Magestuck: The Ascension - Book 1
by Bluecho4

Summary

Somewhere in a world of darkness, a young boy stands in his room, ready to Awaken to the Truth: Magick is real.

And yes, Magick with a k.

Truth Until Paradox.

Notes

A crossover between Homestuck and Mage: The Ascension.

For those new to Homestuck, it can be read in its entirety at MS Paint Adventures.

For those new to Mage: The Ascension (not to be confused with related but distinct Mage: The Awakening), a comprehensive overview can be found at the Mage: The Ascension TV Tropes page. Those interested may also download a free pdf version of the Mage 20th Anniversary Quickstart Guide at Drive Thru RPG.
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“Dad? Daaaaad!”

John Egbert wandered out of his room, hand cupped beside his mouth. “Dad! When's lunch gonna be ready?” he called, walking down the hall.

The boy allowed his eyes to wander as he walked. He passed the portraits of unknown pranksters, hardly even noticing them. In another frame, he spotted posters of clowns – scratch that, Harlequins.

As was customary, he scowled at them, casually shaking his fist. It was his little ritual.

God, he hated Harlequins. Made all the worse by his father's obvious, senseless obsession with them.

John headed to the end of the hall, looking over the railing to the small living room below. Though the television played a muted commercial – some no doubt comical number about a caveman living inexplicably in the modern day – the room remained vacant.

“Dad?” John said, descending the stairs. He passed the couch, flanked by Harlequin figurines and occupied by an oversized harlequin floppy plush doll. An ostentatious gift from his father, left to sit there until John elected to move it (which he never would). For the sake of expedience, John just flipped this enormous Harlequin the bird. He'd scowled enough at it earlier in the day, and expected to repeat the ritual a number of times in days – or weeks – to come.

He turned to the mantle of the fireplace. Upon the surface were placed two urns, of a sacred variety. John resisted the urge to topple them, great though that urge often was. Above them, hung on the wall, were twin portraits: one of his elderly Nanna, and the other of the mother he never knew.

John nodded politely to the two stately matrons. “Mom, Nanna,” he whispered, before he made for the kitchen. “Dad?”

The kitchen was strangely empty. The counters were stacked with baking supplies and covered in flour. John rolled his eyes, knowing already that his father had spent the entire day baking. While he was frequently baking – a hobby John normally didn't detest (and not nearly as much as Dad's fixation on Harlequins) – Dad would only devote an entire day for the matter on one occasion: John's birthday.

Indeed, Dad had in some ways come through for John on this, his Thirteenth Birthday. The inauspicious number of the day was not panning out in terms of gifts: John had received a Little Monsters poster he'd been pining for. And John was pretty sure Dad had a number of additional gifts stashed away somewhere, ready to surprise him with later. Dad made a big production out of his only son's big day.

Unfortunately, that also meant inundating John with baked good galore, courtesy of the batterwitch.
herself, Betty Crocker. John was thoroughly sick of cake, having received three whole ones that morning alone. So if Dad would kindly give the baking a rest already, John would be thrilled.

The boy took one quick look in the laundry room, saw no one, and backtracked out of the kitchen. A quick sweep of the study revealed no Dad either. Only a plethora of more posters and figurines of Harlequins, including a huge poster adorning the left-hand wall. It was bad enough filling the space with the junk, Dad had to paste the biggest affront to John's sensibilities in front of the piano. John loved that piano, but the Harlequins made being in the room a matter of mixed feelings.

On the right-hand wall, a desk sat, adorned with more harlequins and a judicious supply of pipe tobacco. Two books sat upon its surface: a shaving manual, and a vintage copy of Colonial Sassacre's Daunting Text Of Magical Frivolity And Practical Japery. But John didn't bother taking either, being too young yet to shave and already in possession of a Sassacre's of his own. In the far corner, the heavy safe was open, but no one was around going through it.

“Ugh,” John groaned. “Dad! Where are you?”

It occurred to John, as he ascended the steps back upstairs, that his father may have stepped out of the house. Probably for more baking supplies, which would be just like him. Maybe renting a Harlequin costume for John's celebration, though that seemed less likely. Not because he put it past his father to do something so over the top and dorky – the two were noted pranksters, a preoccupation that less informed persons would construe as the height of dorkiness. Rather, John doubted his father would need to rent a costume because he was fairly certain Dad owned one as part of his job.

Because obviously Dad was a Harlequin himself of some description, and entertained people with his antics. That was just straight logic.

John wandered down the hall, figuring that if Dad was gone, he'd just man up and nibble on some more cake until dinner. Or maybe his father was getting pizza or something, and that was why he was gone. As he made for his room, though, John's eyes caught something that was different than was normally the case in his house: the door to Dad's room was slightly ajar.

The rule in the Egbert house, for as long as John could remember, was that one did not barge into another man's room when the door was closed. One knocked, and if no permission was forthcoming, that was the end of the matter. On the few occasions when John got into enough trouble to deserve a spanking – a punishment Dad rarely felt the need to administer, especially not anymore – he would allow John the sanctuary of his room...and John could stay in there until hunger, thirst, or the need to urinate forced him out. By that point, John had usually had enough time to think about whatever he'd done, hence the lessened need for outright corporal punishment.

In turn, John knew that Dad kept his room closed at all times, and he should respect the privacy his father undoubtedly desired.

That the door was ajar meant John wouldn't technically be breaking any rules if he went in. And John was very curious, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He'd never seen the inside of his father's bedroom before.

Creak. “...Dad?” John said, pushing the door in enough to peek inside. The room was too dark to see into, so he pushed the door open completely. “Dad, are you in here?”

He stepped into the room and flipped the light switch.

John Egbert had expected to see many things upon entering his father's room. Not just more
Harlequin figures and posters, but a menagerie of them, dominating any available space. A closet full of harlequin hats and suits, pointy shoes, various balls and other juggle-able objects. Perhaps the mounted head of a decapitated circus animal, claimed from some obscure bit of circus-based heroism. Or even a mural lovingly painted on the walls, depicting in minute detail the glory of the harlequin master race.

What John Egbert did not expect to find in his father's room...was Nothing.

Oh, there were objects, furnishings, and possessions in the room. There was a bed, a mirror, a chest of drawers, a throw rug, a bedside table with a lamp on. There was even a kind of shrine to some douche bag, holding a pipe in a very fatherly way.

But there were no harlequins. Not even clowns, the harlequin's baser, degenerate genetic offshoot. Or any jesters, a similar offshoot from up the family line. Or any sort of Fool, comical or otherwise. Nor, in fact, were there colors much of any kind, aside from black, white, and beige. The clothes peeking from the closet were just Dad's usual fare – the stuff he wore whenever John was around. Ironed shirts and slacks, shined shoes, black ties, and plain, serviceable hats.

John walked – more stumbled forward – taking the breadth of the room and its dominating aesthetic. Plain and serviceable was its motif. Which, in any other context, would have made perfect sense, given the image John's father projected to everyone around him.

But that was preposterous. John began breathing quickly, his eyes darting every which way. He noticed a stack of presents on the floor – so that was where they were hiding – but the suddenness of the situation caused John to ignore them. He would get to those later.

He eyed a plain, black brief case leaned against a wall and dove for it. Sweat was beginning to form on his brow. Surely this suitcase would tell John all he needed to know about Dad's secret double life as a street performer...

Nope! His hands played across the papers he pulled from the case, but they were just documents. Forms and notes and memos about subjects both dry and incomprehensible. That most dastardly of ciphers: boring technical jargon!

“Ah!” John moaned, dropping the case and backing up slowly. “Aaaaah...”

His eyes nervously twitched around to the plain and serviceable bedspread. The plain and serviceable drawers. The plain and serviceable present wrapping paper, somehow colored only in blacks, whites, and grays. John looked to the selection of folding razors, safely closed and aligned neatly on the top of the dresser.

A pit formed in John's stomach as he took in the rug, depicting the outline of a plain, serviceable hat in light gray on darker gray. His heart raced as he studied the rack containing a sizable pipe collection, each more plain and serviceable than the last. John's pupils shrunk and his mouth gaped wide as he looked face to face with the portrait of the pipe-smoking man. His face...his face...

WHO WAS THIS DOUCHE BAG, AND WHY DID HE STARE INTO HIS SOUL?!

“Hah...hah...aaaaah!” John moaned, clutching his head with both hands. The boy sank to the floor, face twisted in pain, rocking back and forth in the fetal position.

He writhed on the ground and wept like a baby for minutes. Or possibly hours.

“Great...”
Rose Lalonde stared down at a mechanical pencil. Her thumb jammed on it a couple more times, but no new lead sprung forth.

The girl scowled, squinting. She was out. Not just out of lead, but out of normal pencils, pens, markers, and even crayons. That mechanical pencil was one she'd managed to scrounge up from a forgotten box in the attic.

Rose sighed, casting the thing aside and resting her face in her palm. “Hrrmm...” She pushed herself up dramatically, setting her creative writing notebook down.

The Complacency Of The Learned would have to wait. Rose walked to the door. She was going to need to ask Mom to buy more writing implements.

That would mean having to actually TALK to her. “Ugh...”

After the indeterminate amount of time passed, John eventually dragged himself to his feet.

“Ah man...” he groaned, slumping his shoulders. “...Dad...”

It slowly dawned on him, with this stunning revelation, that his father had never directly expressed personal interest in Harlequins. He'd bought their paraphernalia, obviously. But he'd never said anything about it...they just sort of creeped in. Like a weird, jester-y vine. They came to fill the house, and everything in it. And Dad was certainly responsible – the posters and figurines didn't slip in of their own accord – John saw his father bring them home, give them as gifts, or decorate the house with them.

Yet here, in Dad's bedroom, they were absent. This was Dad's sanctum – the seat of himself and his proud fatherly power. Power that, apparently, entirely took the form of being a regular, average Businessman. If John's father really liked Harlequins so much, John rightly assumed their influence would be strongest in here.

The opposite was true, however. If anything, this plain, serviceable room for a plain, serviceable father and businessman was a bulwark against the harlequin incursion. As if the colorful abominations were given free rein to do as they pleased in the rest of the suburban household, so long as this one room remained untainted.

The more John thought about it, fingers stroking his chin, eyes cast downward, the more he realized...he had just assumed Dad liked Harlequins. He didn't seem to mind their presence, but he didn't seem all that enthused either. Like he was obliged to the harlequins, a servant to colorful demon lords, who stalked the world and picked up harlequin merchandise, and decorated his home with them. All in the hopes of being personally spared the plague.

John shook his head, tempted to slap himself. He stalked slowly out the door, reaching for the lights. He paused briefly, looking back on the presents in the corner, untouched. He could open them...but John shook his head again, figuring that the moment was passed. He wasn't in the mood anymore. John flipped the lights off and drew the door almost closed.

He sighed, heading back to his room. John would wile away the next few hours on the internet, maybe watch some internet videos or catch up on his web comics. MS Paint Adventures was a series he hadn't come back to in a while. As he reached for his door, John realized he didn't remember where he stopped – he probably should start using the Save function, like he irrationally never had.

Turning the knob and pushing in, he figured he'd need to start from the beginning of the most
recent adventure: The Midnight Crew.

The first thing John Egbert noticed when he got back to his room was that his window was cracked open. Because – duh – of course it was. That's the way he left it, to air out the smell of frosting after he'd gotten sick of the taste.

The second thing he noticed was that the walls around his bed were covered in rough, childish drawings of harlequins.

“Baah!”

A phenomenally cool dude stood in his room, sipping down a bottle of apple juice, when his computer bleated like a goat. He wandered over and took a seat, jiggling the mouse to banish his 90s-style colored-wire screen saver.

This cool dude stocked both the screen saver and the sound effect of the goat for one reason and one reason only: Ironic Purposes.

In particular, the goat sound informed him of a development. Someone was pestering him. He nonchalantly adjusted his sunglasses.

-- gardenGnostic [GG] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] --

GG: are you ready dave?
GG: its almost time!
TG: todays the day huh
TG: the day your dreams come true
GG: yep!
TG: i still cant get over how thats a thing we can say and mean one hundred percent literally
TG: so i just message the guy now or
GG: noooooo
GG: you cant pester him now!
GG: hes right in the middle of something important
GG: if you pester him now he might not even make it through
TG: through what
TG: you know what never mind
TG: ill take your word as gospel
TG: ill make myself your fuckin apostle
TG: shit thats a good rhyme
TG: make myself a catapult
TG: and launch my ass into your cult
GG: hee hee :P
GG: but seriously dave we need to focus
GG: you need to pester him in...
TG: in
GG: in exactly eight minutes and thirty eight seconds
TG: does it need to be that precise
GG: no i guess not :/
GG: but it will be soon
TG: aight
TG: wait why do i need to contact this guy
TG: you actually
TG: you know
TG: know the guy
TG: you've talked to him before
TG: why do i need to act as a medium for this convoluted séance
TG: why not just pester him yourself if you need to talk so bad
GG: ugh because thats not how it goes in my dream
TG: makes perfect sense
GG: also im pretty sure he wont believe me if i tell him -_-
TG: and hell believe a complete stranger like me
TG: wait
TG: believe what exactly
TG: we never even established what the hell the end game here is
GG: he just needs us now okay
GG: and at the right time
TG: wait
TG: is this
TG: his thing
GG: uh...
TG: like
TG: is this like our thing
TG: our thing collectively speaking of course
TG: wait hold on im gonna scrub ahead on this conversation to see if thats the case
GG: okay okay!
GG: geez!
GG: yes dave it is his day
GG: which is why we need to time our moment exactly
TG: shit
GG: too early and he wont wake up at all
TG: fuck
GG: too late and he might do something...
GG: uh
TG: got it say no more
TG: i know exactly what youre talking about now
TG: see how easy it is when were not being all coy and shit
TG: and actually communicate with each other
TG: if youd told me earlier id have prepared fuckin
TG: notes and shit
TG: get out a powerpoint presentation or something
TG: wait no not powerpoint
TG: uh
TG: open office
TG: impress
TG: is that what thats called
TG: shit
TG: not going to support the monopolistic shitstorm that is microsoft
TG: probably stacked all to hell with syn dicks
TG: yo syndicate why did you name your monopolistic corporation after your collective dicks
GG: dave dont you have a thing to be doing?
TG: oh right
TG: the mission
TG: how much time do i have
GG: it should probably be fine in another minute to pester him
GG: first he needs to pick up my gift
TG: oh yeah that gift
TG: totally forgot about it
TG: went to a lot of trouble hunting that down
TG: hope the little guy likes it
GG: i know for a fact hell adore it >:P
GG: but only if you're there to help him through the first few minutes
GG: so move move move!
TG: fine im going
TG: man


TG: this is going to be a headache

Dave Strider clicked off the current window, then rubbed the bridge of his nose. In a cool manner, of course. He just pinched his nose with two fingers, not letting his poker face fall for a second.

In this business, the key to success was developing the persona and sticking to it at all times.

He brought up Pesterchum – the one-stop chat client of the gods, no doubt – and typed in the chum handle she forwarded him: ectoBiologist.

“What...the...hell...?”

John Egbert blinked in mounting horror, mouthing further expletives in hushed tones. His face contorted, eyes wide open and mouth agape.

The corner of his room, against which his bed and its ghost sheets were pushed, was decorated by a series of (totally great) movie posters...that were defaced with crude crayon drawings. The entire wall was littered with them, depicting wobbly, blocky harlequins with sharp teeth and slanted, evil eyes. They were rendered in bright pastels with no apparent rhyme or reason.

As were two phrases, attached to arrows that pointed towards the bed and, presumably, its occupant: FOOL and LAME KID.

John scowled, shaking his head. Who could be responsible for this flagrant act of vandalism?

“...ha ha...” he chuckled, suddenly and for no explicable reason. He just couldn't keep a hold over the righteous indignation. “Ha ha...haha hahaha!” he giggled, even though his body shook with nervous abandon, and his face was turning pale, drenched in a sheen of sweat.

It suddenly seemed so funny to him. Why was it funny? Oh, of course he knew why! “Ha ha! Ha...v-very...gah...very funny, Dad!” he said, his voice faltering. John's mouth was terribly dry, and he couldn't stop shaking. “Y-you really got me! The Prankster's Gambit is in your favor now! J-joke's over! You can come out now!”

The boy hugged himself fretfully. “Dad...?” he wheezed, his nervous smile dropping. “...Dad...? Oh god, oh god, oh g-g-god!”

All this time, he couldn't tear his eyes from the Harlequins etched on his wall. They bore into his soul, and he didn't even have animosity anymore to fall back on.
John Egbert was afraid. He was afraid because it was starting to become obvious what was going on.

He could recognize his own handwriting, even one penned on a wall. Could identify his shitty art style a mile away.

Moreover, he could remember. As he trembled in his little tennis shoes, getting his favorite green ghost shirt sopping wet with sweat, John remembered.

Remembered rising from his bed at night. Remember scrambling feverishly for crayons, any crayons on hand. Remembered dragging them across his wall – and any posters that happened to be there.

He remembered defacing his own walls. And not just once, but many times, over many nights.

And he remembered not remembering, but feeling terrible. Experiencing awful, terrible dreams as he etched murals proclaiming the grand magnificence of his own dumb lameness.

John shook his head, wiping a hand over his brow and disturbing his glasses. “...n-not...p-p-possible...” he muttered, shutting his eyes hard. “...can't...”

Yet, he couldn't deny it either. Despite the haze, the memories were vivid. He could still feel the weight of his hands pressing against wax crayons until they snapped. Still see the figures taking shape before him. Even with his eyes clasped shut, he could still see the drawings. They weren't just on the wall; they were in his mind.

And as the reality of the situation forced itself upon him, he moaned. “Nnnnnagh!” He clutched his head, trembling.

Everything started to make sense. Dad wasn't the one obsessed with harlequins...John was! Or at least, that's the impression his father had likely taken. The man was always ready to accommodate John's interests, while sharing his own. It was bonding. Dad could have seen the drawings, and started collecting harlequin merchandise as an attempt to engage with him. But of course John didn't receive them well, because he hated harlequins. Not just as a result of his father's efforts, but as the root of them. John hated harlequins...

He shuddered, daring one last look at the wall. A single glance sent him turning away with a yelp. ...and feared harlequins.

“Nnnnnaaa...aaaaagh!”

Something in John's head snapped.

“Gah!” John gasped, clutching his chest. His heart beat faster and faster. The pounding of the blood could be felt in his ears, his fingers, and his toes.

He started to hyperventilate. “Hah...hah...hah hah hah...” There was an awful ringing in his ears, and he stumbled forward a step. Breathing rapid, he looked around the room.

John spotted his window, cracked open. He saw – not felt, SAW – the air rushing in, a current of blue flowing in through the opening.

His strained breathing continued. Air. John needed air.
He stretched a hand towards the window and stalked forward, his knees suddenly heavy. His vision started to swim.

John needed to get out. He needed air. He needed to get out.

Trying to reach the window was torturous. His body seemed to resist his movement, like he was made of lead. And the distance to the opening seemed impossibly great.

He needed air. He needed to get out. He needed air. He needed to Get Out. He. Needed. AIR.

Then John Egbert became air, and flowed out the window.

Chapter End Notes

“Our Fool's got belongings slung over his or her back, with a little dog yapping right at the edge of the drop. Meanwhile, the Fool's staring off into the sky, perched on the edge between disaster and flight.”
Rose Lalonde sighed. “...Mom!”

She walked briskly down the hall of her family's large, post-modern home, patently ignoring the awful wizard portraits framed on the walls. Rose briefly passed a window, and noted the expanse of trees growing thickly outside.

Rose didn't bother with stealth this time. She wanted Mom to find her. Hopefully, after a bracing bit of mother-daughter strife – some empty suicide threats, passive aggressive posturing, and ironic parental indulgence – Rose would be able to ask Mom to pick up writing utensils while she was out. She would likely be out getting booze, but whatever. Rose had an entire list of things she needed (in bulk, because these kinds of encounters were tiresome), but she couldn't write it down obviously, so she could only hope Mom was in a sober enough state to remember herself. No promises.

It's not like Rose could call the pizza delivery people to pick some pens and such up for her. They stopped doing that for Rose after her last “errand” made the poor delivery boy go an hour out of his way to buy a Squiddles shirt from Hot Topic. Because no one else stocked those, and both Rose's house and the closest town were in the middle of nowhere.

So Rose plodded along, her barely teenage legs stomping every so often. She's probably in her room, drinking again, Rose thought. She rubbed her brow, annoyed.

She was so distracted by her frustrations, Rose didn't even see her Mom passed out on the floor until she tripped over her inebriated body. “Ack!”

Rose pushed herself from the ground, nursing a minor rug burn. “Shit...” she grunted, hissing. “What the he-”

She looked down on her mother, sprawled out on the floor.

“Dammit, Mom,” Rose groaned, standing up. “Can't you at least pass out...on the...sofa...?”

Rose saw – for the first time in her life – an opening in the wall of a corridor. An apparently secret door, just nestled in a side hall between the main hall and her mother's room.

The girl gawked. “What the...” she gasped, her eyes bugging out.

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John Egbert was a gust of wind.

John Egbert was a literal, in-no-way-metaphorical-or-exaggeration GUST OF WIND.

And he was sort of freaking the fuck out about it.

The gust of wind that was John Egbert blew out from his open window, hitting the cool April air. He plunged into it, mingling with it. His constituent particles danced wildly, up and down, to and fro. There was no directing his mass. Only reveling in the horrific freedom his form provided.

John Egbert had no physiological mechanisms to indicate as much, but he was pretty sure he was terrified.
The boy/wind plunged through the branches of the Egbert family tree, which rose proudly from their yard. A tire swing hung from a low branch, but the wind flew far above it. John felt a thousand leaves drag at him, sifting through his “body” like combs. They rustled – or rather, he rustled them – making quite a racket. At least from where he was flying.

He poured out of the tree and began to rise. John was a warm current, a wind born of flesh. Inexorably, he began to rise. As if it were the most natural thing in the world.

No...no!

John twisted and coiled, bunching up into a vague cloud. Can't go up, he thought, panicking. Too high...too high!

A vague sense of awareness of direction and space remained to him – he could “see”, if the definition of sight were tortured heavily. He “looked” into the sky above – that sky his new body seemed overjoyed to embrace – and balked at the immensity. At the functional infinity of air he flew up to meet. Almost certainly, he would pass into the heavens and be torn apart, scattered forever by the vagaries of climate and weather. Doomed to eternity recycled by the planet's air currents.

Down, down, down! John forced his errant molecules to obey his directive. Too high, he thought, too high! Must go down! No, No, NO!

Somehow, the mass of air complied with its erstwhile, ephemeral master, descending slowly towards the street.

John splashed against the asphalt, pouring over the ground and drifting like a pancake. Fallen leaves and a stray, discarded napkin went flying outward.

Come on, John, he thought ruefully. Pull yourself together!

The gases drew inward towards a center. They spun and twisted upon themselves, sticking close. Adopted the most bizarre buddy system in all of history. John demanded boundaries – a familiar shape – and his wind tried to comply.

Come on...come on, he thought. John looked down at himself – if such words could describe it. He more sensed himself, still as the volume of air, but curling tightly together in the vague shape of a person. He held up his hands, wiggled them experimentally. They were blobs of air, the digits radiating off wind, which eventually collapsed back into himself.

What the hell is going on?!

“HONK!”

John looked back – more sensed the flow of air behind him really – and noted the car driving right at him.

Oh, he thought curiously, as the vehicle barreled right through, scattering him again.

The car didn't even slow down, but kept moving. It did swerve and jerk with surprise when the impact happened. Still, it drove on, even growing faster.

What a jackass, driving so quickly on a suburban road like this. The boy drifted about, once more forced to resist the siren call of the upper atmosphere. It was exhausting work. Not in the physical sense, of course. It drained him emotionally. A sapping of his very Will.
This isn't working, John groaned internally. Okay, let's try this again.

John forced his wind to collapse inward a second time, forming a vaguely humanoid shape.

Now, he thought, cutting out all distractions, come together again! His air coiled around and around, edging closer and closer. Be human! Let this all be a sick, sick-

“Dream?”

John blinked, gravity suddenly jerking him down on his feet. He stumbled.

He looked down at his hands. They were flesh again, as flesh as they were the day he was born.

John smiled, wiggling his now human fingers. “Ha! I did it! I-”

He looked up around him. John had returned to flesh – and to human sight – but he could still see the wind all around him. Not feel it, though he certainly could. He Saw the wind.

Now that he had his heart back, it pounded erratically. He cringed, eyes darting around. Everywhere he looked, he could see blue lines flow along the ground, balling up around leaves and litter as they forced them along. Saw them divert around lamp posts and parked cars like water parting around river stone.

An insect flew by, and John could see the tiny disturbances in the air its wings made. John tilted his head back, watching vast currents of air flowing through the sky, carrying clouds lazily along. He looked down, and caught the flow of air issuing from his own breath. Saw the minute drafts created by his moving hands.

And that sound. He could hear a blowing in the wind. John stared wide-eyed around him, ears gathering the signs of a low, empty howl.

An unfamiliar note was played. It was the one Escalation plays to keep its Instrument in tune.

It was the note foretelling the raise of the magician’s wand.

John Egbert knew, by what means he could not say, that today was going to be a long day.

He clapped his hands to his ears and shut his eyes. “Rrragh!” he growled, shaking his head. “Go away! I don't want to see this! Make...it...stop!”

When he peeked his eye open, the wind was still there.

“Oh god dammit!” John shouted, throwing his hands down.

His voice went out – carried by the wind – and echoed across the landscape.

“Dammit...dammit...dammit...”

John's face was contorted in pain. He felt a little like crying. Instead, he shook his head and ran back towards his house.

It's not real, he thought. Can't be real. Has to be a dream.

John almost ran headlong into his mailbox. “Gah!” he cried, stumbling back. The blue ribbons telling the path of the wind coiled in his wake. ‘Shit, that was close!’ he grumbled, blinking more in the hope of banishing the wind from his sight. Looking up at the mailbox, he saw something.
The red flappy dealy on the mailbox was up!

“Mmmrrr...” John whined, dragging himself to his feet. He stared at the red dealy on the mailbox. “Ugh...guess I'd better check it. You know, while I'm down here having my nervous breakdown...and talking to myself...” He looked around, making sure no one was watching.

Rifling through the mailbox produced a number of letters – undoubtedly for Dad – and a plain green box. John took hold of the box.

And suddenly found himself inundated with flashes in his mind. Images of a dark-haired girl planting something inside the box, sealing it up, and...making it disappear. Feelings of joy, hope, and loneliness.

“Gah! Fuck!” John cried, dropping the box. His face scrunched. “What the fuck?!” He blinked the images away, then looked down to the box again. “Shit!”

Very gingerly, he bent down and touched the box with one finger. Just real quick. He braced himself and...nothing happened. After touching it quickly a couple more times, he picked the whole thing up.

“What was that?” John said, staring at the box. He quickly grabbed the other letters and ran towards the front door of his house.

John seized the handle of the door...and pulled so hard that the door came clear off its hinges with a violent crunch.

“Fu-!” John shut his mouth, holding the (strangely light) door in his hand. “Eeeegh!” he whined, sidestepping inside and propping the door against the opening. Then he rushed for the stairs, whining incoherently the whole way.

He would deal with the door later. Once he figured out what the fuck was going on.

Now Rose was genuinely curious.

This secret room was a feature of their shared home that Rose had never known about or even suspected existed. Stepping over her unconscious mother, Rose walked inside.

Her hand groped along the side wall, eventually hitting a light switch. Overhead light flickered to life, and Rose gaped at a cozy, well-stocked library. In one corner, a reading lamp and huge, red leather arm chair stood.

“...whoa...” Rose said, stepping inside. She walked to a bookcase and ran her hands along the shelf most level with her height. A thick layer of dust came away on her fingers, and she brushed it off on her skirt.

It's not that the house didn't already have a library. It's just that it was more sparsely stocked with a collection of new, common books. A lot of fiction and technical manuals. Much of the textbooks that went into Rose's home schooling – which she almost entirely handled herself – were stocked there. That place was almost never used, as any books Rose really needed from that collection were pillaged long ago for her own bookcase. Mom, meanwhile, had occasionally taken to stocking the vacated spots with trashy romance novels and empty wine bottles.

This place, however, could not be more different. Rose couldn't even read half the titles on the shelves – they were in various different languages – and every tome was old. She had a suspicion
that no text printed less than fifty years ago remained in the room. Very likely, a number of the books were actually hundreds of years old. Any collector would give their right leg for a collection like this.

Rose's eyes darted all over. She inhaled through her nose, and the cloying, venerable stench of ancient parchment, musk, old leather, and vellum climbed to her brain.

She didn't know where to start.

“Mom...” Rose whispered, more to the vague idea of her mother than the unconscious mad woman slumbering nearby. “...what the hell is all this? Where did you get it?”

“...ngh...huh?”

Rose flinched, heart pounding. She looked behind her. Lo and behold, her mother was sitting up. “Ah! Mom!”

“Oh...hic...hey Rose...” Mom said, supporting herself on the frame of the secret door. “Ugh...how...hic...how log was I out? He he...long...” She grinned, trying to push herself up, barely kneeling above the floor. She lifted her other hand and tried to belt back a swig from a wine bottle clutched in it, but gawked in surprise and disappointment when nothing came out. “Oh noes...” she mumbled, sticking one eye up to the overturned bottle's opening, “...I'm out...whoops...”

“No, Mom, forget about your...stupid swill for a moment!” Rose clutched her hands into fists, leaning forward. “What is all this? Where did you get these books? And why are they behind a secret door?”

“Oh, this...hic...this old thing? Place?” Mom Lalonde gestured broadly with the empty bottle. “Oh, this...this iss just yer...yer daddy's secret library...library...study...hic...”

“Dad?” Rose blinked, stunned. She touched her temple with two fingers, looking at the floor. Had...had they ever talked about her father before? Rose couldn't remember.

“Yep! Your daddy...he had a lotta books...” Mom said, crawling a step forward, swaying. “His 'reel' books...” She made an exaggerated air quote sign with her bottle hand. But that act seemed too taxing on her impaired coordination, and the bottle flopped to the carpet, rolling to a stop. “Oops!” She batted at the bottle a couple times, before waving it off. “...anywhosists...this ain't...hic...even alla his books. He had a place...hic...over in...friggin...London, En-glande...” She waved at the air. “Most of those went off to hiss...sss...st'dents...”

“Students?” Rose asked, blinking again. “Dad was a teacher?”

“Well...no...no...he wa'nt no...teacher...” Mom said, propping herself up on her knees. “...'cept sometimes...hic...he knew a lot...alot a lot...and he...WHOOPS!” Mom tried to take her weight off the wall, and ended up falling forward. “Owwies...”

“Ugh!” Rose said, smacking her face with her palm. She walked over – kicking the empty booze container away – and grabbed her mother by the shoulders. “Huff...come on, Mom. I could use some help!”

“Heh heh...hic...Rose...” her mother said, smiling, letting Rose climb underneath her. With her little girl draping the drunk old woman's arms over her shoulders, Mom began pushing with her legs. That much she could do. “Thanks...Roase...I'm...a little drunk...”

“What? I...ack...couldn't tell!” Rose forced the woman up and pulled her forward. The closest place
to put her was the leather chair in the corner. That would at least give the drunk a comfortable place to sleep off her inebriation.

“You're...yer a good kid, Rose...”

“Yeah, yeah...” Rose grunted, rolling her eyes.

“Naw rilly...yer good, Rose...” Mom patted the girl's stomach fondly, as it was the closest part in reach. “Yer...hic...book smart. Like yer...hic...daddy...”

“Huff...yeah, about that...” Rose pulled her dead weight of a mother along. They were just about half way across the room. “Why don't you ever talk about Dad?”

“Cause its...sss...a sore subject, baby...” Mom moaned. She drunkenly patted the girl's head now, then started playing with her ivory hair. That hair that was so like her mother's.

Great, now she was calling her baby. Rose rolled her eyes even harder. They were almost there now.

“It's a rail sore su'ject, Rose...” Mom placed a hand on the armrest, letting her daughter help lift her to the seat. She flopped sideways onto it, resting on the opposite arm. “I lost his...his hot ass...when you was just a babby...”

“And how did he...pass, exactly?” Rose said, pulling the woman up to halfway proper sitting position. She pointedly ignored the drunkard's casual comments about her father's rear, which may or may not have been hot.

“The war took 'em, Rose,” Mom said. Her face was suddenly droopy. Somewhere between tiredness...and maybe sadness. “The war took your daddy away...took him away from me...”

“The war?” Rose asked, cocking an eyebrow. She was going to ask if he was a soldier, but considered he could have held any number of professions that brought him to a warzone. Soldier, medic, war correspondent, humanitarian aid personnel...she wondered with a slight bit of unease if her father was actually something like a gun runner, supplying arms to insurgents. “Which war are we talking about, Mom? Iraq? Afganistan?”

Except wait, that wouldn't make sense. Rose's faced scrunched up. She would have been at least four if it were Iraq. She'd have some memory of the man, at least.

“No, no, noes!” Mom said, waving her arms. “It was the War! The...assenjan war...Ass-enshon...”

“What?”

“Ascen-jon...Ascen...Ass...” Mom, rubbed her temple wearily. “I'm too dunk for...hic...complex words, Rose. Pointis...it weren't no war...hic...between nayshins...it were another war.” She lowered her voice, curling her hand around her mouth, as if to block her words from view. “A Secret war. Hic!”

“A...secret war?” Rose felt profoundly foolish, both for sitting there doing nothing but parroting her mother's drunken ramble, and because she still couldn't grasp the meaning. “What secret war?”

“Rose...Rose...my babby flower...hic...child...” Mom pointed a finger at her. “Is a secret war...cause is secret. Just like this room is...hic...secret. Can't have Rose be findin' out about it...”

“Uh...”
“Reely, I don't know what half this...hic...stuff even is...” Mom muttered, waving her hands at the bookshelves. “Richter jus’ left it all here...stashed in our house...and then they took 'em.” The woman looked into the middle distance, frowning. “I never knew what kind of stuff any of dese books had in em...I was...hic...jus' a consor...not even Richter's consor...I worked for 'nother woman...Doctor Langley...she weren't no wizard like Richter...”

“Richter...Dad...was a wizard?”

Rose gaped. She suddenly didn’t understand anything. But now she wanted to.

“That right!” her mother nodded, smiling stupidly. “Yer daddy was a wizard, Rose! Why'dya...hic...why'dya think I had so much wizard stuff...in th'other librarby...an all odder the walls?” She giggled to herself, shaking her head. Then her smile faded, and she looked...so very sad. “Bu'that was tha old days...Richter gone...then I get left with Doc Langley's gear. That's down in the lab...hic...out in the woods...” She jerks a thumb over her shoulder.

Rose's eyes shot up. Was that what was in that building?

“...I miss Doc Langley...she was so smart...” Mom said, sagging in her chair. “She knew what was what...she had that genius...but the war took 'er, too...” She frowned, her lower lip quivering. “Tha war took ma hubby...and Langley...and now...I need to keep it all secret. 'Cause if Rosie finds out...”

She blinked, looking at her daughter.

Rose blinked back. “...uh...”

“Ooohhh nooooo!” Mom cried, clutching her hair, distraught. “Oh no! I fucked up!”

“Hey!” Rose said, as her mother climbed onto her, pulling the girl into an embrace with both arms. “Mom!”

“Hic!” the woman sobbed, burying her face in her daughter's shoulder. “I fucked up! I fucked up, Rose! And now the war'll get you too!” She sniffed, shaking her head.

Rose tried to pull away, but the embrace was too strong. Looking nervously around, Rose swallowed, her hand reaching up and patting her mother's back. “There, there,” she cooed, “it's alright. The war isn't going to come to get me. Everything is going to be fine.”

Mom sobbed. “Hic...really?”

Rose nodded. “Really. I'm not going anywhere, Mom. No secret wizard war is going to come after me.” Rose could feel the tears running down her shoulder.

“Sniff...oh Rose...my baby...” She hugged the girl to her. “Don't go...dyin' on me...hic...okay? Don't let 'em...hic...take you!”

“Shh...shh...” Rose rubbed her mother's back. The girl didn't really understand what her mother was on about – and the thought of actual wizards fighting it out in secret seemed absurd to the extreme – but...

...but if Mom felt so strongly about it, there was obviously more to Mom and her father's activities than Rose ever imagined. Rose pressed herself into her mother's shoulder. “There, there...I don't intend on dying, any time soon.”
“Mmmm...hic...” Mom nodded. “...thanx, baby...”

Rose let the two just sit there for a while. Felt the warm from her mother mix with her own. She even tolerated the strong stink of booze.

“...uh...Mom?” Rose asked, patting her mother's back.

Mom snored.

“Oh.” Rose blinked, then pushed her mother back onto the chair. It was even harder now, without a modicum of help, drunk though it was. “Hngh!”

When Rose stepped back, her mother slumped in the large, comfy red chair. A wide grin formed on Mom's face, and she giggled in her sleep. White hair fell in front of her cheeks, sticking to fresh tear stains. But she breathed easy, and snored loudly.

Rose scratched the side of her head. She wasn't going to get the matter of writing utensils settled that day, that was sure. Rose sighed.

And that business with her late father being a wizard. Obviously, a more sensible interpretation of events got garbled somewhere in her mother's head. Rose would need to find a way to draw the story out of Mom later. Hopefully when she hadn't had a chance to get completely hammered.

The girl shot an aside glance at one of the bookshelves. “Hmm...” She looked back to her mother, still asleep.

Rose walked over to a shelf and started removing volumes.

John staggered into the bathroom, placing the package on the edge of the sink.

“Ah...ah...”

He collapsed in front of the toilet.

It felt like he was going to throw up.

John kept his mouth shut, waiting.

…

…

…

John forced himself to his feet, rubbing his belly. As nervous as he was, he didn't want to puke, and none was forthcoming. His stomach was roiling, making him nauseous, but he just wasn't feeling it.

“Oh man...” he moaned, standing in front of the bathroom mirror. John saw the sweat on his face – how he contorted his features in pain and confusion.

Turning on the faucet, John splashed water in his face. A second later, he remembered he was still wearing his glasses. “Shit, shit, shit!” he grumbled removing his soaked eyewear.

He wiped the lenses down with his shirt, then dried his face with a towel. Dammit, he could still see blue flow lines, issuing from the air vent in the corner.
John scowled, gritting his teeth. Placing his glasses back on, he looked down at the sink. One of his father's many razors sat near the tap. His eyes wandered to the green package nearby.

John Egbert needed distraction. Just for a second.

Taking up the razor and the box, he carefully unfurled the blade. Like all of Dad's shaving implements, this razor gleamed spotlessly.

John's hands shook, so he took it slow. He slipped the blade down into the top of the box, between flaps. It cut through the masking tape like butter. In no time at all, the seals on the box were undone. He quietly folded the razor up again and returned it.

He walked out of the bathroom, body shaking. John made for his bedroom. Dreading the thought of being back to the circus his room had become, yet feeling a need to move.

Somewhere downstairs, a diminutive figure appeared unseen.

John couldn't avoid looking up at his wall.

Yep, that sure was a lot of weird, harlequin-based defacing he apparently did. It still gave him the creeps, but he could look at it now. He'd had his emotional theatrics already (including spontaneous transition into living wind).

John plopped the package on his bed and examined it. To his mild surprise, it was from his cousin, Jade Harley! The two of them would often exchange Pesterchum messages, but for whatever reason, she hadn't messaged him a Happy Birthday that morning.

Well, knowing Jade, she would include a hand-written letter in the package itself. Also knowing her, she probably engineered the mailing of this present six months in advance. It was kind of a hassle, exchanging gifts when the girl lived on a remote island. At least that's how she described it to John. She lived with her grandpa – John's great uncle and Nanna's brother – a fact upon which Dad only rarely commented. Dad had evidently never met his uncle, though he sometimes related an anecdote of the man, told to him by Nanna when he was a boy.

A little tension blew out of John, seeing the package (wait, no, “blew” was a very triggering phrase for John right now, all things considered). He smiled, just a little bit.

Popping up the cardboard flaps, John peered inside. His hands probed within, pulling out- OH.

John Egbert held a stuffed bunny in his hands. It looked suspiciously like the bunny from cinematic masterpiece Con Air. The one that Nicholas Cage's ex-con character gave to his daughter upon their heart-felt reunion, proving himself a hard man with a heart of gold.

In fact, if the certificate of authenticity bundled in the box was any indication, it was the exact same stuffed rabbit used in said film. Inside also was a note, addressed to John from Jade.

A part of John brightened up a bit, seeing such a cool present from such a cool friend/relative. It almost made him break out into a goofy grin.

Another, more pressing part of John slammed that feeling right back down. As cool and awesome as the present was (to which there could be no doubt), John was simply not in the mood. He'd just had a series of stunning revelations, followed shortly thereafter by inexplicable, surreal misadventures.
John put the bunny back in the box, resolving to take it out and read the letter once he'd gotten a hold of his runaway feelings.

The telltale blue swirls emanating from his open window caught his eye. “Aaaah...” he whined, shaking his head. What the hell was he going to do?

Well first, he walked over and shut the window. He didn't need any more distractions. What he could probably use was his daddy. And maybe some psychiatric help.

No sooner had he closed the window that he noted the air vent in the ceiling, billowing blue swirls down on him.

“God...dammit!” he muttered. He shook bodily, this time with mounting frustration. He grabbed a pillow off his bed and planted it on his face. A muffled scream filled the room. He couldn't possibly hear anything other than-

Ping!

John looked over at his computer. Someone just started pestering him.
TG: yo john
TG: your cousin jade told me i should talk to you
TG: said youd need some help
TG: has your mind been blown yet
TG: man what am i doing here
TG: im gonna be pissed if it turns out jade was just trolling me
TG: i mean id also be impressed
EB: hello?
TG: like damn good one jade
TG: oh hey
TG: sup
EB: how do you know jade?
TG: man come on
TG: we pester each other all the time
TG: dont tell me jade never told you about her cool buddy
TG: shaggy 2 dope
TG: thats my name btw
EB: this seems like such a huge crock of horseshit!
EB: im not in the mood for this.
EB: so if you dont mind, im gonna block you now.

-- ectoBiologist [EB] blocked turntechGodhead [TG] --

-- turntechGodhead [TG] unblocked turntechGodhead [TG] --

TG: no youre not
EB: what the hell?!
TG: im gonna give you the benefit of the doubt man
TG: and chalk that up to stress
TG: because seriously
TG: rude
EB: how the hell did you unblock yourself?
TG: magic
EB: what the hell is going on today?!
EB: ghdigdgieht
TG: dude
TG: chill
TG: so like i said earlier
TG: did your mind get blown already
EB: what are you talking about?
TG: i mean
TG: did something really fucking weird happen just now
TG: other than me unblocking myself obviously
EB: how did you know?
EB: who are you?!
TG: i told you before
TG: shaggy 2 dope
EB: i don't think that's your real name!
TG: whoops you caught me
TG: for real tho
TG: names dave
EB: dave?
TG: yep
TG: and i really do know your cousin jade
TG: shes your grandmas brothers granddaughter
TG: she lives on blood murder island
TG: with her badass grandpa and his devil beast of a dog
TG: she was the one who asked me to talk to you
TG: so dude
TG: tell me about your feelings
EB: i
EB: okay i guess if you really know jade,
EB: then you must be cool.
TG: dude im the coolest cool kid who ever chillaxed
TG: not that i need to brag or anything
TG: my being cool is an immutable fact stated for the record
TG: it doesnt mean hubris is whats happening here
EB: oh
EB: anyway
EB: as for my feelings,
EB: im kind of freaking the fuck out over here!
TG: tell me about it
TG: that wasn't me just showing sympathy
TG: literally tell me all about it
EB: well
EB: before some random guy who can hack my account started pestering me,
EB: uh
EB: god damnit this sounds fucking insane when i think of it!
TG: doesnt matter dude
TG: i live neck deep in insane station
TG: take the crazy train every morning to madness meadow
TG: im the head herder of mad cows
TG: its me
TG: just
TG: tell me the craziest thing to happen to you today
TG: aside from me because weve already established that
EB: i think i turned into wind a couple minutes ago!
TG: huh
TG: thats different
EB: i told you it would sound insane!
TG: naw dude i believe you
TG: unlike how i usually am
TG: being sarcastic as fuck and dicking around
TG: todays not the day for it
TG: for one day only im being totally honest
TG: and completely straight
TG: with you i mean straight with you
TG: dont take that the wrong way
EB: what?
TG: i just meant
TG: you turning into wind
TG: like literally wind
TG: thats not something ive heard often
TG: but im not saying i disbelieve you
TG: i know where youre coming from
EB: ugh this was such a bad idea. i don't even know why im doing this.
EB: so stupid!
EB: my head hurts!
TG: calm down man
TG: breath deep
TG: wait shit maybe breath puns are triggering you right now
EB: im feeling pretty damn triggered by air right now, yes!
TG: just chill dude
TG: everythings gonna be alright
TG: dial it back a bit take it from the top
EB: the top?
TG: yeah man
TG: when did the world turn into a whirling batshit pandemonium
TG: where did this story start
EB: a couple minutes ago i was trying to find my dad.
EB: it's my birthday and i wanted to know when lunch was,
TG: happy birthday little man
EB: oh, thanks!
EB: anyway, i ended up peeking inside his room,
EB: because he left the door open, and i'd never been in there before.
TG: so you were getting your snoop on
TG: dogg
TG: please say you didnt find his body or something
EB: what? no!
TG: cause that would make for a pretty shitty bday
TG: on top of everything else
EB: no!
EB: i don't know where my dad is,
EB: but what i expected was for there to be,
EB: like, harlequins and stuff.
TG: what
TG: like clowns
EB: harlequins dave,
EB: please.
EB: my dad collects a whole lot of harlequin memorabilia.
EB: and i assumed his room would be full of them, just like the rest of the house is.
TG: okay
EB: but his room didnt have any harlequin stuff in it,
EB: just, you know, business man stuff.
TG: i
TG: honestly cant imagine that
TG: no seriously my mind is not equipped to render normal businessman stuff
TG: i have an interesting home life
TG: please continue
EB: so i kind of had a minor nervous breakdown.
TG: stunning revelations can do that yeah
TG: like
TG: holy shit my dad is fucking normal
TG: would have blown my mind to know my bro was just
TG: a guy
TG: so did you turn into wind then or
EB: no, that wasn't it.
EB: i just kind of accepted it after a while...
EB: like...it made too much sense in retrospect.
EB: but it got me thinking about how now the harlequin thing didn't make sense either.
EB: and i walked back to my room
EB: and
EB: holy shit, harlequins were on my walls!
TG: what
EB: dave you need to understand.
EB: i HATE harlequins.
EB: always despised them.
EB: and hated how dad always seemed to love them.
EB: but then i get to my room,
EB: and someone drew harlequin scribbles on my walls.
EB: and i think that someone was me.
TG: wait really
EB: yeah, i'm being completely serious here.
EB: ugh, this sounds so dumb!
TG: no keep going
EB: i just,
EB: i got this feeling.
EB: this feeling that i knew for a fact i was the one using the crayons to deface my wall.
EB: it was me.
EB: but i was asleep while doing it,
EB: dreaming and stuff, and i sleepwalked through it.
TG: holy shit
TG: sleep scribbles
TG: gotta write that down use it in a rap later
EB: im serious!
TG: i am too
TG: rapping is serious business in the strider household
TG: thats my last name btw
TG: dave strider
EB: oh.
TG: wait did this happen in the same room youre in now
EB: huh?
EB: uh, yeah, why?
TG: give me a sec
TG: keep talking
EB: uh?
EB: so i guess, after seeing that...i had another, bigger episode.
EB: i was really freaking out.
EB: i couldn't breath, i needed air.
EB: so i went to the window,
TG: and turned into wind and flew out
EB: exactly. how did you know?
TG: well first
TG: fuckin deduction
TG: but really its cause im watching it play out on my screen here
EB: …
EB: what?
TG: i can see through time and space
TG: and im watching you a couple minutes ago
TG: you walk in the room have a conniption
TG: then turn into air and fly out
TG: then youre gone for a couple minutes while you do your windy thing
TG: and then come back
EB: my windy thing?
EB: hang on, you can see me?
TG: yeah dog
EB: how?
EB: did
EB: did you hack my computer's web cam?
TG: sure lets go with that
TG: for now
TG: man dude you look like shit
EB: stop peeping on me, you sleaze!
TG: naw
TG: wait
TG: you have a mac and me poster
TG: please tell me you hung that piece of shit poster up for ironic purposes
EB: fuck you!
EB: mac and me is awesome!
TG: oh my god you have a poster for deep impact and
TG: fuckin con air oh my god
TG: holy shit you like these movies for real
EB: i knew you were a troll!!
EB: i can't believe i spilled my feelings out to you!
TG: john shut the fuck up
TG: i mean
TG: shit
TG: sorry i just got a bee in my bonnet
TG: its like a fuckin reflex raggin on bad movies
EB: my movies aren't bad!
TG: whatever
TG: oh i see you also got jades present
EB: oh yeah!
EB: i wish my day wasn't so shitty, i could actually enjoy it.
TG: the bunny from con air
EB: how do you know?
TG: dude who do you think got it for jade for you
TG: she lives on a deserted island in the middle of the bermuda triangle or some shit
TG: she needed someone with like
TG: mad connections to get it for her
TG: she was all like
TG: dave senpai please youre so cool
“Here's your pizza sir!”

Paul Egbert took the pizza boxes and doffed his hat politely.

He exited the pizza restaurant and placed the boxes in the passenger seat of his plain, serviceable white car. In the back seat were several grocery bags, filled largely with baking supplies. Ten whole boxes of cake mix, and three dozen eggs.

The man took his place in the driver’s seat, feeling a profound sense of stern, fatherly relief. He almost ran out of mixes there. Such an event would be a travesty on the best of days, let alone on the birthday of his beloved son John.

Paul tapped an ounce of tobacco into his car pipe – the pipe he kept at the ready in the glove compartment – lighting it. He puffed thoughtfully, shifting the vehicle in reverse.

He would need to get home quickly. Paul needed to get back to baking the next few cakes. The pizzas (and cakes) would tide John and him over until he got around to cooking the birthday dinner. Paul puffed happily on his pipe, considering the turkey thawing in his fridge.
The father pulled out onto the road and sped off. John was no doubt bored out of his mind, without his old man.

TG: what you experienced earlier was what we in the biz call
TG: an awakening
EB: awakening?
TG: yeah
TG: congrats john you are now conscious
TG: time to get out of bed and have some sugar toasted crunch or whatever
EB: what does that mean exactly?
EB: cause it sounds like youre messing with me again.
TG: im dead serious
TG: so turns out
TG: reality isnt really made of immutable laws
TG: reality is actually crazy mutable
TG: its just that most people cant grok to the notion
TG: theyre asleep to their true potential
TG: that potential being to reshape the world to their desires
EB: dave this sounds asinine.
TG: oh i know what it sounds like
TG: sounds like fuckin new age bullshit
TG: but the joke was on us all alone
TG: because the new age bullshit was the only truth that really exists
TG: weve found the secret john
TG: and the secret
TG: is that the magick was inside you the whole time
TG: you just didnt know it until today
TG: this is some straight disney shit
EB: …
EB: dave,
EB: if i block you, will you stay blocked this time?
TG: hell no
EB: lame!
TG: see
TG: ive got magick too
TG: the magick of hacking
TG: and also actual magick
TG: which just so happens to also be channeled through more hacking
EB: ghʃʃfirethė
TG: its recursive like that
EB: i dont
EB: even
TG: yeah a lot of peeps have that reaction
TG: just remember you turned into wind today
TG: are you in any position to argue about what is possible
EB: …
EB: you have a point there.
EB: shit!
TG: turns out magick wasnt fake after all
EB: i just...
EB: i dont get it!
TG: let me put it this way
TG: imagine that reality is a butler
EB: a butler?
TG: yeah a butler
TG: and the reality butler is standing by you
TG: you and everyone else in the world
TG: youre all just sitting there are butler island
TG: and reality will do anything you ask
TG: make a sand castle a thousand stories high
TG: make a juggalo a thousand doobies high
TG: cure cancer
TG: let you fly
TG: reality can do anything for you
TG: ma guy
TG: accidental rhyme
TG: with me so far
EB: i guess...
TG: but the problem is
TG: you dont even know the butlers there
TG: cause youre busy snoozing
TG: been snoozing your whole life
EB: snoozing?
EB: i've been asleep my whole life?
EB: does that mean this is all a dream?
TG: some folks seem to think so
TG: but back on point
TG: you and most everybody else is asleep on butler island
TG: but that dont mean the butler isnt listening
TG: dudes still there creepin on ya while you get your nap on
TG: like a fuckin pervert
TG: and hes listening to every word that comes out of your mouth
TG: cause you talk in your sleep we all do
TG: and reality butler dude is just taking that shit in like diamonds from the mouth of a baby
TG: and he makes shit happen according to your subconscious desires
TG: what you believe the world to be the butler makes happen
TG: and hes goin round to everybody asleep and picking up their dreams
TG: he aggregates that shit together
TG: because no one wants to live in a world where everybody carries a bubble of reality around them
TG: and never two dreamers meet
TG: so we get a consensus reality
TG: something all the little sleepers subconsciously agree life to be
TG: democratized reality
TG: explains why the commies lost the cold war
EB: wait,
EB: are you telling me this world is what i want it to be?
EB: why is everything so crummy then?
TG: its what you BELIEVE it to be
TG: cause sometimes we want things we dont realize
TG: and believe in things we dont want to admit
TG: thats why there's also monsters and shit out there
TG: we cant stop believin in the bad parts of the world so they keep leaking out
TG: btw there are also vampires and werewolves out there
TG: have fun sleeping dude
EB: that sounds terrible!
EB: and,
EB: no, im still confused.
EB: what does this talk of butlers have to do with me, dave?
TG: glad you asked
TG: see every so often one of those adorable sleeping babies wakes up
TG: maybe they see something they shouldn't have had a bad fuckin dream
TG: and their perception of the world is broken
TG: like a kid who realizes it isnt his dad who loves baroque-ass clowns
TG: its him
EB: oh.
EB: oooooooh!
TG: or a pretty chill kid
TG: who finally stops being an idiot and acknowledges the signs around him
TG: and figures out that his bro is actually
TG: you know what never mind
EB: is that how you woke up?
EB: wait are you even awake?
TG: yeah dude
TG: like i said
TG: i have magick
TG: and now so do you
EB: i...
EB: have a hard time believing that.
TG: sigh
TG: fine hold on
TG: im sending you a thing
EB: what?
EB: like an email or...
EB: dave?
EB: hello?
EB: are you still sgdigsj
TG: okay im back
TG: did you get my thing
TG: yeah i see you got it
EB: what the fuck what the fuck!
EB: what the hell is this...
EB: ...thing...?
TG: thats a perfectly normal reaction to seeing a smuppet for the first time
TG: let alone seeing it teleport in front of you
TG: like a surprise plush schlong nose to the face
TG: youre welcome for another stuffed gift btw
TG: happy birthday
EB: ew dog ew!
TG: stfu
TG: wait no sorry i just needed to show you for reals
TG: that this isnt me just screwing around
TG: i have literal
TG: honest to god
TG: digital ass sorceries
EB: where the hell did you get this thing?
TG: my bro makes them
TG: a bunch of them are lying everywhere in the apartment
TG: so i grabbed one and instant transmissioned it to you
TG: ill probably need that back later so dont lose it
TG: its part of bros inventory
EB: why does your brother make these things?
TG: sells them on the internet
TG: makes him mad duckets yo
EB: because, I don't know, but it looks kind of like...
TG: i know what it looks like
TG: its
TG: its a sore subject okay
EB: alright.
EB: ill just...put it over here i guess. your bro is weird.
EB: so that was magic?
EB: *magick
TG: dont worry about using the k
TG: its some aleister crowley shit idk
TG: anyway
TG: when you had your double emotional breakdown reacharound combo
TG: everything about your perception of reality broke down
TG: and you woke up
TG: and right in front of you was this crusty ass butler
TG: asking you like
TG: is there anything I can get for you master john
TG: and because you just had a scared ass nightmare and woke up suddenly
TG: you dont know what the fuck is going on
TG: and theres this douche bag youve never met asking for orders
TG: naturally you start spouting whatever bleary ass bullshit response you can think of
TG: like
TG: holy shit whats going on
TG: im kinda thirsty I guess
TG: and the butlers like you got it boss
TG: and he splashes water in your face
TG: because aint nobody got any idea how to deal with magic when they first wake up
TG: thats what happened when you turned into wind
EB: i asked a butler to turn me into wind?
TG: idk
TG: what was going on in your head when it happened
EB: …
EB: i felt sick.
EB: yeah thats right,
EB: i remember i wanted to get some air,
EB: because i was sick to my stomach and wanted out.
TG: bingo
TG: not all wild magic manifestations can be so coherent
TG: sometimes you dont know what the fuck brought it on
TG: youre actually pretty lucky
TG: especially since you made it back so soon
EB: wild magic?
TG: its what we awakened
TG: thats what we call folks who can use magic
TG: or just mages you know
TG: thats what we call uncontrolled spontaneous magic
TG: they usually only happen a couple times in a mages life
TG: usually around the awakening itself when you're just getting your power for the first time
TG: its a bitch shit causes problems
TG: be lucky you didn't blow up your house or summon cthulhu or some shit
TG: but now that you're wide awake
TG: you can start the process of mastering your new ability
TG: that being the ability to dictate to the reality butler directly
TG: rather than just letting him creep on your dreams
TG: you're in the drivers seat now here's your license
EB: wait.
EB: that means i can do magic for real?
TG: yeah dude
TG: you're a wizard john
EB: does that mean i can go to hogwarts? take classes in magic?
TG: i mean i think there's magic schools
TG: i guess
TG: but you don't have to go to a school and i don't know where any of them are
TG: my bro taught me most everything i know
EB: is your bro magic too?
TG: hell yeah
TG: the striders have programming magic ninja shit on lockdown
TG: but yeah i wouldn't know the first thing about getting you into a magic school so
TG: probably have to wing it
EB: oh. i'm honestly kind of disappointed.
TG: you do however need a system
EB: a system?
TG: yeah cause right now your magic is out of control
TG: no restrictions
EB: yeah i can get that.
EB: it is getting pretty annoying seeing the wind all the time.
TG: you're seeing the wind right now
EB: yeah, is that normal?
TG: not abnormal
TG: its not like a permanent thing
TG: you can turn that shit off
EB: oh good.
EB: uh...how?
TG: just kind of
TG: will it to happen
TG: it should turn off if you want it to
EB: oh!
EB: hey, it worked!
EB: thanks dave!
TG: no prob
TG: but this illustrates why you need a system
TG: you're just doing magic by feeling it out
TG: making it happen through shear force of will
TG: and while that works its not optimal
TG: like trying to lift a boulder with your bare fuckin hands
TG: you make a system for your magick so you can focus that will in a productive manner
TG: like learning to bend with your knees not your back
TG: or building a ramp
TG: magical systems define how you believe your magic works
TG: so its easier to act inside the framework to make shit happen
EB: like making a magic spell?
TG: exactly
TG: every mage has their own names for it but basically a spell
TG: it doesnt really matter what form it takes
TG: it can be high ritual shamanism mystic kung fu
TG: mad science witchcraft elaborate self help advice
TG: so long as its consistent enough that you can believe in it and make it fit together
TG: its also important because it sets boundaries
EB: boundaries?
EB: sorry, it sounds like im just a parrot at this point.
TG: no worries
TG: it helps grease the wheels on this overblown lecture
TG: really never thought id be giving this
TG: this so isn't my bag
TG: where the hell was i
EB: boundaries
TG: right boundaries
TG: see its all well and good to say you can do anything
TG: and you can magic is dope as hell
EB: anything?
TG: anything
TG: but you dont really want to do anything
TG: you want to do useful things
TG: dont want to be out on the street
TG: bend over and start farting rainbows
EB: ew...dave you're so gross.
TG: part of getting a system is about defining to yourself what makes magic tick
TG: how do magic your process
TG: so magic happens on your terms and not by accident
TG: while magic always happens when you will it
TG: sometimes you want something without realizing it
TG: so you do things without really meaning to
TG: like
TG: for no particular reason
TG: you shout at a crow and end up telekinetically throwing a shitty sword at it
TG: didnt mean to impalement just sort of happened
TG: your system is there to stop those sorts of embarrassing travesties
EB: dave.
EB: did you telekinetically throw a sword at a crow by accident?
TG: i plead the fuckin fifth
EB: how do i learn a system though?
EB: i dont want to keep pulling doors off hinges.
TG: there are teachers
TG: or read it from books
TG: you can literally use whatever
EB: could you teach me magic, dave?
EB: oh god that sounded so gay.
TG: hey
TG: i dont appreciate using gay as an insult
TG: but yeah it totally fuckin does
TG: sounds gay as hell
TG: but sure i could teach you
TG: how do you like computer programming
EB: i...dabble...
EB: ugh im pretty shit at it though!
EB: my code sucks.
TG: probably not a good idea to learn from me
TG: i can give you pointers but if neither hacking or ninja moves appeal to you
TG: youre probably best either finding a different teacher or just sort of winging it
TG: anyone on the internet and their mother has advice on how to do magic
TG: i think i can scrounge up something off here
TG: just some bullshit i have
EB: yeah okay.
EB: i kind of want to get started right away.
EB: this sounds like fun!
TG: believe me its so fun
TG: you might want to take it slow for a bit though
TG: there's one other thing i havent talked about when it comes to magic
TG: kind of a
TG: john
EB: huh?
TG: look out behind you
EB: wow, what a cheap trick. nice prank, dave.
EB: im willing to believe in magic but im not that gullible!
TG: no seriously dude look behind you
TG: theres a fuckin monster
EB: oh look at me im a gfdjgnrsjkt
TG: john
TG: oh shit

Claws raked across John's back.

“GWAH!” John cried, falling out of his seat.

He scrambled to the nearby wall and looked back.

John Egbert was being assaulted by a monster in his bedroom.

…
Boy.
Minutes Ago (But Not Many)

A Without-home Veteran walked a street, huddled against the wind. A stick balanced on his shoulder, holding a hobo bundle on one end.

The hobo's dark skin was tightly wrapped in a soiled shroud. Once it had been a children's blanket, adorned with cute ghosties, donated by charitable individuals of some means to an impoverished foreign land. Now it was a soiled Rag of Souls, both a reminder of, and bulwark against, spirits.

Their previous owners, sadly, no longer needed the blanket. Not since the war came to their country. As such, to the questionable victor go the questionable spoils.

Indeed, the shell-shocked old soldier didn't really feel like all that much of a victor, when he came home. Didn't really feel like anyone, anymore. Though if one were to bring up the name Wayland Vasily, one might get a surprised reaction from the man.

The hobo walked around disinterested city goers. None of them paid any attention to him. This was only partially due to being a transient, and thus effectively persona non grata.

He turned into an alley, waving pleasantly at the ghost milling around there.

The ghost – that of a poor fellow homeless who slept one too many times in that very alley the previous winter – sent a few words the living hobo's way. This hobo signed in response, gesticulating affably.

He didn't speak. The vagrant hadn't had much to say, after the ambush, no matter how much the army psychiatrists urged him to talk about his trauma. Then his silence sort of snowballed, until he'd gone almost two decades without speech. Although, the event that lost him his Gift of Gab compensated him somewhat with the Gift of Influence. Unfortunately, both contributed to him ending up on the streets, so...mixed blessings.

Pleasantries were exchanged, as was current news on both sides of the divide between the living and the dead. Matters of who was romancing who, what shady figures were seen where, which shades had apparently found peace (or Oblivion). Any news about Parasites.

The wraith then stated that he just saw a particularly incensed man walk past in the other direction, and that he wanted to give chase. The hobo nodded, knowing how much comfort the dead gained from sharing, vicariously, the passions of the living. He waved goodbye and walked on, cutting between buildings.

Upon further reflection, the hobo decided he would probably need to dodge this alley for the next few days, since his ghost buddy's feast would leave him irritable. When it came to ghosts, it helped to be able to gauge the mood.

He crossed the next street over, giving a wide berth to the group of young men who counted themselves among the local gang. While the armed lads made him more than a little uneasy, the hobo respected their space, just as they gave him only a brief glance, which counted as respect.
among them.

It had induced a panic attack and a week of cowering in his hovel, but the vagrant had managed to establish, early in his stay in the neighborhood, that he was not to be trifled with. On the streets, this was essential.

The next two street crossings were uneventful, and the vagrant made it, for lack of a better term, “home”.

No, he wasn't really a hobo. Not much anymore, at least. He'd decided he'd had enough of the transient lifestyle, and settled down in a quiet urban squat, right next to a set of incredibly unquiet municipal train tracks. Once he figured out the train schedule, the loud noises no longer took him back to the battlefield. Usually.

He ran around to the back of the condemned storefront – a waste of valuable city space, but a boon for him – and lifted a loose wooden board. Laying down on the ground, he crawled through the gap and entered the building's basement. One of these days, he supposed he would need to get the actual side door to open.

The hobo checked the Hobo Signs over the opening, determining that they still functioned. The extensive and esoteric symbols established Wards against intrusion, spiritual or otherwise.

Pulling down the dull blue tarp that shielded the inside from the rain, the vagrant walked out to the main basement room. The floor was covered in an intricate model of the city made from cans, boxes, other bits of refuse, and extensive chalk drawings. In the center was the bulk of downtown, with its tall buildings rendered in tall can stacks, as well as a more detailed model of city hall.

It was his Can Town, and the most ambitious iteration yet. His previous attempts were a diversion indulged during his brief stays in various small towns, back during his nomadic days. As he gained a great facility with his Gifts, the diversion turned into a tool for Influence. Using personal scouting, some study of street maps, and his infallible sense of direction, this vagrant could plot out the whole of municipal space within the city. At least as far as the basement walls would permit.

He skirted along those walls, stepping lightly around the outer limits of Can Town, and admired his murals. Extensive designs depicting skylines and occasional sequential art, such as pictures of himself marching in full mayoral regalia amid cheering crowds, or cheerful pictures of his old squad. The squad pictures were drawn above one of the basement's drains, so that when the veteran poured alcohol out for his boys – or started weeping, whichever – he wouldn't make too much of a mess. All of these pictures were inscribed in whatever medium the vagrant could procure: chalk, crayons, markers, spray paint, discarded makeup...

In one corner, the vagrant found his way to his main living space. His soiled mattress and soiled blankets were there – they came pre-soiled, honest – as were his piles of junk, meager food stores, and unsorted cans, to be applied to Can Town.

The vagrant plopped himself on his mattress, unhooking the hobo bundle from his hobo stick. Rooting through the bag, he pulled out a couple unopened cans of food (thank you, local school food drive) and some empty but promisingly shaped cans. A box of chalk – discarded from behind an art supply store because of their broken (but still usable) chalk sticks – came out next, followed by a generous stack of napkins obtained from a gas station.

Napkins were essential, living on the streets.
As was a can opener, which thankfully the hobo had accumulated in abundance. He wasn't going to be caught with cans aplenty but no opener. Never again.

With a plastic spoon inside an opened, cold can of beans, the vagrant picked up his semi-rusted metal folding chair and sat in front of a worn wooden desk. The desk had been left behind – upstairs, so the vagrant had to nearly break his back moving it down – but the television set atop it was salvaged from the dump.

The man formerly known as Wayland began pressing buttons and fiddling with a pair of rabbit ears he'd fished from another dump. The screen began to flash static, and he pressed more buttons. Not getting a coherent picture from the infernal contraption, he slapped the side of the TV a couple times, then on the top.

It was always difficult, getting a picture on a television set that had been gutted for parts years ago, and was thus technically inoperable.

Difficult, but not impossible for one who knew a few Tricks. The hobo leaned in closely, listening to the static and tapping the channel down button. With a resounding strike to the side of the TV, it flared to life, displaying a live feed from somewhere in the world.

The vagrant smiled to himself, baggy eyes lighting up, and took his place in front of the tube, can of beans in one hand and spoon poised in the other.

Then he frowned, because the picture wasn't of the current activities in the city council. It was a picture of a small white boy, sitting in his bedroom at a computer.

The vagrant sighed. He'd gotten the wrong “channel” again. That boy was probably not even in the same state as the vagrant. At least, by cursory evidence in the boy's room, he'd gotten the right continent this time. Mistakes like this didn't happen too often (they never happened when using an old dial TV, but the vagrant had left his last one back on the road), but they happened often enough to be grating. And they often happened for no explicable reason. The vagrant didn't know this kid, and he wasn't one for people watching.

Usually. At least, not just to watch for entertainment. When he watched somebody, it was for a specific, fact-finding reason, dammit!

Setting aside the food, he sighed and made to stand and adjust the TV again. Such mistakes were simple enough to correct, and he knew the walls of city hall well enough to make it a cake walk.

Then he looked back down on the set, and saw a small, obsidian black creature (in an incongruous silly hat) sneak into the room. It had claws and jerked unnaturally, and he sure as hell wasn't human. Looked like some kind of imp.

Disconcerting. Leaning closer, the hobo screwed his eyes up, trying to discern the nature of the beast. It read like a spirit of some kind, but it was solid enough. As it rifled through a box on the kid’s bed, the vagrant groaned. It was one of those things.

Little tike must have figured out the true nature of the world, and got his Influence on too Overtly. Overt Influence, in the hobo's experience, often lead to painful consequences. The hobo had the scars to prove it.

Either that, or it was just a monster. Those existed too, the hobo supposed.

Regardless, the matter wasn't good. The little imp on the screen stalked up to the boy, a stuffed rabbit in his hand – no doubt a treasured comfort object for the little guy. The vagrant watched
helplessly as the monster attacked the kid from behind, throwing him to the ground.

The vagrant shook with concern, but also with rage. As an oppressed minority (of multiple varieties), the hobo loathed to make judgment calls on the imp for being an imp. On the other hand, as a person who had to live in declining urban slums, he knew full well that, justified or no, dangerous malefactors made victims of the innocent more than the guilty.

So while the homeless man would vastly prefer to engage the creature in civil discourse, and come to an accord where man and imp could live together in a respectful Democracy...

...it was clear that this ruffian was the aggressor in an unwarranted sneak attack on an unarmed civilian, and needed to be stopped.

Too bad they were way out of the old soldier's area. And much as he probably ought to, bringing Overt Influence upon the imp was a thought that left the vagrant uncomfortable. The hobo had been burned a few too many times by such unsubtle action. Often literally burned.

The hobo gesticulated wildly in front of the screen. Then he slapped his face with his palm. Of course one cannot just sign a message to someone on the other end of a clairvoyance box. They can't see one's hands! Even Enhanced Sign Language needs to be seen to convey its hidden meanings through the power of mental Influence. That's just common sense!

The hobo bonked himself on the head a couple times. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

Another approach would be needed to get the child's attention.

He looked around his desk, then scrambled for a box. He pulled an old computer keyboard from the container, then sat back down. Looking at the plug coming off the keyboard cord, he looked frantically from it to the TV and the action unfolding onscreen. This TV was one of those with a built in VCR, with a flap for putting in the VHS tapes. The hobo just sort of stuck the plug inside the VHS slot.

What? It's not like he's doing science. All of what the hobo did was complete bullshit, and he knew it.

The vagrant slapped the keyboard down on the table and hammered away at the keys.

Boy.

John backed himself against a wall, wincing slightly from the wound on his back. He trembled.

A short, diminutive creature stood in the middle of his room. It had jet black chitinous skin, little grasping claws, a pair of white, featureless eyes, and a row of stark white teeth. At odds with its frightening appearance, it was clothed in a multi-colored shirt, with stripes and polka dots, pointy red elf shoes, and topped with a matching jester's hat.

Get up, boy.

John gulped, seeing the hideous visage of his worst nightmare come true: a monster Harlequin.

In one of its claws, it gripped the stuffed bunny.

John's face shifted. His eyebrows sank low, and he gritted his teeth.

Boy, you are being assaulted by an unscrupulous ruffian.
He pulled himself to his feet, eying the creature gravely.

The monster rocked back and forth wildly, clawing at the air in front of it impatiently.

You need to make a tactical retreat, soldier.

“Yaaaah!” John yelled, charging the beast, fists raised.

He was so sick and tired of harlequins today.

Oh god dammit!

Throwing himself at the creature, John started pounding at him with one barely clenched fist.

This bastard had taken John's present from Jade, his close family member and dear friend.

“Rrragh!” he growled, trying to snatch the bunny from the monster's grasp. “Put it back! Put the bunny back in the box!”

Waving the blows off with one hand, the creature smacked John in the face with the stuffed toy, sending the human sprawling.

“Oh!” John grunted, landing hard on his butt. “Ow!” He blinked up at the creature.

It flexed dramatically with its arms, grumbling something incoherent. “Brah bllgle bah!”

John scowled. The monster was taunting him.

Good effort, boy, but you can't fight the imp on his own terms. Scratching and biting is not how men fight beasts.

Jumping up, John rubbed his behind, flinching. He needed to beat the...imp (?)...and take back the precious bunny.

But...how? The imp is too strong. He's playing with John!

How would a grown man fight? With his fists?

Tools, boy. Men tamed nature with tools.

John blinked, watching the creature.

Weapons, child! Get a weapon!

The boy looked frantically around the room. A weapon, a weapon! To his left, on one of the book shelves, he spotted a hammer, lounging comfortably beneath a Little Monsters poster.

Flash of remembrance. That morning, his father gave him the poster. Taking up a hammer and nails, John had affixed the poster to his wall, just beside the door. John never put the hammer away.

He looked down at the desk. His desk chair was in easy reach.

Grabbing hold of the computer chair, John rolled it after the imp. Taken by surprise, the imp used both hands to stop the chair, then rolled it to the side. By then, John raced to the shelf.

The chair ruse...was a distraction!
Whoops, finger slipped.

John's hand slapped on the top of the shelf, closing over the tool. He glared over his shoulder at the monster.

Good, boy! Now you have the tactical advantage!

He whirled around, facing the imp. He brandished the hammer in front of him, another hand free at his other side. John set his eyes, his legs spreading apart into something approximating a battle stance.

“Grrrrgh!” the imp growled, hopping from side to side and flailing its arms.

Aim for the joints, boy. It's where his armor is weakest.

The young man gritted his teeth. The door was right behind him. But he wasn't going to run away. He wanted his bunny back in the box.

And his name wasn't “boy”. It's John.

Alright, John. Engage your enemy.

“Rrragh!” John yelled, running forward, hammer swing high. Aimed to come down on the creature's head.

The imp jumped back out of the way, swiping a claw at John's face.

John jerked backwards just in time, then pressed forward. He pulled back for a swing from over the shoulder.

As the hammer started to fall, the imp raised the bunny in front of it, right in the hammer's path.

“Ah!” John cried, stopping his blow. He stepped backwards, shaking.

The imp hopped from one foot to the other, pointing at the bunny and sticking out his tongue. “Bweh he he he he!” it chortled, holding the bunny forward and shaking it.

The enemy has taken a hostage! So outrageous!

“Oh hell no!” John shouted, readying his hammer. Stepping forward, he brought his hammer back on the other side, aiming left. If he could just catch him on the side without the bunny...

The imp tried to block with the bunny, but John smacked the hand away. John readied another swing, and the imp blocked with his free hand. It crunched, then gave off a small cracking sound.

John pressed forward, but the imp, shaking its empty hand, socked John in the face with the rabbit. Then he reared back and clawed at the boy.

“Argh!” John cried, clutching his chest. A rend was made in the shirt fabric, and a little blood came away on John's palm when he looked at it.

John's heart raced, beads of sweat running down his brow.

First blood. Don't give up, soldier!

John gave ground instead, backing up until his butt hit the end of his desk. “Ah!” he yelped,
chancing a glance over his shoulder.

His free hand leaned on the desk, his fingers touching a stack of papers.

“Rhaw rhaw Bleh!” the imp grunted, sticking its tongue out again. It hopped forward a foot.

The creature was not only strong, but fairly skilled. Holding out his hammer defensively, John strained his mind for a way to level the game.

His fingers played over the papers.

From up above, John felt a draft. He didn't need to see the wind to know air flowed from the ceiling vent.

Air...

John Egbert didn't have a system for his magic(k). Not yet, anyway. So he stared at the imp.

He'd have to wing it, and hope it worked. “Egbert...”

His hand closed over the sheets on the desk. They were probably homework assignments. Whatever, he'd deal with it later.

“...PAPER!” John yelled, throwing the paper forward as hard as he could.

Of course this never would have accomplished anything, except create a little wind and let the papers flutter uselessly to the ground. But making a little wind was what he counted on.

His attention iron-focused on the imp, the air currents from his swing flew that way too. Combined with air diverted from the ceiling vent, and there was just enough to propel a single, solitary sheet forward.

Right into the imp's face. “BWAH!” the imp cried, shaking in surprise. He flailed his arms every which way, the bunny's filth-stained ears flopping up and down.

Good show, John! You have Influenced the battlefield to your advantage!

John smiled, then gripped his hammer tight.

Running forward, John brought the blow down right on the blinded creature's paper-covered face.

Crack!

“Glagh!” the imp cried, throwing his hands up protectively.

“Egbert...” John cried, then brought his leg up, “...KICK!”

The force of the kick struck the creature in its tiny chest, sending it tumbling back. “Blagh!” The bunny flew out of the creature's grasp as it fell on its back.

Finish him.

John watched the bunny hit the floor, then noticed where it landed. He smirked, running over to it. The hammer tumbled from his slack hand.

Wait John, what are you doing?
John Egbert was doubled over, straining under a great weight. With every ounce of his Man Grit – and a little push from wanting the thing to rise hard enough – John raised his brand new copy of Colonial Sassacre's Daunting Text Of Magical Frivolity And Practical Japery above his head. His noodle thin, early adolescent arms wobbled. Not that they needed to bear the burden long.

“Gack...blk!” the imp groaned, twitching on the floor. He finally managed to pull the paper off its face, both now sopping wet with a viscous, oily liquid. One of its white eyes was busted open, and it leaked the fluid vigorously. “...hah!” Its remaining eye opened wide, as did its toothy maw.

John stepped over to the fallen imp. “Egbert...”

“Nnnhhaaaagh!” the imp burbled, flailing its arms in front of it. It shook its head from side to side violently. Its single, undamaged eye displayed none of its previous malice or cockiness. It only showed fear.

“...SASSACRUSH!”

The mighty tome tumbled, gravity pulling its great mass down on the creature.

Crunch!

The beast's upper body was completely eclipsed by the daunting text, while its little legs, with their funny red elf shoes, shot up into the air. A gout of black, oily liquid blossomed out on the floor in all directions around the book. The little legs flopped to the ground.

John sighed deeply, doubling over. His hissed, rubbing his sore hammering arm, but smiled. “Heh heh!”

Confirm your kill.

The boy walked over to the fallen creature and kicked one of its legs. The foot just sort of toppled over, twitching not even slightly. A cursory glance showed that the small quantity of black goo (blood?) that had sprayed out was now overtaken by an expanding puddle of pitch.

John blinked. “...yeah, I think he's dead.” He raised his foot and sort of...stepped on the book. Another spray of oil shot out, further soaking the carpet. “Ew!”

Congratulations, John. Victory is yours. Collect your spoils.

John looked over what little of the imp he could see, without having to take the gently-used Colonial Sassacre's off. The little elf shoes (imp shoes?) didn't really appeal to him, so he shrugged. Instead he walked back over and picked up the fallen bunny.

“I said...”

John walked to his bed.

“...put the bunny...”

He raised the stuffed toy over his head, the other hand clutching the green package.

“...back in the box!”

John thrust the bunny into the box, griting his teeth. “Why couldn't you just put the bunny in the
John, this is stupid.

Ping!

Also, it appears your friends want your attention.

John looked back to the computer. Someone was pestering him...or still pestering him. In all the excitement, he kind of lost track of if “Dave Strider” was still messaging him.

He wiped his mildly bloody hand on his shirt, retrieved his chair, and sat down.

-- ectoBiologist [EB] is no longer idle --

TG: shit son
TG: you really showed that asshole
EB: oh yeah, i forgot you were watching
TG: wouldnt miss it for the world
TG: you couldve just absconded like a chump
TG: but you hung in there like a real trooper
TG: congrats
EB: thanks
EB: shoot, my back and chest are killing me.
EB: you think i need to go to the hospital?
TG: naw
TG: i saw your back earlier
TG: neither it or your chest seem to be bleeding enough
TG: probably just flesh wounds
TG: i mean yeah probably should like
TG: bandage it up
TG: but you wont up and die
EB: you sure?
EB: cause im exhausted.
EB: is that blood loss?
TG: probably just exhaustion from kicking too much ass
TG: trust me i know the feeling
EB: speaking of, what the hell was that?
EB: a monster just came out of nowhere and tried to kill me!
TG: looked more like it was playing with you from here
TG: what else can you expect from a paradox spirit
EB: paradox spirit?
TG: this actually ties into what i was trying to talk about before
TG: sure youve got dope as hell magic powers now
TG: but theres a cost
EB: what, like mana?
TG: no not mana john this isnt a video game
TG: i mean yeah theres such a thing as magical energy
TG: but its not essential for most magical shit
TG: the cost is a thing called paradox
EB: whats paradox?
EB: wait, is it that monsters come to attack me?
EB: have i pissed off some fantasy forces of darkness?
EB: do i now have some kind of epic destiny?
TG: you might have a destiny maybe idk
TG: but thats not really what paradox is
TG: although yeah it probably summoned that monster
TG: paradox is
TG: literally
TG: the paradox between what you do with magic
TG: and what most people believe is possible
EB: i still dont understand
TG: think of it like our butler metaphor again
TG: simile whatever
TG: about a thousand years ago our friend the reality butler suddenly got
TG: like super schizophrenic
TG: and bipolar
TG: he still gives you what you ask for but now hes pissed
TG: hes gotten too used to things being the way the sleeping masses want it to be
TG: doesnt want their cozy little delusions about the world disrupted
TG: basically the mutable aspect of reality started to solidify
TG: so suddenly every time you want to ask the reality butler something
TG: he punches you in the face
EB: what? why?
TG: i told you
TG: reality has gotten comfortable doing things the way the masses want
TG: if you cast a spell that is obviously supernatural
TG: reality doesnt like that
TG: it disrupts peoples perceptions of what is and is not possible
TG: and reality has a way to combat that
TG: we call it paradox
EB: so now i get penalized for doing magic?
TG: basically
EB: thats so unfair!
TG: tell me about it
TG: you just summed up the words of every mage for the last several hundred years
TG: and when paradox gets mad it can send a whole bunch of shit your way
TG: sometimes it just hurts you
TG: like with migraine headaches or burning or spontaneous stigmata
TG: or if youre really unlucky you just blow the hell up
EB: jesus christ!
TG: sometimes it hits you with some kind of weird effect
TG: something to kind of mark you as the weirdo that you are
TG: like you grow horns or feathers
TG: or you can only speak in backwards words
EB: shit!
TG: sometimes like today the dox will send paradox spirits at you
TG: spirits are real btw
EB: funny, that imp didnt look like a ghost...
TG: no shit they can take physical form
TG: and hassle you
TG: you have no idea what kind of monster or supernatural jackass will show up either
TG: protip if you see some wrinkly old fucker in a suit
TG: stops time on you and acts like a chastising grandpa
TG: just
TG: do whatever the hell he says
TG: it aint worth fightin wrinkle
EB: wrinkle?
TG: an asshole paradox spirit
TG: but a dangerous one
TG: there are a lot of infamous ones out there
TG: more likely though youll just encounter a random monster
TG: maybe more harlequins maybe something worse
EB: i dont know.
EB: after today i cant imagine anything worse than violent monster harlequins.
EB: i guess.
EB: wait is wrinkle the reality butler?
TG: naw that was just a metaphor
TG: but who knows maybe now one will show up
TG: if one does kick his ass
TG: let me know how it goes
TG: if you live
EB: dave you arent inspiring a lot of confidence here.
EB: in fact, this talk of paradox monsters and blowing up is kind of freaking the hell out!
TG: it gets worse
EB: oh boy!
TG: dox can sometimes be patient
TG: letting you get away with stuff here and there
TG: its a trap though because dox never forgets
TG: if youve got a big debt to pay off to dox it can do things like
TG: drive you magically insane
EB: oh damn!
TG: or just eject you from reality entirely
TG: send you to a paradox realm
TG: like realitys way of putting you in time out
EB: fuck!
EB: dave this all sounds horrible!
TG: yeah dox realms arent fun
TG: my bro got sent to one once
TG: he doesnt like to talk about it
TG: a sore subject
EB: no really dave!
EB: i dont think i ever want to do magic ever again, if all this stuff will come get me every time i do!
TG: chill out john
TG: it isnt that bad
EB: how is it not bad!? you yourself said i could get shunted out of the world entirely!
EB: or attacked by horrible monsters!
EB: where is the good news, dude?
TG: well first
TG: dox stuff is usually either temporary or a one and done
TG: like those bits of reality weirdness that dox hits you with
TG: they usually fade with time
TG: and dox doesnt put like a bounty on your ass for monsters to hunt
TG: that one douche was probably all reality is gonna give at the moment
EB: oh
EB: so im not going to have to leave my house to avoid an army of monsters?
TG: well the dox spirits would attack you wherever you go
TG: but no youre safe for the time being
TG: second you can get dox off your back by just like
TG: going cold turkey on magic for a while
TG: dox only stays mad at you for so long
TG: so if you think dox is saving up for a big backlash just lay low
EB: it still doesnt sound like its worth it to use magic.
TG: well if youre vulgar about it yeah
EB: vulgar?
TG: there are degrees of how blatant you can be with magic
TG: you could throw down out in the open
TG: popping off fireballs from your magic wand and being super obvious
TG: or you can nudge things slightly or play a little sleight of hand
EB: oh i know sleight of hand!
EB: magic tricks are one of my interests.
EB: although I guess its different from real magic
EB: *magick
TG: well yeah but the same principles apply
TG: using distraction and obfuscation to hide what it is youre really doin
TG: for whatever reason reality doesnt like when mages get all up in peoples faces
with their supernatural power
TG: but you can dodge dox if you can make what you do look like a coincidence
EB: a coincidence?
TG: remember when you threw that paper at the imp
TG: that was magic right
EB: yeah i think so. i really wanted to blind the imp so i made the wind blow the way i
wanted.
TG: thats basically how you do it
TG: lets go back to our metaphor
TG: but instead of reality as a crusty ass butler
TG: reality is a hot chick
TG: your high school sweetheart
EB: dave im like thirteen.
EB: i dont think im supposed to have those kinds of feelings for girls yet.
TG: thats fine lets just assume you do
TG: and reality is this fine honey you want to
TG: smooch or whatever
TG: and youre magic so reality is totally into you too
TG: with me so far
EB: i...
EB: guess?
TG: problem
TG: reality has this burly older brother named paradox
TG: and he dont appreciate you touchin his sister
TG: if he finds you mackin on her
TG: or trying to cop a feel
EB: ew.
TG: bro dox comes over and beats you up
TG: or smashes your car or calls some of his ugly ass friends
TG: or gets you locked in jail
TG: but dox cant be watchin his sis all the time
TG: and cant catch everything you do
TG: so instead you creep over when his back is turned
TG: and give her a peck on the cheek
TG: or you make out in behind the bleachers
TG: whatever its all about being subtle
TG: same with magic you got to learn to hide your spells
TG: instead of throwing a fireball make a gas main explode
TG: so long as any random asshole could look at your trick and be like
TG: that sure was an unlikely but still technically possible thing to have just happened
TG: youre golden dox wont come after you
EB: huh.
TG: basically you need to keep your surroundings and resources in mind
TG: and be clever
TG: dont just throw spells around like an idiot
TG: and if you have to
TG: because dox is a cost benefit issue and you might need to go vulgar anyway
TG: definitely dont do it with a bunch of witnesses around
TG: if paradox hates anything more than disgustingly obvious magic
TG: its normal folks seeing it happen
TG: the dox is harsher when that happens
TG: i guess to encourage mages not to show off and start blowing peoples minds idk
EB: i guess i cant go out flying,
EB: and fight crime like a super hero.
TG: yeah youre a mage not an xman john
TG: keep the tights at home
TG: for private purposes i dont judge
EB: come to think of it, it would make sense why ive never heard of real magic before.
TG: yeah paradox is a pretty effective system reality has going for it
TG: for maintaining its current nature
TG: wasnt always this way though
EB: it wasnt?
TG: naw
TG: used to be magic and miracles were everywhere up in this bitch
TG: but then the rationalistic world view started getting popular
TG: and everyone bought into the safe sterile lie that is the current consensus
TG: which precludes any kind of magic
TG: miracle or mad science
EB: wait
EB: so paradox is only so harsh because so many people believe magic isnt real?
TG: yep
EB: so what if we did a whole bunch of magic, and convinced everyone that they were wrong?
EB: then we'd be able to do it paradox free!
TG: wow
TG: what a stunning revelation id never thought of that before
TG: in all seriousness you just hit the nail on the head
TG: youre smarter than you look john
EB: thanks!
EB: wait...
TG: thats basically what a whole mess of us mages have been trying to do for centuries
TG: dox makes it difficult to just show large numbers of people the truth
TG: but if were willing to take a few hits on the chin and spread the good word
TG: we can chip away at the consensus
TG: replace the boring rational paradigm
TG: with a more awesome one
TG: or rather a series of different but still more awesome ones
TG: just one problem
EB: whats that?
TG: the current paradigm of inflexible science
TG: dogmatic social constructs
TG: and secular corporate and state worship
TG: that shit is not without its defenders
TG: if it were just something that occurred on its own wed have broken it by now
TG: the modern consensus has help
EB: help? from who?
TG: well
TG: naw im not up for that fuckin discussion
EB: what!
TG: im tired
TG: got my lecture on and wasnt even prepared
EB: dude you cant cliffhang me now!
EB: theres so much left to talk about!
TG: thats right there is
TG: which is why its best to save it for another lecture
TG: whoops kids looks like class is over for today
TG: professor striders gotta take a piss
EB: ew dog ew!
TG: grade some papers maybe sling some rhymes
EB: lame.
TG: like i said theres plenty more where that came from dude
TG: youve got my pesterchum address ive got yours
TG: you rest up mull todays lesson over a spell
TG: no pun intended
EB: ugh.
EB: i guess youre right. i feel like shit right now.
TG: you should probably talk to jade too while youre at it
EB: oh yeah!
EB: i havent even read her letter yet!
TG: yeah dog
TG: also she was the one who asked me to message you in the first place remember
EB: oh yeah. wait why did she even do that?
EB: i should ask her.
TG: well i can give you the reason she told me
TG: because she predicted your awakening in her dreams
EB: her dreams?
TG: apparently anyway
TG: ask her shes probably jonesing to tell you all about it
EB: okay i will!
TG: also
TG: since im suddenly professor strider
TG: i got homework for you
EB: oh man i just remembered.
EB: i threw my homework at that imp!
EB: thats gonna be impossible to explain to my teacher.
TG: yeah
TG: sorry teach a clown monster sent by a pissed off manifestation of reality ate my homework
TG: for real tho your homework is to research magic
TG: find your system dude get your shit under control
EB: thats probably a good idea.
EB: where do i go for that though?
TG: shrugs
TG: internet
TG: look up chaos magick or some shit idk
TG: anyway im gonna bounce
EB: okay
TG: oh and john
EB: yeah?
TG: happy birthday
TG: you just got the best damned birthday present any kid could ask for
EB: thanks!
TG: that gift being the gift of my presence
TG: smell you later dude
EB: striiiiiiiider!

-- turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering ectoBiologist [EB] --

Chapter End Notes

Pesterlogs are now the bane of my existence. It is such a pain to apply coloring. And I've got several more chapters that feature them heavily. Whoops!
I will take my leave now, John. You are a brave little soldier.

The Without-home Veteran took his fingers off the keys, pushing the keyboard away.

He jabbed the On/Off button on the television. The picture on the TV screen devolved into a mass of static, before cutting out entirely. Only the black remained.

His heart beat furiously, but a smile crept to the old hobo's face.

For the first time in twenty years, he led a young man into an engagement. Unlike twenty years ago, however, he'd managed to bring the boy out alive. It was a gratifying feeling. Like he made up, in just a little way, his failure so many years ago.

He glanced over to the pictures of his fallen squad – those poor young men, who never went home, save on their backs. Would they be proud of their captain, seeing him now?

The hobo's fingers straightened out, and he shot the boys a salute. As long as he'd gone without need to, the action flowed strong and true. He'd trained that reflex often enough, before that two-week war even started. He should know it by now.

He dropped the salute, then sank in his chair with a sigh. The hobo's hand grasped the almost forgotten can of beans. Luckily, it was already room temperature to begin with, so he just started shoveling beans into his hungry maw.

When the can remained half empty, the vagrant carried the can and spoon with him as he walked around the room. Nibbling absentmindedly, he focused on the big model of Can Town. And, through the Sympathetic Transitive Property, to the whole of the city's core.

The man once known as Wayland Vasily had much work ahead of him. Democracy was in danger.

In numerous locations in Can Town, he'd placed signifiers. Like a hard-boiled police detective (or hard-core conspiracy theorist) would stick colored pins on a map, this hobo had placed colored reminders throughout his three dimensional map. Little paper umbrellas, bottle caps, scraps of cloth. A whole mess of tiny objects that would stand out from the shiny metal mass. Each type signifying a different kind of data point.

Before the army – but after the family farm – the hobo named Wayland Vasily studied Political Science. His dreams had been modest: become mayor, and promote honest democratic processes within his fair city. Whichever one he decided to run in.

In fact...

The hobo walked over to one of his boxes and retrieved another instrument of his Influence: a mayoral sash. It wasn't a real sash (god, if he could somehow fish one of those from the trash), but a length of linen with the word “MAYOR” sewn into it. As it turns out, a lot of young people today try to pick up sewing (among other potential handicrafts), only to give up shortly after starting. The goods go into the trash, where they either rot...or provide kindling for the passionate fires of a homeless person with a lot of time on his hands.
Donning the sash, the hobo transformed into the Mayor. Not literally, of course, and he'd be much too embarrassed to wear the thing out in public. Someday, maybe. But its a symbolic Mayorhood that he took on. It made him more powerful, at least in Can Town.

He returned to stalking Can Town's perimeter, knocking back the last of the beans into his mouth and putting the can aside (he would need to rinse that out later, before it got added to the town).

When he went to war, it had been for three reasons: patriotism, the desire to see a put-upon people freed from the shackles of invaders, and to promote his eventual political career. Obviously his plans had been dashed forever, but that didn't mean his drive died. He was no longer an Optimist, but he was still an Idealist. In some ways he was crippled – he could never stand the political stage now, with decades untreated PTSD – but in others he was empowered. Namely, by his...Influence...

Okay, let's be honest. It's magic. Magic is what he's doing. But he liked to call it Influence, because it made it sound less silly, in his own mind anyway. Plus, this farm boy turned political science major turned soldier turned homeless man's body of knowledge (wide though it may be) did not include the esoteric.

But he did know The System. And through his long studies, both on the road and there in the city, the Hobo Mayor knew one thing: the System was sick.

No, not sick. Infested. By parasites.

And by Parasites, the Hobo meant Vampires.

Blood-sucking fiends are actually easier to find than they think they are. It's only for willful ignorance on the part of the public at large that the series of blunders, sloppy feeding, violent sectarian rivalries, and blatant use of supernatural powers that go on every night haven't caused the Vampires to reveal themselves. That and the campaign of coverups, both through vampiric cronies and what the hobo suspected was the work of the government. Stories of murder and attack by “monsters” were buried under softer news, assuming they weren't killed entirely. Getting access to such records was a persistent desire of the Mayor's, which unfortunately is difficult for a transient.

But this hobo had other avenues for information.

The homeless are often ignored, but they don't ignore anything. Those living on the streets need to keep constant eyes out. So they see things. Things that few others would admit to seeing. Give them what they want, however, and they'll sing. The Mayor was always on the lookout for booze (and drugs, actually), but he doesn't take any himself. Besides for only making his panic attacks worse, he needs the stuff to trade to other homeless. Combine that with his almost intuitive ability to tell just from talking whether someone was lying or misremembering, and the Mayor had a steadily growing web of contacts. They, in turn, gave a steadily growing cache of intel. Where someone was murdered and how, where strange things were sighted, where a lot of pale people hang out, where a lot of folks give vague accounts of assault, where people were seen doing things so inexplicable not even they knew why they did it...

Animals, surprisingly, can be a wealth of information, if one can talk to them. And the hobo could. He'd figured out how to connect with beasts. Once he could do that, it was a matter of appealing to that one common resource they all desired: food. Feed a stray cat tuna, and he'd tell all. Keep bird seed in the pocket, and one suddenly had dozens of eyes watching from the skies. Their ability to comprehend complex orders or give accurate information was limited. But if a homeless person is overlooked, humans seemed to actively resist noticing the random pigeon, rat, stray cat or dog, or even the lowly firefly.
Not that the Mayor would call a firefly a lowly creature. He liked fireflies. Their glow was...soothing.

And then, of course, there's the spirit world, and the spirits who dwell therein. Ghosts tell a lot of tales, often simply to have the tale told. Those without such a desire could often be bribed by retrieving and preserving (or, contrarily, destroying) their former personal effects. Sometimes they just want to be FELT at, so they can drink up the emotions. While getting information from wraiths was often a production in and of itself, they could reach places no regular contact could go.

More...exotic spirits – of plastic, garbage, pigeons, and malaise – had more esoteric requirements for bribery. And they were often difficult to talk to, because they're just so alien. But they, too, offer information (and sometimes favors) that no one else could.

What all four groups share in common is a general dislike for Vampires.

The Mayor doesn't particularly want to seek destruction for all Vampires, even in the one city. That would be suicide. But he understood, through his study of their ways and their own Influence, that they were one of the biggest reasons for corruption in the city government. Street lights burning out and never replaced, fire trucks diverted from fires, police investigations halted, city officials bribed, pet art galleries promoted over a children's hospital in terms of municipal funding...

But one thing drew the Hobo Mayor's attention more than most. One night, while using the TV to peek into city hall, he saw a Vampire – for it looked very much like one – performing very Overt Influence on the mind of the mayor. The real mayor, not the Hobo Mayor.

This vagrant looked at the Can Town model of city hall. On top shined a flashlight, representing the light of Democracy.

What he wanted more than anything was to remove the parasite who dared to control city hall. The one that besmirched the noble ideal of government by the people.

And, looking at the data collected across the entire city, the Mayor was getting closer to finding it.

---

TG: alright i talked to your cousin
TG: johns pretty cool
TG: for a completely dorky nerd dweeb
TG: might make a good fuckin wizard out of him yet
GG: thanks dave! :)
GG: i really appreciate it!
TG: still dont understand why i needed to do it instead of you
TG: were you busy or something
GG: no its just how the dream went
GG: given how finicky prognostication is
GG: i prefer to hedge as close to the vision as possible if its something i want to have happen
GG: and my dream was really hopeful
TG: dude got attacked by a paradox imp btw
GG: oh no! :(
GG: is he alright dave?
TG: yeah hes cool
TG: got scratched up a bit but he pulled it out in the end
TG: crushed the shitter with a huge book
GG: :O
GG: colonial sassacre's daunting text of magical frivolity and practical japery?
TG: uh
TG: i guess
TG: didnt really stop to look at the cover
TG: when it was crushing the thing to death under its massive weight
TG: hold on how do you know which book it is
GG: its a family heirloom, of sorts...
GG: well the book was written by family anyway
TG: really who
GG: great great grandpa Sassacre himself
GG: he was the one who raised my grandpa and johns grandma :)
TG: wait wasnt he the guy who got gunned down by an infant duel wielding flintlock pistols
GG: yeah :( 
GG: the reports of his death were sadly not exaggerated
TG: kids should not be allowed to duel wield flintlocks
TG: now a pair of shitty anime swords is another matter entirely
GG: he he! :P
TG: anyway im signin off
TG: oh before i forget
TG: john got your bunny
GG: oh good!
GG: i hope he enjoys it!
TG: better damn well do
TG: shit took four goddamn weeks to hunt down
TG: not even my ben stiller shades took that long
TG: oh and he probably likes it
TG: fought the imp over it
GG: omg!
GG: okay ill talk to you later
GG: cool guy! :) 
TG: the fuckin coolest


The incredibly cool dude reclined in his chair, picking up another bottle of apple juice and knocking it back.

While he was obviously a savant at many things – hacking, ninjitsu, net surfing, swordplay, being really cool – educating baby mages on their new state of enlightenment was not one of them. It was exhausting, and he had to compromise his totally rad persona as a dude who really didn't care in order to do it. Oh sure, he threw out some sick wordplay more than once, and got his dope metaphors on. But it was a drop in the bucket compared to all the straight dope he had to throw out, exposition style. 

He'd need to make some notes later. Figure out his lesson plan, hopefully in a less straight forward, more labyrinthine way. Maybe in comic sans, too.

“Baah!”

Dave Strider put down the AJ and checked the computer.
Oh fuck, it's this douche bag. One of his “peers”.

But really this guy was fine, albeit with a pretty douchey typing quirk. Dave figured he'd left him hanging long enough.

-- twinArmageddons [TA] started pestering turntechGodhead [TG] --

TA: oii douchebag.
TA: the fuck are you?
TA: we doiing thii2 or not?
TG: sup
TG: sorry dude something came up
TA: hmmm?
TG: told you before i had a thing today
TG: shit took longer than planned
TA: and you didn't tell me about thi2 until now becau2e?
TG: check it
TG: turns out there was this baby ass mage
TG: needed to be talked through the first few minutes of his awakening
TG: so he didnt end up burning his house to the fuckin ground
TG: and also a dox spirit attacked so theres that
TA: seriou2ly?
TG: yeah dog shit took 40 goddamn minutes
TG: didnt have time to message
TA: damn.
TA: wait, YOU taught a newbiie the rope2?
TA: you.
TG: got it as an assignment from an acquaintance
TG: who for whatever reason decided i had to be the one to do it
TG: and then didnt tell me why until just today
TA: ugh, biitch biitch biitch. can we ju2t go already? ii don't have all day.
TG: yeah fine
TG: ill jump in in a second
TG: gotta get my gear on
TA: fiine, ii'll be on the 2erver when you get there.


Dave leaned over to a cardboard box by his desk, adorned with a ironic cartoon stickers. Out came an ironically oversized VR headset and a pair of Nintendo Power Gloves. He was ambivalent towards the Power Gloves. They were so bad. Yet so ironic. Yet still pretty bad.

There were few ways to don such an eighties getup in a cool manner, but Dave compensated by not giving a shit. When in doubt, coolness could be maintained in any level of ridiculous costumes by simply wearing them in a cool, aloof manner. It's how he got through every school picture day.

His regular shades came off and the headset came on, as did the gloves. Hooking them into the computer, Dave booted up one of his most used programs. Fingers flew over the keyboard, clad in nostalgic gray.

With the hitting of Enter, the VR headset lit up, and images poured out over his eyes. He removed his hands from the keyboard, allowing the tech to transport his senses into the Digital Web.
“Ugh...”

John winced, hunching over. His back grew to sting more as the effects of adrenalin faded. He rose from his chair and wandered to his bed.

He expected, with more than a little weariness, that he'd have a hell of a time cleaning up after the mess he made of the imp. To his surprise, however, he discovered a trail of light smoke coming off the book, before dissipating into nothing.

Tilting his head, he reached down and carefully turned the book over. The corpse of the imp was gone, however, the last smudges of black evaporating into nothing. Even the oily fluids that had soaked the carpet had disappeared, though the otherwise pure white carpet was left stained an off-white color where the puddle had grown.

John frowned at this. He didn't even know where to begin removing spirit monster stains. Bleach, maybe? John shook his head, resolving to worry about it later. Thankfully, paradox spirits seemed to clean up after themselves.

He turned to the bed and rifled through the green package again. There was the bunny of course, which he briefly admired, before picking up the unread letter from Jade.

“John!”

John shot bolt upright, looking out his door. From somewhere below, his Dad was calling for him.

“John! Why is the door off its hinges?”

John gulped, then sighed. There was no way of avoiding dealing with his father now. Dad had already seen the door, and there wouldn't be any hiding the cuts. Nor, indeed, did John think it wise to do so, if the wounds could get infected.

As he exited his room and headed downstairs, John supposed he could have attempted to heal his wounds with magic. Dave had said he could do anything, and while John was skeptical about how powerful he could truly be, minor first aid seemed simple enough. But he didn't know how to go about doing that, especially for the claw marks on his back. He didn't want to make an error, just willing the cuts closed, and he also didn't particularly feel up to inviting more paradox. One home invasion was frankly enough for one day.

The birthday boy found his way to the first floor. Dad was waiting near the entrance to the kitchen.

“John, can you explain the...” Dad said, turning to him. A box of pizza was in his arms, but his nearly dropped it upon seeing his son. “John! What happened to you!”

“Oh, this...?” John said, rubbing the back of his head. The strain of twisting his arm up caused his back to flare up, and he winced. “Ah!”

“Oh dear!” Dad said, walking over. He put a free hand on his son's shoulder and examined his back. “John! Are you alright? How did this happen?”

For a brief moment, John considered telling his father the truth. That he was attacked by a monster, who only appeared because John had come into great cosmic power and been openly vulgar about it.

“Uh...” Naturally, he quickly quashed that idea. It would be refreshing to be honest, and thus
sidestep the pitfalls so common to fiction of children having to keep fantastic secrets from their parents. But Dad would never believe the tale, and trying to prove it would only complicate matters (and possibly invite more Paradox). So John chose a close, likely tale. “A wild dog got in and attacked me.”

“Oh no!” Dad said, setting the pizza on the ground.

“But it's alright, Dad!” John said throwing his arms up and waving them. “I fought it off with a hammer.”

Dad looked stunned, but then smiled slightly, regarding his son with stern, fatherly approval. “I'm glad to hear that, son.” He bent over and wrapped John up in an embrace, though careful of the boy's injuries. “I'm proud of you.”

“...thanks, Dad,” John said, smiling and returning the hug.

The man released John, standing up. “Well, let's have a look at those marks, John.”

“Okay,” John sighed, removing his shirt. As his father looked at his chest and back, John regarded his shirt. The poor thing would probably need to be thrown away. A pity, since it was one of his favorite ghost shirts.

“It doesn't look too serious,” Dad said, rubbing his chin, “but we'll take you to the clinic down the way, just to be safe.” He gestured to John, who resumed wearing his shirt. “We'll probably also need to get you some shots. Never know if the dog was rapid, or had some other disease.”

“Guess birthday dinner is off, huh?” John asked, looking up. He fiddled with the note from Jade, which he still had in his hand.

“Oh, this probably won't take that long,” Dad said, smiling. He picked up the pizza box, motioning towards the door. “Plus, I got us some lunch, so that should tide you over. Come on, son.”

“Coming, Dad!” John followed after.

In the car, the pizza box was balanced on John's lap, and the two ate slices. As they traveled to the doctor's office – where John's longtime physician worked – John read through the note from Jade.

dear john,

happy birthday!!!!! i hope this package finds you well. in truth, though, i have no doubt that it will arrive just when you need it. my dreams told me as much. :D

there are so many things ive wanted to tell you, john. things ive been holding onto for years. by the time you read this, i hope you will be in a position to understand.

if your birthday plays out the way i think it will, you will be going through some very sudden, very rapid changes. things you never would have dreamed possible. the coming months will be hard, but i know youll be able to break through. you're a strong kid, john. stronger than you'd ever give yourself credit for. youll make it, im sure.

if nothing else, i will be there to help you. and my friend dave. and even a few friends you havent made yet. theres so many people i want to introduce you to! So many things i want to show you. i know everything seems to be moving quickly. believe me, it will seem like a disaster soon enough.
a whirlwind of history, names, friends, foes, and a whole bunch more.

the future is too great even for me to predict. i dont think anyone in this world could every know the future for certain. but we'll step forward into that Undiscovered Country together. if i may use one of my grandpas favorite words, it will be an Adventure!!!

anyway, i hope dave helped you where i could not. and that he wasnt too much of a butt! >;P
take good care of Mister Bunny, for me, okay john? it was really hard getting a hold of it! Dave certainly wont let you forget it, either. we will have to think of some way to pay the guy back.

Pester me as soon as you can.

love you cousin!!!

jade

Rose Lalonde sat at her desk. Behind her, the window was pitch black, for the dead of night.

Her desk lamp shone down, illuminating a worn, ancient codex. Rose turned a page with a pair of tweezers, careful to give the venerable tome no undue stress.

The latest page revealed an illustrated diagram of the Sephiroth, the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. Each sephirah was labeled in neat handwriting. Malkuth, Yesod, Hod, Netzach, Tiphareth, Geburah, Chesed, Binah, Chokmah, Kether.

The girl rubbed sleep from her eyes. She didn't have time to rest.

Rose's attention had just be captured by a whole new world of erudition.

---

**Hours Ago (But Not Many)**

“Mister Tallfield.”

The man in the outrageously expensive bespoke suit steepled his fingers. The screen before him cast a cool blue glow over him.

On the screen was a video feed of a man in a gray jumpsuit, holding a tablet PC. His head was bare, save for a metal box that jutted from the side, just above his right ear.

“Yes?” said the man in the suit.

“Through advanced statistical analysis,” said the cyborg on the other end, in a flat monotone, “we have discerned that sometime today, a spontaneous Enlightenment will occur somewhere in the following locale. Sending coordinates.”

The businessman reached a hand over and tapped a key on the keyboard. A map of the United States appeared in another window, which zoomed in around the state of Washington. It centered finally around a suburban neighborhood in Maple Valley.

The coordinates placed it within the jurisdiction of the businessman's Construct.

“Can we narrow the prediction down any further?” the man said, though this was merely a formality. Almost as soon as he said it, he realized the answer.
“Negative,” the cyborg said. He played his fingers over the tablet. “Several anomalies in and around the locale of Maple Valley, Washington, made more precise calculations inconclusive. We require more data to confirm the location with absolute certainty.”

“Well, if it's happening today, we likely won't be able to catch it,” the businessman said, frowning. “Not scouring an area this large. It would take too long to press local resources into action.” He cracked his knuckles, one by one. “I will have a talk with the boys in black, and have them send feelers into the area. If anyone develops extranormal understanding of hyperphysics, or exhibits signs of Reality Deviance, their blind use of Inspired ability will give them away. Eventually.”

He leaned in, fiddling with the mouse and enlarging the map. Looked at the endless rows of little white houses.

Syndicate rep Brandon Tallfield smiled, already running the operation costs in his head.

“We have merely to wait until our target calls out to us.”

-- ectoBiologist [EB] began pestering gardenGnostic [GG] --

EB: hey jade!
GG: omg john are you alright?
GG: also happy birthday!
EB: thanks! and yeah i'm alright.
EB: i'm with my dad at the doctor's office, getting my scratches looked at.
EB: doc says its not all that serious.
GG: that's such a relief
EB: i guess dave told you about my fight with the imp then?
EB: or did you just predict that?
GG: oh no it was dave who told me
GG: if id been able to see it coming i would have sent more help
GG: sorry :(
EB: its okay. i had my hammer with me.
EB: and my copy of colonial sassacre's.
GG: yeah dave implied as much too
GG: looks like great great granpa is looking out for us still!
EB: i know, right? family is the best.
EB: thanks for the bunny by the way.
GG: youre welcome! :)
GG: did you read my letter?
EB: yep!
EB: oh and just in case it wasn't clear,
EB: i'm magic now.
GG: yeah i figured
GG: proud of you! :)
EB: hey i've got a question jade.
EB: since we're getting a whole bunch of stuff out in the open.
GG: sure!
GG: what do you want to know?
EB: you're magic too, aren't you jade?
GG: yep!
GG: although i like to think of what i do as more like science
GG: progressive science! ;P
EB: sweet.
EB: uh...
EB: jade?
GG: yes?
EB: is it alright, if I,
EB: you know...
GG: uh
EB: okay this might be really personal,
EB: because mine was kind of involved with my own problems,
EB: but how did you,
EB: you know,
EB: wake up?
GG: oh
EB: sorry if that's a sore subject you don't have to answer.
GG: no its okay
GG: i guess since were being honest now
GG: i can tell you
GG: really its kind of good to get this off my chest
GG: i didnt even tell dave or anyone else what happened
EB: so i'm getting an exclusive?
EB: that is so sweet.
GG: totally!!! :D
GG: well it kind of went like this...

Chapter End Notes

This marks the end of the first story arc. I've got a generous backlog, so stay tuned.
February 2006

“Jade...come here, my dear...”

The dark-haired girl almost bolted back through the doorway again. She averted her face. Then, staring the floor, she hugged her hands to her heart, and moved inside.

Jade Harley, a girl of only ten, forced herself to look at the man in the bed. The silence in the room was broken only by the metronomic beep of the heart monitor.

Grandpa Harley reached a hand out from where he lay, beckoning her closer. “There's my girl,” he said softly, smiling.

Funny how Jade had almost never heard her grandfather speak in anything less than a room-filling bellow. Now he could only muster a whisper. The girl walked forward, he skirt swaying. She took her place at the chair beside the bed.

“Grandpa...” Jade said, her emotionless mask cracking at the edges. A quirking mouth, a twitching brow, flaring nostrils. She was trying to suppress the pain she was feeling, barely able to comprehend the physical pain the man felt.

If he felt any pain at all, the tanned, wrinkly old face didn't show it. Not around the broad grin, and certainly not behind the thick, coke bottle glasses. “Shh...shh...” he said, reaching out with his huge hands and patting the girls. “I know.”

A snow white canine sat at the foot of the bed, lying across the man's feet. Becquerel had his ears back, but its head was up, ever alert. Occasionally, an ear would jerk around, though there was little sound to be heard there.

“Jade...have I ever told you that you are beautiful?”

“Granpa...stop...” Jade frowned, leaning over. “...why...does it have to be this way?”

Grandpa Harley let the smile diminish, just a little. “Right to the crux of the matter. You are a true markswoman, Jade, and I couldn't be more proud. You know that, right?”

Jade nodded, clutching her grandfather's liver-spotted hand. Enormous, it was, and calloused like tanned leather.

“I mean it, my dear. You are the best girl a...grandfather could hope for.” There was an imperceptible twitch at the corner of the old man's mouth. Grandpa squeezed his hand, warming his cooled digits in Jade's warm, lively hands. “You are brilliant, beautiful, sweet, bold, adventurous, and a crack shot with a rifle. Most importantly, you are strong. I know, even this, you can weather.”

Jade gasped, shutting her eyes.

“Now, now, Jade,” Grandpa said, squeezing her hands again. “For now, I'm still right here. You aren't allowed to cry for me...until I'm gone.”

Despite that admonishment, she could not hold back any longer. Jade threw herself onto the old
man, burying her face in his medical gown. “Bwaaaaaah!” she cried, tears pouring out.

“Oh dear, oh dear...” Grandpa said, taking the girl into his arms. “There, there, sweetie. I'm sorry. You can cry all you want. Let it all out.”

And she did. Jade threw her arms around the man's broad chest and sobbed, soaking the gown with salty tears.

The two sat there, letting the sadness drain out, little by little. The dog on the foot of the bed whined, looking at the old man. The old man merely looked at the dog. Nothing needed to be said between them.

Eventually, the fit of sobbing died down, and Jade pulled herself off. Plopping down in the chair, she sniffled and rubbed her red eyes. A snot trail leaked down her face, along with a generous helping of tears. “...G-Grandpa...hic...why do you have to go?”

“Ah, I'm afraid we all have to go sometime, my dear,” Grandpa Harley said, flashing the girl a compassionate smile. “I'm one of the lucky ones, really. I get to grow old. Many souls never get that chance.” He tapped his chest. “I'm afraid my old ticker is...just too worn down. I have it on good authority it won't last for very long at all.”

“Why...hic...w-why c-can't you just make a new one?” Jade asked, sniffing. “You always say, 'we have the technology'. Can't you replace your...hic...your heart?”

“Ah, but there's the rub, Jade,” Grandpa sighed. He gestured to his chest again. “I already have. Twice. This is my second artificial heart.”

Jade's eyes widened. She stared at his chest in mounting wonder.

“That's right!” the old man said, flashing a toothy smile. “When I said my ticker was wearing down...” He knocked on his breast. “...I wasn't been figurative. Really, Jade, you think so little of the technology at my disposal? After so many years living with me, here on this island?”

Sniffing, Jade bit her lip. “...hic...then why?”

“Well, truth be told, it isn't my design,” Grandpa said, shrugging. “Got this one from a...colleague, belonging to the same social club as your old grandpa.” He sighed, whimsically. “But that old man isn't around anymore. Ran afoul of hostile forces too many times. And I'm me – Jake Harley – so when I say someone ran afoul of too many enemies, that's saying something. Truth is, I've been lucky as hell. But my old source of...replacement parts was simply the best there was. No one else could match him, not even his students. Or if anyone could, I'm too out of the loop now to know of them.

“Besides,” Grandpa continued, looking out the window at the volcano that loomed mightily over the island, “I'm much too old for more surgeries.”

“But you aren't that old, Grandpa!” Jade shouted, flailing her hands at him.

“Oh? And how old do you think I am, Jade?”

“Uh...” The girl studied her grandfather's face. “...Sixty?”

“You flatter me, Jade,” Grandpa said, chuckling. This was ill-planned, though, as he started to cough. “Hack hack!” He rubbed his chest, frowning. “No, my dear, I'm not that young. I may not be good enough to design an artificial heart myself – much less surgically install it by my lonesome
but I know how to take care of my body. Make it last.” He looked sidelong at her, smiling. “Jade, I'm already 115 years old.”

Jade gasped, covering her mouth with both hands. “Really!? A hundred and fifteen!?”

“Like I said,” Grandpa beamed, twerking his eyebrows, “I'm very good at keeping myself healthy.”

He looked out the window again. Beyond the volcano, the great blue sea rolled. “But there's not just the quantity of life to consider, Jade. There's also the quality. Certainly, if I really wanted to, I could keep going for another century or more. I'd have to call in some favors – would need a few miracles – but it would be doable. Could easily work at learning it myself, and go on, functionally, forever.” He frowned. “But there is a cost to such age. Many costs, rather. I don't want to end up going senile, or worse.” He looked to Jade. “And I certainly don't want to burden you with having to deal with a bedridden wretch, whose body and mind waste away. You have your whole life ahead of you. I refuse to stand in the way or hold you back. That's not what parents are far...and it's certainly not what grandparents are for, either.

“And then there are other, less explicable barriers to contend with. The world is...hostile, to such a tragically long life. Out here on the island, it wouldn't be so bad. But if I went anywhere else, it could get...messy...” Grandpa winked at the girl. “And you know I would off myself in an instant if I was immortal, but could never go on an adventure ever again.”

Jade smiled, just slightly, sniffling and letting a single, tiny chuckle come to her chest. Grandpa's hand rose to her face, and she let him hold it. As he brushed away a tear with his thumb, she hugged his forearm.

“No, this is probably for the best in the long run, my dear,” Grandpa said, petting the girl's head. “I've already lived a long, full life. Honestly, I expected to meet my end in some hidden wilderness temple, or high in the air, or...other places far from home. Fighting some monster or madman or cabal of evil manipulators. Righting some injustice, saving some innocents. I've had plenty of that, and gotten away with my skin up until now. And really, this is good too.”

Jade pressed her face into her grandfather's hand. “Are you...really going to leave me alone, Grandpa?” She frowned. “I'm...I'm scared.”

“Well don't you worry, sweetie,” Grandpa said, nodding. “You won't be alone. There's Bec, of course, the old hell hound.” The old man looked down at his feet. “Isn't that right, Bec? You'll take care of our sweet sniper angel, won't you?”

Becquerel looked over and barked, smiling in that panting sort of way.

Jade giggled.

“And while the island will be lonely,” Grandpa said, holding up a finger, “there are plenty of folks that will support you. I've made many friends and allies in my time. Which...hurrumph!” Grandpa cleared his throat. “…brings me to matters of business. You know Miss Dilshad?”

The girl nodded. “The nice woman with the big hair!” Jade smiled. “She gives me candy, sometimes.”

“Yes, she gives me candy too,” Grandpa said. “Nice Turkish candy. The stuff you can't get anywhere else. Acquired a taste for it, back in the 40s. Ha...” The old man sighed. “Well, Ms. Dilshad Teke is my lawyer. I knew her father, when he represented me. Dilshad will be handling the estate and the money for you. Making sure it all winds up in a trust, to be given fully to you
when you turn eighteen.” Leaning over, he dropped to a whisper, though it was hardly necessary. “She'll also be making sure all the legal documents mark you as having a responsible guardian, even though you and Bec should be able to take care of yourselves.” He winked.

Jade stifled a giggle with both hands.

“She'll insist on checking up on you regularly, and I've left you her contact information. You call her whenever you need to...as well as...” Grandpa shook his head. “Anyway, I've also left the contact information with a number of my friends and acquaintances. This includes members of that...'social club' I mentioned earlier.”

The old man sighed, rubbing his nose. “Next comes the matter of your...education. Ms. Dilshad will be on you to read your books...and yes, Jade, that means all of them.”

“Hhhhhmmmm...” Jade groaned.

“I know Literature and History and all other things besides Math and Science are difficult,” Grandpa said. “But we can't have you becoming...well, let's just say I've known a few people who only focused on those. Couldn't hardly interact with the world at large. Pitiably chaps...You know how to repair most of the machines in the complex already. If any of them cause you trouble, though – especially that complex geothermal generator – I have detailed schematics in my study...which reminds me. Bec?”

“Woof!” Bec barked, before teleporting away in a haze of green sparks. He returned moments later with a key in his mouth, which he dropped in the old man's hand.

“Thank you, Bec,” Grandpa said, petting the unearthly creature's head. He held up the key. “This will get you into my study, Jade.” He took the girl's hand and placed the key in it. “It contains all of my books, as well as all my tinkering. Now...” The old man paused, opening and closing his mouth. “...some of the books, Jade, might prove...difficult to grasp.”

Jade tilted her head sideways. She frowned a little.

“Not that I'm saying you aren't up to the task!” Grandpa waved his hands in front of him defensively. “It's just...the material in there is on a whole other level. Don't get discouraged if you don't get it right away. In fact, I have one book in particular that will help immensely with this.”

Jade's eyes widened incrementally. She stared at the old man curiously.

“I've left it on the desk, on top of my research notes.” Grandpa held up a single finger. “It is called the Kitab Al-Alacir. It is a very...precious book, Jade. Never lose it. Every copy is like a diamond.”

“...the Kitab Al-Alacir...” Jade said, looking down at the floor thoughtfully.

“It is a bit of a difficult read, the first time through,” Grandpa said. “It's also a strange, abstract text. But I assure you, on my honor...” He clapped one hand over his heart, and raised another in salute. “...that you can get through it. You can grasp its teachings, even if it is hard. And when you do...Jade...”

He leaned over, staring gravely into the girl's eyes. Jade flinched back. Grandpa held his gaze firm. “...you will understand secrets of the world you never thought possible. More than that mere hunk of metal in you hand, what you learn from the book is the key to my lab and everything in it. It is the key...to Creation itself.”

As he watched the gravity of this revelation set in on Jade's face, Grandpa leaned back. “I
had...hoped to show the book to you when you were older. Help you through the...initial period of confusion. But...fate is forcing my hand, Jade. I don't want to dodge it any longer. I think...I'm ready to meet the turning of the Wheel head on. While I yet have my nerve.”

Jade's face twisted in pain. She sniffled, then leaned forward, pressing herself against her grandfather's chest. “...hic...I'm...I'm gonna miss you, Grandpa!” She gripped his blanket tight. “...I'll miss you so much! I don't want you to go!”

“...I'll miss you too, sweetheart,” Grandpa Harley said, patting her on the back. “You are the apple of my eye, and the greatest thing I...ever created.” Tipping his head back, he closed his eyes. “Do not mourn me overmuch, Jade. You are allowed to cry, but don't let my passing stop you in your tracks. Don't shut yourself away here on this island, either. The world outside wants to see you, and your smiling face, and the terror you can bring to the wicked and the vile.”

Jade nodded, sniffing.

“I don't believe for one second that Death is The End, Jade.” Grandpa shook his head, frowning. “I have fought the vilest of men – damned men who worshiped Oblivion like a dark god.” A fist clenched tightly. “I've fought their kind enough times that I could never accept their belief. I refuse to validate their nihilism.”

Grandpa smiled. “I refuse...because in addition to depravity and blasphemy, I have seen sights broad and beautiful. I've cut my way through the thickest jungles of South America, Africa, and Asia. I've met peoples there who smiled and laughed and cried and loved. I've sailed across all four oceans, marveling at the endless expanse of blue. I've walked the streets of New York, Paris, Moscow, Hong Kong...and cities beyond, like Radiant City, within the Gernsback Continuum. I've wrestled Kraken over the sunken, thriving city of Lemuria. I've floated among the stars in Etherspace, and meditated alongside the Goro monks, deep in the temples of the Hollow Earth.

“I have seen so many enchanting things. The beauty of nature, the triumph of human ingenuity, and the love in the hearts of every man, woman, and child. How could I possibly give in to despair, knowing the world has such wonders in it?”

He brushed his fingers through Jade's hair, the girl hugging him quietly.

“Death is not the end, Jade,” he said, smiling. “I think I like how my friends from India have it. Life and Death are but two sides of a Wheel...ever turning. I'll go forward to that place – to that Undiscovered Country – and return, transformed. I rather like the idea, actually. It mirrors my own life, each mission causing me to change the world and be changed by it. There's something poetic about that.

“So I'm not really ceasing to be, Jade. I'm just departing...for a New...Adventure...”

“Hrrragh!”

Jade gave one last push, then stood back and wiped her brow. She looked up sadly.

The stuffed body of the Grandpa Harley looked down upon her, glass eyes staring through his favorite pair of spectacles. A roaring fire backlit the mounted cadaver, casting him into silhouette. Draped an altogether sinister pall over the room.

Jade Harley scowled.

Sighing, Jade walked over to one of the lounge's two long couches. She gently pushed one of her
grandfather's “house guests” over. She still didn't understand why he kept life-sized stuffed
dummies, in varying degrees of fanciful dress. The one she moved sported a Napoleonic officer's
uniform and a medieval knight's helm.

Exasperated, Jade plopped herself on the newly vacated seat, and promptly buried her face in her
hands.

Stipulating full taxidermy preservation, as performed by a grieving ten year old girl, explicitly in
his will. What the Fuck, Grandpa?

If there was anything more profoundly messed up to force on surviving family members, Jade
couldn't readily think of anything. Nothing besides maybe full blown human sacrifice to a shrine
erected in his honor. Nevermind the family tradition, Grandpa could at least have allowed Jade to
outsource the task to a professional team. One who weren't emotionally attached to the
deceased...as well as emotionally vulnerable.

Jade sighed, feeling like her heart was in a vice. Disturbed by the lengthy old man stuffing as she
was, Jade couldn't help feel terrible harboring bitterness against her beloved grandfather. Like a
betrayal of their whole life together.

“Uuuuuugh!” she groaned, throwing herself back and slouching against the couch.

After the funeral – a rather crowded affair, where dozens of old men and women arrived, jawing
about the good old days and throwing their condolences, Grandpa stories, and contact info at Jade
– dealing with the body took most of her time. Ms. Dilshad had offered to bring an actual team of
taxidermists to do the work, since Jade would understandably have reservations. Jade, stupid as she
was, hedged on the side of carrying out her grandfather's wishes to the letter.

As she sat in the middle of a stuffy, crowded smoking room, surrounded by nicknacks and dead
things, and without a single other human for thousands of miles...Jade felt lost. Drained. Like she'd
poured all the grief, all the horror, and all the frustration out in gallons, and now had nothing left
but a dull ache in her heart.

What the hell was she supposed to do now?

“Woof!”

Jade rolled her head over and looked towards the door.

Becquerel stalked slowly over, tail decidedly not wagging. He looked up at the stuffed body of
Grandpa Harley, and sat in front of him. Bec rested his chin on Grandpa's foot, and whined.

“Oh Bec...”

Jade rose and shuffled to Bec, kneeling and draping her arms over the dog. She rested her neck on
his back, rubbing his neck. “I know, boy. I miss him too.”

They stayed where they lay, comforting each other's grief with their mere presence. The two souls
stayed there for minutes. Or possibly hours.

By and by, though, Bec wiggled from under the girl and began walking towards the middle of the
building.

“Bec?” Jade mumbled, watching him walk.
Becquerel turned back to the girl. “Woof!” he barked, head jerking over his shoulder. When Jade didn't move, he barked again. “Woof woof!”

“What is it boy?” Jade asked. Tentatively, she rose to her feet.

“Woof!” Bec barked in satisfaction, jerking his head back and then turning around.

“You want me to follow? Where?” Jade scratched her head, then started walking.

What did the silly dog have in mind?

Entering the central room of the floor, Jade saw Bec look back at her, bark once, then look up to the ceiling. With a green flash, he disappeared.

Jade knew that Bec didn't need to look before he leapt. He could just go, seeming to know exactly where he was going. That little head tilt was for her benefit.

Sighing, Jade mounted the Transportalizer on the floor in the center of the room. The world fell away for the briefest instant, light flickering around her. Such a familiar sensation Jade barely noticed.

When she ascended to the next floor, Bec was waiting, sitting amid the collection of suits of armor. “Woof!” he barked, then looked to the ceiling again.

Jade sighed again, watching her dog flash away again.

This follow-the-leader routine continued for several floors, each bringing them to a higher floor of the island's sole building (well, besides the mysterious frog ruins sunken in the bay). Each floor had more artifacts of Grandpa Harley's extensive adventuring. Or his eclectic and singularly odd points of fascination, such as the floor full of female model portraits, plundered from barbershop windows only when they were good and sun-bleached blue.

One of these days, Jade resolved to at least organize her grandfather's stuff. Maybe hang those portraits on walls, instead of just leaning them against other crap. Maybe use some of Grandpa's fortune to build an extension to the tower to serve as storage. Though she was raised here, Jade always found the building so claustrophobic.

Oh, and Jade would need to throw out that awful stuffed snake monster. The one squatting on the Transportalizer several floors down, rendering it impossible to just port there. Had to use the stairs to access that floor. Like a caveman.

Finally, Jade materialized on one of the upper floors, where Bec sat waiting, wagging his tail. “Woof!” he barked, plopped down right next to a locked door.

“Oh...I see...” Jade walked forward, reaching down to pet Bec. “Guess I forgot about this, huh? Thanks Bec.” She sighed, giving the dog a small smile. “Good dog. Best friend.” Bec leaned into her hand, as she bent over to pat his head.

She stepped forward and placed a hand on the door. It was her grandfather's laboratory. Not that the tower in its entirety wasn't the old man's lab – every inch of it practically was equipped with some kind of device of his making. Either that or trophies of his conquests. Still, this was where Jade supposed all of Grandpa's real inventing occurred. Given the often volatile nature of the materials contained therein, Jade was told in no uncertain terms never to go inside without Grandpa.
Her hand fished under her shirt and pulled out the key slung around her neck.

The lab was a mess. Jade wasn't even surprised by the state of no-doubt organized chaos the room was in. Work benches stacked with dozens upon dozens of half-built machines, well loved tools, scientific instruments, leafs of paper bearing arcane notation, and spare parts. Microscopes and centrifuges sat aside alembics and Tesla-coils, though thankfully nothing seemed to have been left running. One wall was dominated by the mounted head of a shabby black wolf. That one in particular was vaguely disconcerting.

On the far wall, a wooden desk was perched with tall piles of books, and set against a bookcase. The bookcase stretched right up to the ceiling, and like the desk was filled to bursting with tomes, notebooks, and technical manuals.

In the corner of the room, another bookcase stood, dedicated to a single subject: back issues of a publication called “Paradigma: Journal of the Progressive Sciences”. A journal that was a favorite of Grandpa's; Jade recalled countless memories of him reading an issue by the fire or on breaks between vigorous exercise on the island. Sometimes he would even plop Jade on his lap and read articles from the journal to her.

Even she didn't exactly get some of the stuff Paradigma talked about, but it always seemed so cool and futuristic.

Jade traced her fingers over the aged spines of the Progressive Science Journal. Just a glance told her Grandpa had been collecting them since...jeez, from the very beginning it looked like! There was Volume 1 Issue 1, right there on the top of the shelf. It reminded Jade that one of the guests from his funeral worked as an editor on the journal, and had assured her, in memory of her late grandfather, she would be sent the next year's issues, free of charge. Jade would need to remember to file them here when they came in. Granted, they would likely be six months behind – their island being remote to the point of absurdity.

The girl sighed. She was avoiding the elephant in the room. Jade turned to the desk.

On the middle of a crowded area – likely the only space dedicated to actually writing – sat a single aged volume, bound in leather. On the spine and the front cover, words were written in gold leaf: “Kitab Al-Alacir, by Aretus – English Translation by Lord Edmund”.

Gingerly lifting the tome, Jade thumbed carefully through the yellowed pages.

Cursory examination revealed that most of the text looked to be typed on a typewriter. Had someone (her Grandpa?) actually hand transcribed the text? Moreover, where the ink had begun to fade, someone (probably Grandpa) had tried, with modest success, to apply new ink.

And then there were the annotations. Little scribbles in the margins. These, definitely, were Grandpa's work. Jade recognized his forceful handwriting. Most of them seemed to be notes clarifying historical and regional context. Thankfully, the body of the work was translated to English.

“Hmm...” Jade hummed, flipping to the beginning of the text. “Here goes nothing, Grandpa...”

Jade started to read.
Familiar

Days Later (But Not Many)

The Master was gone.

Becquerel lay at the feet of the stuffed body of Jake Harley. He was curled in a ball, save his head, which lay on his Master's foot.

An ancient, wise eye looked up at the man. Bec whined.

The Master was gone. While his corporeal form stood right there – the product of the Master's offspring's finest efforts at preservation – the Master was not there. He'd vacated his body and left. Gone somewhere not even Bec could follow.

Bec whined, sniffing. That old, familiar smell of cologne and sweat mixed with the stench of chemicals and fresh cotton.

The Master was gone. Becquerel couldn't sense his presence anymore. Couldn't feel him, either. That connection was severed, when the Master left. Now only Bec and the Master's offspring remained. Bec and Jade, Jake Harley's beloved daughter.

Bec's perception focused briefly – protectively – up above, watching Jade's movements. She was still there, in Master's lab, reading through Master's precious book. She was just like her sire.

Yes, Becquerel knew the truth of the family. That “Grandpa” Harley was, in actuality, “Father” Harley, to his beloved daughter. That Jade's “late” mother and father were convenient deceptions, though Bec had never quite understood the reasons. Whether it was now or a thousand years ago, humans still confused Bec.

The Master, even in his old age, had been a strong, virile male. It was perfectly natural for him to have found a willing female in his travels, and sired offspring. At least, it seemed natural to Bec. The alpha male in the pack, by virtue of living longer than any other male, deserved all the chances to breed. So when the Master returned home with Jade – his offspring – in his arms, Bec only thought it right. With so many of the Master's packmates (adopted though they were) gone over the decades, Bec had been glad to see the pack growing rather than shrinking.

Jade was such a lovely pup. Bright, cheerful, active. All the signs of healthy offspring. The Master doted on her relentlessly, as did Bec. He couldn't help it. The dog felt the love for the girl through his connection to Master. That, too, was only right.

Now the Master had gone. Bec understood, just a little bit. The years wore on the man, Bec could feel it. Wore on him in a way that only the tragically mortal could feel. Death called to the Master, and he answered in that enthusiastic, stalwart way that Bec always...admired about him. It was new to Bec, this human emotion called Admiration. One of many emotions he'd grown familiar with, being familiar with the Master.

It didn't make Bec any less sad by the Master's passing. If anything, it pained the dog even more. A part of Bec was missing. The Master was gone.

Becquerel remembered centuries past. Remembered them better than the previous millennia. The coming of those old explorers. Coming with their tools and their witchcraft, and the tools powered
by witchcraft. Remembered the conflicts with them, encroaching on the island that was Bec's territory. Back before Becquerel was the spirit's name. Remembered, tired of the repeated incursions, Bec traveled to the home of those same explorers, wreaking havoc and sowing fear in their hearts. Remembered that wise pack leader of theirs, and the pact the two formed to cement peace. Remembered the stack of steaks the man had agreed to give. Made Bec think it had been a pretty good deal.

None of those seekers – or the engineers that succeeded them – would set foot on the island. That was the arrangement. Bec's territory was Bec's. In return, the island became terra non grata – no map, made by hand or by the eyes humans set in the sky, would show the island. So far as Man was concerned, Bec's island did not exist. The seekers/engineers evidently decided it was better to isolate it, than to make war against Becquerel.

It was an arrangement Bec was more than happy to honor.

Except the agreement only applied to members of those hidden explorers. They didn't stop that man – Jake “English” Harley – from coming.

The dog didn't always understand the ways of humans, but later Jake would speak of finding a map in the heights of the Realms Invisible. It had once existed, a thing of bound sticks and beads, crafted by the hands of some islanders in the ocean that would come to be called the Pacific. Through misfortune, sabotage, or the denigrations of time, the map was unmade in the material world. But like all such things, it persisted as a reflection, in some repository of knowledge within the spirit world.

Such a repository did that man visit, where he learned of the island. Though Bec's island was impossible to find on the material plane – save by those who already knew it – it could be found on the other side. And so that man, young and strong, and full of piss and vinegar, braved the Umbral seas and set foot on the island.

Becquerel knew of his presence the moment the man arrived, and the dog made his displeasure known. In a perplexing turn, the man suggested a contest – a “manly” round of “fisticuffs”. A whole crate of steak and an agreement to leave, should Bec win, and friendship and the ability to stay if the man won.

To Bec's eternal bafflement, the man won. While Bec agreed to some generous handicaps on his part – no teleporting the man into the void, for instance – the dog hadn't made it easy. The fight lasted hours. Yet finally, the man forced Bec to the ground, and Bec conceded defeat.

Then the man gave Bec the crate of steaks anyway. By the end of the day, Becquerel and the man formed a pact of their own, and Bec recognized the superior male as his Master.

Now, the Master was gone. Bec whined.

“Hrgh?” Bec sat up, ears twitching wildly.

Above, on a higher floor. The Master's lab. Where the Master's offspring studied.

Bec felt space ripple from off the girl.

“Woof!” Bec barked, shifting himself out of the room.

Becquerel never really traveled when he did what the Master called “Transportalized”, and what the rest of humanity called “Teleported”. Bec merely identified himself in a slightly different state within what was, in reality, the exact same location. The dog didn't need to move. He was already
In much the same way, Bec already sensed everything his mundane eyes would tell him when he appeared in the lab.

“Huff...puff...ack...”

Jade was doubled over, clutching her head. Master's copy of the Kitab Al-Alacir lay on the desk in front of her, turned to the last page.

The girl trembled, sweating profusely. “Hah...hah...ah!” she groaned, mussing her hair as her fingers rubbed her scalp. “Ah!”

Bec flinched, space rippling around the girl. He whined. “Woof!”

Jade turned around shakily. “B-Bec...h...hah...help...” She shook her head. “It hurts! I...I can't...AH!”

Bec's ears jerked wildly. He knew, before it even happened, that the entire contents of the room were being shifted spontaneously out of the building. They popped away, and Bec shifted after them.

High over the ocean, forty miles away and four hundred feet up, Becquerel appeared in the sky, noting the mass of machines, wood, and paper dislocated there. A cavalcade of random, beloved junk, suspended in the air for the moment before gravity exerted her command. Bec wasted no time, spreading his own will over the objects – not a little feat, given their quantity and size – and shifted them right back to the lab, along with himself. As he shifted to the lab floor, the room shook with the settling of thousands of heavy objects. Some of the more precarious piles collapsed in on themselves, knocking a few incomplete machines to the floor. The bookcases in against the walls groaned, hundreds of bound texts shifted against one another.

The pup's pain, while understandable, could not be allowed to destroy the Master's property.

“Bec...Bec...” Jade said, shaking her head more. She was jerking around, face probing in all directions. She clapped her hands over her eyes, tears rolling down her face. “Bec, I can't take it! It won't stop! The images...” She gasped, shuddering. “...they won't go away...I can't stop seeing...everything!”

“Ruff!” Bec barked, whining.

Poor child. She, like Becquerel, could see Everything. But she couldn't stop seeing Everything. Her human senses couldn't handle the strain. Her mind couldn't process the flood of awareness.

Jade shuddered, again clutching her head. “...ah...argh...AAAH!”

The girl blinked out from the room. Becquerel, loyal dog that he was, followed immediately after. The girl wasn't exactly subtle about where she was moving.

(All over the world, Awakened individuals felt eyes on them. It would be later that the worldwide, simultaneous nature of the phenomenon would relieve some, and deeply disturb others.)

______________________________

Hot air. Blazing sun. Scorching sand.

Jade Harley appeared upon an ocean of sand, a great cloud of dust flying up and away where she
shifted in. Her breathing grew labored, raising a hand to block the sun. She then shook her head, unable to block the visions.

“Woof!” Bec barked, his paws sinking down into the sand.

“Ah! Hah...ack...” Jade gasped, sweat forming on her skin to ward away the oppressive, baking heat. “AH!” She clutched her head, and the space around her began to shift again. “...hrgh...AAAAH!”

Sand for a mile around was relocated under her feet. As the two figures shifted away, the vacation of sand exposed the ruins of a sandstone palace. It stood out, at the bottom of a crater of desert.

(Hours later, a carpet flying over the desert would stop in mid flight. Its occupant would gaze down on the marvel, and then descend. The Taftani weaver would abscond with a store of ancient stone tablets in the palace temple, grinning as he departed. Shortly after he left, a sand storm would blow in. By the time the skies were cleared enough for a group of black helicopters to arrive, the palace was buried again. The men in suits and mirrored sunglasses that came in the helicopter were forced to delay a formal excavation until public archeology efforts could be organized, and sufficient false “evidence” could be fabricated to point independent Sleeper authorities to the site.)

Cold air. Biting wind. Snow that sapped heat from toes unlucky enough to sink into them.

Jade Harley exploded a small mound of snow with her arrival, its icy constituents taken away by blizzard winds.

Hugging herself, Jade shivered in the middle of a vast expanse of white, flakes of frost chilling her face. “Haaah...B-b-b-Bec!” she shouted, a wispy white band of vapor escaping her mouth. The breath joined the wind. Jade winced, both from the flurry of the wind and snow, and from the flurry of images assaulting her mind.

Jade hunched low, pressing a clenched fist against her temple. She felt like she stood in a million places at once.

She hardly even noticed the dog barking impotently into the wind beside her, fur camouflaged against the landscape.

Fingers growing numb, Jade trembled. “Gah! Why...why won't it. Just. STOP!”

The snowflakes flying past drew to a halt. For as far as the eye could see – admittedly not far, in such inclement weather – tiny diamonds of ice hung suspended in mid air.

Bec looked around, then chomped at a snowflake experimentally. He chewed it, licking his lips.

“Hah...hah...” Jade wheezed, looking around in confusion at the panorama around her. “…wow...” She whispered in wide-eyed wonder. “…ack!” She clutched her head, clasping her eyes shut, heart racing.

Space pulsed once. Twice. And in an instant, she disappeared, the dog going with her.

(A mountain climber, lost in the blizzard, would minutes later come upon the wonder of frozen snowflakes. She would linger in the little miracle, a sanctuary from the winds that stole her precious heat, digging into the snow beneath her. She built a fire in her white hovel, waiting out the storm. When she rose from sleep, the floating snowflakes were gone, leaving only the blessed morning sun.)
Moist air. The chatter of voices all around. A high, ancient wall.

Jade Harley appeared in the middle of a crowd of tourists, huffing and shivering.

“Oh my god!” and other phrases were heard, in several different languages, as the crowd backed away from the girl who wasn't there a moment before.

Jade staggered around, hands swiping blindly at visions assaulting her senses. She leaned hard against ancient stone ramparts. Her perceptions cleared well enough for her to gaze in amazement at the vast Chinese landscape all around her. Jade's eyes looked left, following the zig-zagging pattern of the Great Wall she stood upon. Looking right, she saw a similar progression far into the distance, before the structure disappeared around hills.

“...w-what?” Jade gasped, hyperventilating. Her hands dug into the stone, but when she looked down at them, she found that she was literally digging into them. She pulled her hands back, and stone came away, not in jagged chunks like true rock, but like fluid clay. Jade stared in horror as clay dribbled like water through her fingers, before solidifying again on the ground at her feet. The railing bricks showed distinctive hand marks where she gouged into them. Like hot claws through butter.

The crowd around her was growing louder. Jade could sense them staring, without even seeing them.

Bec whined behind her. When someone – a guard in local military uniform – tried to approach, Bec whirled on the figure and barked ferociously. The man recoiled in fear, watching the dog that held itself in full fury. Bec jumped around the girl, barking at anyone who tried to approach.

“Gyaah!”

Becquerel whined, looking over his shoulder.

Jade stared transfixed at the sky. “Sun!” she gasped. “A...g-green sun!” Of course the actual sun was setting on the horizon, far from her view, and it naturally wasn't green. But Jade threw her hands over her face, bending over. “Make it stop! Make it go away!”

She staggered backwards, away from the edge. “Why can't I not see it!? WHY!?"

Bec whined, looking from her to the crowd and back.

Did the Master's offspring truly see the Green Sun? Perhaps, though, the appearance of the Green Sun was merely a coincidence. Growing into her new powers, Jade could merely be suffering the effects of a universe hostile to her wondrous gifts. Bec remembered well the many times this force – Paradox – would afflict his Master. It did not strike Bec, of course, save by the force that sapped his strength, and forced him to sup from the waters of creation in order to remain in the world. Usually in the form of tasty irradiated steaks, infused by the machine in the Master's geothermal plant.

A man – the guard from before – approached again, holding his hands up. Though Bec growled at him, he leaned over. “Lady!” he said in passable English, keeping a distance so as not to gain the dog's ire. “Lady! The sun is not green! Do need medical assistance?”

“Shut up!” Jade barked, looking at the guard. “The only thing I need...agh...is for this Green Motherfucking Sun...to go...away!”
Jade doubled over, clutching her head. The air around her rippled.

“AAAAAA-” she screamed. With a thunderous pop and flash, she and the dog disappeared.

(A frenzy of activity followed, with a high number of memory alterations and material reconstruction efforts performed, all to erase evidence of the event from any record. Images of the girl and her dog would persist on the internet for years, but they were determined to be acceptably non-contextual. The guard, seeing both the appearance and disappearance of the little white girl and her guardian pet, Awakened himself shortly thereafter. He was quietly transferred to a facility, where he was coached through the rigors of his change, and inducted/indoctrinated into the ranks of an organization called the Five Elemental Dragons. For many nights, he dreamed of the mysterious Green Sun. He never told his superiors of this – never dared to – and would come to see the emerald solar body as a personal symbol.)

No air at all. A field of stars. A beautiful blue orb dominated forty percent of the field of view.

“-AAAAaaa....aaaa...ack!”

Jade clutched her throat, hair floating around her. She gasped, but her lungs emptied and remained empty. She couldn't catch her breath, as there was no breath to catch.

Her blood raced. Black dots began to form in the periphery of her vision. Everything was upsettingly silent, save the beat of blood in her ears.

The girl clawed at the void, eyes sweeping over blessed blue and starry expanse.

Becquerel floated up in front of her.

“...” Jade's lips formed the word “Bec”, but she could speak none of it. Her lips formed the words “help me”. Her hand reached out towards the dog.

Bec reached a paw out and let the asphyxiating girl take it. With just a flex of his will, Becquerel shifted the two away.

(Pictures received by the Hubble Telescope – of a little girl with raven hair and a dog as white as snow – were quickly removed from all NASA databases (and from the memories of any NASA personnel who may have seen them) within the hour. The thirty seconds missing from the Telescope's log would be blamed on magnetic interference. The last extant copies of either file or photo of those two wound up on the desk of a very displeased Man in White, who in the coming days would connect the incident to an unexplained parallel event covered up by his associates in China. The events were logged, but with no additional data, it was filed as just another in a long list of unexplained Reality Deviations.)

“-GAH!” Jade gasped, falling to the floor of the Master's lab. She sucked air greedily, wincing from the unabated assault of sensory overload and the shine of the Green Sun. “Hah...aaaah!” she whined, covering her eyes.

Becquerel sat, leaning down towards the Master's offspring. “Woof,” he barked.

“Bec...please...I can't take this anymore!” the girl said, rolling over on the floor. “The visions won't stop! The Green Sun won't stop! I feel like I'm going crazy!”

The dog tapped the girl's forehead with a paw. Jade peeked out between her hands, looking up at
“Woof!” Bec barked, leaning in close.

“...Bec...” Jade mumbled, sitting up as best she could.

She flinched in surprise when Bec touched his nose between her eyes.

Becquerel weasled his way to the collage of images, sounds, and feelings that assaulted the girl's senses. She felt his presence in her mind, and his intent.

The pup couldn't handle the whole of material creation. Not at this level of detail. Not this close.

Bec helped Jade take control of the visions. At his urging, Jade pulled back. Away. Out.

Visions became indistinct, broader. Where before she saw faces, objects, she now beheld scenes, locations. Where before she heard every pin fall, voice, and gust of wind, now only the loudest sounds were audible above a whisper.

Jade and Bec pulled up, and Jade saw cities, then countries, then continents. The crowd of human bodies devolved into a mass of tiny dots, then fell away entirely.

Jade blinked psychically, behold a vision of Earth retreating before her. She gasped, thinking for a moment she'd returned to the breathless void. Bec nudged her neck, and she looked around. She vaguely felt the floor of the lab; she was still there. Her perceptions had merely moved, showing her naked soul a vision of the world. And all around her, an endless field of stars.

The girl marveled at the beauty of totality. Somewhere close yet distant, she felt her mouth turn up into a smile. She turned and turned, yet at once realized she could see in every direction at once.

Bec floated before her, this time in the form of a doggy spirit. His torso bled off into a flowing tail. His fur glowed like thousands of strands of fiber optic cable, and his eyes shined like two viridian stars.

“Woof!” he barked happily. He reached down with his snout and bit into his chest. It flashed, and Bec pulled out the Green Sun, holding it in his teeth. Bec held it out in front of him, a black and emerald orb.

It occurred to Jade that the dog was waiting on her. With a little trepidation, she followed Bec's lead, plunging her hand into her chest and pulling out an orb that shone jade green and white.

The two figures pressed their orbs into each other, and like bubbles they stuck together, then merged into one. Their colors – emerald and jade and back and white – swirled and mixed. As they combined, Jade and Bec saw what each other saw, and felt what each other felt. Bec felt her wonder and human complexity, Jade felt his happiness and the yawning expanse of his perspective.

They embraced, letting their mutual grief and good memories overwhelm them. Memories of the man called Jake “English” Harley. Explorer, Adventurer, Philanthropist, Son of Ether. Grandfather, Father, Friend.

Jade smiled, drifting finally to sleep.

Becquerel shifted the two to Jade's bed, in her room filled with toys, and her Eclectic Bass, and her
posters to anthropomorphic fauna, and her work table with the first attempts at invention.

“...good dog...best friend...” Jade mumbled, hands clinging to her sheets, a smile on her face.

And Bec curled up on the bed, pressing himself against the peacefully sleeping body of his New Master.
All was quiet in the Egbert house.

A presence passed through the front door. From its perspective, the door – and the living room beyond it – were impossibly warped and stained. Paint chipping off from the walls, rust forming on the fireplace pokers, rot in the wooden end tables. Smudges and smears on every glass surface. The tell-tale signs of entropy at work.

The Presence was used to this state of affairs. It took comfort in knowing that, on the other side, the master of the house would never allow a single hair out of place.

On the mantle above the fireplace, two urns sat. The Presence felt its connection to one of the urns, and the ashes within. The object anchored the Presence, and made it feel more real. The urns were well taken care of. The Presence fed a bit on the emotions invested in that informal shrine.

Feeling just a little happier – and a little sadder, though that was neither unexpected nor unappreciated – the Presence drifted up the stairs. Running an ephemeral hand over the wall, the Presence filtered through and to the bedroom on the other side.

A businessman lay in bed, slumbering. The Presence saw a pale white aura rising off the man's body. The Presence felt tension fade. Paul Egbert was still very much Alive.

The Presence more or less “lived” in the house full time. “Haunted” was a better word, of course, but the distinction was somewhat moot. The Presence hadn't been gone more than a few hours. It still worried for Paul's safety, however.

It pressed its lips to the man's cheek. To the Presence's amusement, the kiss seemed to be felt by the living man, on some level. He brushed the back of his hand against his cheek, muttering something incoherent in his slumber.

The Presence smiled, then floated through another wall.

A young man's room. The young man slept in his bed, wrapped in a Rag of Souls (translation: a blanket with ghosts on it). His cheek was pressed deep in his pillow.

The Presence viewed the young man's aura. Unlike his father, John Egbert gave off a white aura cut with sparkles. It shined. The Presence regarded this development fondly. It marked him as one touched with a spark of the divine. Of magic.
Although...the shine ought not to be visible. Those who could see auras could only pick a Mage out when they practiced their Art. They only shine when doing magic. Could it be the boy's dreams were weighed down by prophecy?

“...John?” the Presence said. Its voice echoed hollow, there in the shadowy realm.

John Egbert stirred, gripping his blanket tight. His face scrunched up.

“John.”

He bolted upright, eyes blinking rapidly. His hand padded the table by his bed. Finding his glasses, John donned them, looking around.

The Presence hovered before the young man. In its senses, it could see that aura that shone. Could...could the boy see her now? Finally?

John blinked, studying his room. His hand groped the table again, this time finding and activating a flashlight. The beam passed over the room, one square meter at a time. Shadows formed, morphed, and unformed under its scrutiny.

He scrunched his face. “Hmm...” John shrugged, turning his light off. He placed it and his glasses back on the table, falling flat on the mattress. Rolling over, John sighed, drifting towards sleep again.

The Presence hovered still. Just a little disappointed, but not surprised. Not every mortal gifted with transcendent senses could see into the land of spirits. Not all of them knew how. Some emphatically refused to believe in such things. The Presence had hoped John would manifest such senses, after his rather exciting Awakening. Turns out no. Not yet.

Maybe he would. The Presence took comfort in the possibility. The young man had a lot more growing up to do, after all.

The Presence drifted over. With a ghostly hand, she brushed a clump hair from the boy's face.

“Mmmrr...” John moaned, snuggling into a ball.

“Good night, John. Sweet dreams.”

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-- tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] --

TT: Strider. I received your frankly baffling text message, and am ready to discuss that matter.
TT: Vis a vis, the Occult.
TG: sweet
TG: knew i could count on you
TG: also why are you still calling me strider
TG: were literally cousins
TG: hows your hot mom btw
TT: Inebriated at all hours, and quite mad.
TT: Business as usual with mother.
TT: Were I not more devoted to other pursuits, I might find it prudent to change at least one of those faults.
TT: However, my schedule has filled out considerably lately.
TT: I have so little spare time, in fact, I cannot devote any to analyzing your deliberate, knowing compliments towards your own aunt. Ones of a lascivious nature.

TG: okay that was a joke

TG: and also an objective fact stated for the record

TG: it doesnt mean some oedipus shit is going on here

TG: but for real its about my new friend john

TT: John?

TG: john egbert hes jades cousin

TG: and i swear them being cousins and us being cousins is just a coincidence

TG: or i dunno maybe its some kind of shitty conspiracy

TT: I was unaware Jade had a cousin.

TG: i know right

TG: surprised as hell her grandpa had any blood relations

TG: rather than punching his way out of sea foam like a muscular male aphrodite

TT: Oedipus and Aphrodite.

TT: Look at our dear rapper, becoming cultured in Classical myth.

TG: been looking to expand my horizons

TG: add new material to my repertoire of sick rhymes

TT: You are aware that Aphrodite was born from the sea foam, as created when Zeus cast the severed manhood of his father Cronus into the ocean, correct?

TG: uh

TT: Now I wonder if I shouldn't free time from my schedule after all. The complexity of your Freudian slips has increased while I wasn't looking.

TG: can we just talk about jades cousin john now

TT: Sure.

TT: How is this John, by the by?

TG: a huge dork

TG: but he grows on you ya know

TG: truth time i think im in love

TT: I'm making a note in my Strider journal of this development. I'm interested in the effect this new object of affection has on your existing psychological hangups.

TG: but seriously dudes alright

TG: hes developed a wicked interest in the occult lately

TG: i dont know shit about a lot of that though

TG: so

TT: I see.

TG: youre still into that shit right

TT: No, I've abandoned the strange and dubious for the realm of underwater basket weaving.

TT: Dissertation pending.

TG: okay but for real tho

TT: Yes, Dave, I'm still interested in occult matters. More so than ever before.

TT: I found a secret library belonging to my late father. It was filled with occult books.

TG: what really

TG: uh

TG: shit what

TG: i didnt know you even had a dad

TT: Hence why I used the qualifier “late”.

TT: It was only when I found mother passed out at the entrance of a heretofore unknown secret door that I discovered that truth.

TT: First time I've had cause to consider a father that, intellectually, I knew must have existed, yet played exactly no part in my life up until now.
TG: better than mine
TG: i know where my parents be at
TG: buried in the ground cause of
TT: Because of...?
TG: car accident
TT: That pause was in no way ominous, and deserves no scrutiny whatsoever.
TG: damn right it doesnt
TG: so wait your dad was like into magic and shit
TT: This appears to be the case, given examination of the books in the hidden room.
TT: That and because mother apparently reached a sufficiently deep state of inebriation, such that she was willing to speak of such matters.
TT: She claimed my late father was a wizard.
TG: uh
TG: huh
TT: Indeed, I have chosen to take this revelation with a grain of salt, given the source.
TG: yeah sure lets go with that
TT: The library was full of occult texts. Old ones, too. Positively ancient.
TT: If I may reference the immortal Indiana Jones, half of the library belongs in a museum.
TG: yeah better watch out in case nazis come for the stash
TT: Had I any intention of parting with a single volume, I could easily make a mint if I sold them to collectors.
TT: Luckily, we're suitably well off that the money isn't needed. And selling these tomes is practically unthinkable.
TT: Not for the least reason than because of sentimental value. Now that I consider the matter, one could easily see the library as my inheritance.
TG: well thats cool i guess
TG: sweet magical tome windfall rose
TG: uh
TG: you gonna tell your mom about this or
TT: I don't feel much like going out of my way to inform her.
TT: It's not as though my access to the secret room has been covert.
TT: Any more than usual, that is. Mother is quite inattentive.
TG: yeah okay
TG: well you keep doing that sneaky magician shit
TG: like youre some kind of scholar of forbidden lore in the dark ages
TG: peeking at wizard slash under the noses of the church
TG: a church all buzzed out on sacramental wine twenty four seven
TT: That is the plan, yes.
TT: I suppose I ought to contact your friend John. If he's as interested in mystical matters as you say, this might be enlightening.
TG: sounds good ill tell him youre gonna contact him
TG: with your covert magical booty calls
TT: Who knows how this esoteric dalliance will develop? Will it be an arcane one night stand, or a witchcraft more serious?
TG: yeah
TG: his chum handle is ectoBiologist
TG: anyway later i got more plans
TT: More rapacious rhymes?
TG: the most covetous you dont even know
TG: raps be so gold hungry they get nuggets stuck in their teeth
TG: thats how bling is born
TG: peace

-- tentacleTherapist [TT] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] --

-- turntechGodhead [TG] started pestering ectoBiologist [EB] --

TG: yo dog my cousin rose is gonna holler at you soon
EB: that's great!
EB: wait is she a nice person?
TG: pretty nice yeah
TG: sarcastic as hell like is common in my family
TG: its the gift slash curse of the strider-lalondes
TG: you have no idea how exhausting it was talking to you the first time
TG: having to give straight dope that wasnt complete bullshit
EB: im sure it was hard on you dave.
EB: sorry for your pain.
TG: man i sacrificed plenty to lead you into a safe landing here at dallas intermagical airport
TG: btw dont tell rose anything about awakening or true magic
TG: pretentious k or otherwise
EB: why?
EB: doesn't she already know about this stuff?
EB: you said she was all into magic.
TG: yeah theres being into wizard shit
TG: and then theres knowing for a fact that folks like us can do it for real
TG: anyway no rose doesnt know a thing about the awakening
TG: and i want to keep it that way if at all possible
EB: why?
EB: do you not trust her?
TG: its not that shes not trustworthy enough
TG: i just cant let her know
TG: not easily anyway if shit gets out it gets out
EB: then whats the problem?
TG: her mom
TG: aunt roxy told me and bro not to
EB: your aunt roxy?
TG: she just
TG: my aunt knows a lot about this stuff
TG: from past experience
TG: with my bro and a bunch of other folks back in the day
TG: point is she asked us not to tell rose about mage stuff
TG: made us swear an oath on all our coolness never to reveal the truth to her booksmart babby
EB: does your aunt just not like magic all that much?
TG: naw dog shes crazy about that shit she even made it with a wizard
EB: really? wait, maybe something bad happened in the past, and it made rose's mom never want anything to do with mages. or something?
TG: maybe
TG: bro is cagey at the best of times and he wont say
TG: and its apparently a sore subject for roses mom
TG: so yeah
TG: keep a lid on that if all possible
EB: well if its to please rose's mom,
EB: i guess i can keep quiet about it.
EB: it's just...
TG: what
EB: it's going to be hard talking to rose about magic and stuff when i can't talk about why im doing it, or how to apply it for real.
EB: i'm still new to this magic thing, and was looking forward to talking to someone about it.
TG: what about me am I not good enough for you
EB: no offense, dave, but hell no!
EB: you're not exactly the most comprehensible authority on anything,
EB: least of all abstract matters of an arcane nature.
TG: bs
TG: but for real im just joking
EB: sorry man.
TG: naw its okay im not that thin skinned
TG: its better that you talk to more than one person about something as complex and serious as magic
TG: stick to too many of the same opinions and you get an echo chamber
TG: and suddenly you cant adapt or shift with the times
TG: many magic groups out there died off from too much of that
TG: gotta cross pollinate your idea space
EB: yeah, i can get that
EB: so wait how many magical groups are there out in the world anyway?
EB: i'm still not that clear on how common mages are or how they operate.
TG: fucking bunches of groups man
TG: no telling how many or how many mages be rolling with them
TG: when we get time ill learn you about some of the crew me and my bro hang with
TG: about the council of nine mystic traditions and all that jazz
EB: that sounds fun.
EB: wait whoa hold on.
TG: what
EB: is rose's chum handle tentacleTherapist?
TG: yeah thats her
TG: what she pestering you
EB: yeah.
TG: alright ill leave you to it
TG: and remember
TG: dont tell her about real mages
EB: i won't.
EB: see you later dave!

-- turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering ectoBiologist [EB] --

-- tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB] --

TT: Dave Strider, my “beloved” cousin, informs me that you and I share an interest in matters esoteric.
TT: And also that you share a blood relation to our mutual friend Jade Harley.
TT: Sorry for pestering you apropos of nothing, incidentally. Dave stated you could use some assistance.
EB: hi!
TT: ...perhaps I ought to have opened with a greeting.
TT: Hello, John. My name is Rose.
EB: hi rose!
EB: also you sound,
EB: sorry, “read” smarter than dave.
EB: don't tell him i said that.
TT: I will endeavor to resist the temptation, strong though it may be.
TT: And thank you for the compliment.
EB: so, dave tells me you know a lot about magic.
TT: Lies and slander.
EB: wait should that be with a k?
TT: Aleister Crowley seemed to think so. Whether the additional 'k' is truly necessary is up to debate.
EB: oh, okay.
EB: who's aleister crowley? i vaguely remember dave bringing him up before.
TT: An accomplished, yet controversial, figure within Western Esoterism during the early to mid twentieth century.
TT: He popularized a number of concepts and practices, including mixing existing hermetic theory with certain eastern philosophies.
EB: uh...
EB: okay.
TT: I see that your instruction on mystic thought has thus far been limited. Crowley is among the most popularly known thinkers, and the most prominent of the last century.
EB: yeah sorry.
TT: Then again, he also advocated the use of sex magic in his practices. Hence, his controversy.
EB: i'm kind of new to this whole thing.
EB: man, i'm probably just wasting your time here, rose.
TT: Oh, no. I'm sorry.
TT: I didn't mean to come off as demeaning.
TT: There's no shame in ignorance. Especially on subjects as esoteric as western occultism. It's kind of in the name, really.
EB: thanks, i guess.
EB: i really am ignorant, so i apologize in advance for needing to be spoonfed.
TT: No problem, John.
TT: Let's begin simply. What do you already know about magic?
EB: uh,
EB: i'm an amateur magician.
EB: and by magician i refer to doing simple magic tricks. you know, illusions and sleight of hand.
EB: not, like, actual sorcery.
TT: Interesting. Not out of the ordinary.
TT: Yet you seek to learn about arcane philosophy?
EB: i guess?
TT: May I inquire as to why?
EB: why?
TT: If you seek a deeper understanding of the mysteries of the universe, you must have cause to do so.
TT: What brought on the sudden interest?
EB: uh...
TT: If you would rather not say, I understand.
EB: it's not that, it's just,
EB: how do i put this?
EB: well, recently i had a kind of...
EB: experience...
TT: An experience?
EB: it's...kind of hard to describe.
EB: actually, i don't think i could describe it even if i wanted to.
EB: but it made me look at the world in a new way. so now i wonder if there's
anything more out there.
TT: Are you perhaps seeking spiritual fulfillment?
EB: maybe.
EB: or maybe i'm seeking,
EB: i don't know,
EB: a system for myself?
EB: something to get myself under control.
TT: So we're talking more spiritual perfection.
EB: huh?
TT: This experience that prompted your quest. Did it have anything to do with
something you've done?
EB: …
EB: yeah kind of.
TT: How does this make you feel?
EB: wait, are you psychoanalyzing me?
TT: A little bit, I must admit. Psychology is a passing interest, along with mysticism.
TT: According to Carl Jung, the two may in fact be related.
EB: well, i'm not crazy!
TT: I never implied that you were, John. You are safe here.
EB: that's exactly what shrinks say!
TT: I was being facetious, John.
EB: what?
TT: I was joking.
EB: oh.
EB: okay...
TT: There are easy ways to prove you aren't insane, John. Or at least not dangerously
so, as Sanity is a questionable, subjective concept.
TT: Tell me, do you feel driven towards acts of violence?
EB: not really, no.
EB: i just...i'm so confused lately.
TT: Does this confusion have to do with the passage of time, people's names or
identities, or an irrational shift in mood?
EB: no, i don't think so.
TT: Just general confusion, then?
EB: i...guess?
TT: We can probably rule out dementia and/or schizophrenia, then.
TT: Or at least barring the intervention of a seasoned psychiatric professional. As
opposed to a mere dabbler.
TT: Most likely you are feeling perfectly normal confusion at the world, and seek an
outlet for gaining control you no longer feel you possess.
EB: uh, sure.
EB: let's go with that, yeah.
TT: Why do all the boys I talk to keep using that phrase?
EB: what?
TT: Nevermind, it's unimportant. TT: What is important is that you've decided to pursue magic as an outlet for these feelings. TT: Any ideas on where you want to start? EB: not really. EB: wait, no, I think dave suggested something offhand. EB: i think it was called chaos magic? TT: Not the path I would choose, but there's certainly nothing wrong with chaos magic. If all you want is a means of establishing systematic control in your life, there are worse ways to go about it. EB: what is chaos magic anyway? TT: In short, it is a loose, modular thread of esoteric thought that arose relatively recently. One that espouses the appropriation of any magical practice or tool, if it performs the mystical task required of it. EB: modular? TT: Yes. I'm not an expert on chaos magic, but I gather it places more value on how a magic act “feels”, than on any coherent structure behind it. TT: Take a little meditation from eastern mysticism, some incantations from the west, invocations to any gods, even made up ones... TT: Very much a “whatever works” system. Personally I find the idea too fast and loose for my liking. Feel free to try it yourself, though. EB: hmm... TT: If nothing else, you are unlikely to be called upon to memorize long, flowery chants and the lore pertaining to the interplay of planets, constellations, and the emanations of god. EB: yeah, that sounds kind of overwhelming. TT: It certainly can be. EB: is that what you're doing? TT: More or less. Up until recently, I was more interested in the idea of magic and the mythical, rather than its practice. TT: Lately, however, I've come upon my late father's secret cache of occult books. EB: your dad is dead? TT: Yes. EB: oh shit. EB: sorry for your loss. TT: It's quite alright, John. My father passed when I was very young. I have no memory of the man. EB: huh. TT: It is only with the discovery of his hidden library that I've taken to thinking of him at all. EB: that's kind of like me and my mom. TT: Your mother died when you were too young to know her? EB: yeah TT: Curiouser and curioser. EB: huh? TT: Sorry, just more coincidences. They seem to be cropping up with alarming regularity, though this may simply be confirmation bias at work. EB: … EB: so what sort of magic stuff did your dad have in his secret library? EB: (so cool!) TT: (It is quite cool, yes.) TT: In answer to your question, my father, a man by the name of Richter, hoarded
quite a collection. Very old books, on a variety of topics. Much of it is rendered in other languages, which will make deciphering them difficult. Others are difficult to grasp simply because of the density of information.

TT: Density and complexity. I think I'll need to develop a flow chart just to grasp what I don't yet understand. A catalog of negative knowledge, if you will.

EB: sounds rough.

TT: You have no idea. But I find the challenge...stimulating.

TT: Luckily, my father seemed to possess a number of newer, printed texts with more approachable discussions of esoteric themes.

TT: What do you know of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn?

EB: uh...

TT: It's okay, you aren't being graded.

TT: The Golden Dawn was THE organization exploring ceremonial magic and western esoterism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They codified the popular perceptions of western magic.

TT: It is from their erudite ranks that Aleister Crowley rose up and developed his own school of magic, Thelema.

TT: He was also the first major member of the Golden Dawn to break his vows of secrecy and spread Golden Dawn secrets to the public.

TT: This is another reason why Crowley is controversial.

EB: oh dear.

TT: Verily. For a while, I assumed that my father was trained in the Golden Dawn tradition. After all, he possessed a number of books written by former Golden Dawn members (after the secret was out and the order imploded due to toxic internal politics). One of the populist books in my father's library, “Self-Initiation into the Golden Dawn Tradition”, shows clear evidence of use, and plentiful annotation.

TT: But...

EB: but?

TT: The more I read from my father's books, the more it seems like he was running on a level above the Golden Dawn.

TT: His annotations to “Self-Initiation”, for instance, showed definite mixed feelings towards it and the Golden Dawn as a whole. At times patronizing, at others critical, and at yet others enthusiastic in expanding on material held therein.

TT: It was...interesting, reading his commentary. Fascinating, and frequently daunting. I admit much of his commentary flew directly over my head. At all times, though, he implied a position on his part of greater knowledge and authority.

EB: ...

TT: Sorry, I'm rambling. In summation, if my father ever was learned in the Golden Dawn current of magical thought, evidence suggests he grew beyond it.

TT: And sometimes, I find the name of a different organization in his notes. One he claimed allegiance to, though his references to it have thus far been vague in my investigation.

EB: an organization?

TT: Yes. With a less bloated title than the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Though perhaps, that's telling of their reduced need for pretension. And increased desire for secrecy.

TT: My father called it, simply, the Order of Hermes.
“Hmmmmmm...”

John Egbert sat cross-legged on the floor of his room. He sat atop a white plastic tarp, on it a mildly complicated ritual circle drawn in black permanent marker.

His eyes were closed. “Hmm...” John hummed, ridding himself of all distraction. He inhaled deeply through his nose, then released. In. Out. In. Out. John's breath was steady. Regular. Very soon, he lost conscious awareness of his breathing.

In the darkness behind his eye lids, John envisioned the bright blue outline of a circle. When it finished forming, a blue square materialized around the circle. Once done, a triangle formed around that square. Finally, John summoned another, larger circle to enclose everything else.

The fourteen year old boy meditated on the symbol for a minute. Two minutes. Then, he began to deconstruct the symbol. Working backwards now, John unmade the outer circle, then the triangle, then the square, and finally the inner circle. Only darkness remained.

John opened his eyes, exhaling.

Groping next to his leg, John seized a box of cards and opened them. Shuffling the cards, he considered what he wanted to ask.

“Hmm...” John mumbled, staring at the ground. His mind was clear, but that had an unintended side effect of rendering him unable to think of any pressing questions. He briefly considered asking the cards what he ought to ask, before promptly shaking his head. That would be a very silly use of his time.

With a shrug, John began to lay cards down, opting for an old standby. “What is the most important thing I could be using my talents for today?” he muttered, hands dropping five cards face down in an arch shape.

The full spread prepared, John flipped the uppermost, center card. “The Eight of Swords,” John said, rubbing his chin. The card represented confinement – a prisoner. Was he a prisoner? Were today's events conspiring to box him in? Or did the card refer to John at all? Whatever the case, it informed the boy that being trapped was the most operative answer to his question.

He flipped the upper left card, saying, “The Page of Swords.” This card would potentially help him solve the problem.

Symbolically, the card referenced rumors and gossip. Then again, it could also refer to spying. If such a thing were meant to aid him, John would need to keep attention to what the people around him were saying. Or be on the lookout for a spy. Either way, he was forming a plan for how to proceed already. Honestly, it was an idea John had been wanting to try for a while now, but hadn't had the opportunity.
What could work against him was next. “The Emperor,” John said, flipping over the upper right card.

Obvious symbolism. The Emperor denoted someone in power. Given the nature of the problem – the Eight of Swords – it could me someone (possibly John himself) trapped in the machinations of a most powerful authority. Alternatively, it could refer to a person trapped within the bounds of an office. Authority both as instrument of power, but also as chains.

John scratched his head. Whatever the case, this authority would be in opposition to John today. He needed to be cautious.

The last two cards denoted two potential outcomes to the situation. John turned over the lower left card. “Ten of Sword...really Sword heavy day...” John mumbled, considering vaguely if he ought to call Dave at some point.

John looked back to the card and frowned. The Ten of Swords wasn't exactly the worst thing that could happen – that dubious honor went to the Nine of Swords, and maybe The Tower – but it still wasn't good. It referred to an ordeal gone passed, and on less than ideal terms. It could also denote truth coming out, which was rather telling given the presence of the Page of Swords earlier. Perhaps John could pick up and spread gossip, securing a resolution to the problem?

Again, less than ideal. John wanted to avoid such an event if at all possible.

The final card eased some of the tension John had unknowingly developed in his chest. He sighed. “The Chariot.”

Signifying victory through willful dominance. A significantly more pleasant outcome, and the one John would shoot for. He would need to be assertive, which likely would require standing up to someone in authority. John didn't relish that, but it was better than the alternative.

John still couldn't quite make sense of how the whole thing would play out. Reading the Tarot for divining purposes was something he'd just started, and he didn't completely buy into the predictions yet. Maybe when he devoted himself more to the study, prognostication would come more easily (and possibly manifest in actual, magickal results; John couldn't tell if he was doing it right).

Really, the whole exercise was more to get his mind flowing, and onto symbolism. The preponderance of swords within the reading – plus the presence of the Page of said suit – already gave him what he really needed.

John took out his phone and snapped a picture of the card spread. Might need to check his results later. Then he picked up a stack of index cards and a pencil.

He wrote two of the cards down: The Page of Swords and The Chariot. What would help him, and the outcome he preferred. He then scratched out all the vowels from the two names, and then scratched out any repeating consonants.

It left John with a letter sequence: PGFSWRDTHC.

On the space below this scribbling, he began drawing the letters connected together, forming a crude sigil. It was complicated, working with so many letters, so John used another two index cards experimenting with different layouts. The placement hardly mattered, but John disdained wonky, difficult to remember sigils. It would make the next bit more difficult.

After several revisions, John decided on a layout he was comfortable enough with. He redrew the
pattern again, smoothing out unnecessary details, and “jazzing” the sigil up to look sufficiently arcane.

When John figured he had the crude drawing memorized enough, he resumed a meditative position once again, shutting his eyes. In the darkness, John began to assemble the sigil with his mind's eye. Envisioning it before him, John held the figure for a moment, meditating upon its purpose. The intent behind its creation.

It was not a free-thinking being. It was not a godform, or any kind of spirit. It had no name, or personality, or will of its own. It was a servitor. An instrument of John Egbert's will, and a conduit through which he would affect the world.

He breathed in. Breathed out. In. Out. I-

Knock, knock.

“John,” came a voice from behind the boy's door, spoken in a stern, fatherly tone, “it's almost time for school.”

“I'll be right out, Dad!” John chimed over his shoulder, smiling. As he heard the retreating sound of muffled shoes on carpet, John rose to his feet. Rolling the white tarp on the floor into a neat bundle, he folded it over and walked over to his magic chest.

The compartment had served as storage for his previous childhood forays into illusion and sleight of hand. And while John had moved beyond the normal bounds of mere stage magic, he found the trunk could be repurposed perfectly well for True Magick.

Not that he would ever throw away the memorabilia of his prior interests. As he opened the chest, he stuffed the tarp inside, nestled between his cheap disguises and prop wands. His deck of Tarot cards went inside as well. Space shrank to a premium now, but John would consider the matter of getting a bigger chest later. For now, his current effects served their purpose.

Taking up his backpack, John Egbert made for the door to his bedroom.

All throughout these proceedings – and indeed for the next few hours at school – John kept that sigil running in the back of his head, floating just behind him. Until he internalized the mental tech – as he'd done for a number of tricks he'd developed over the past year and change – it helped to keep this servitor primed. As an Egregore, it was fueled by his mental attention. His belief. It was new enough that John didn't trust it to work if he tried to build a spell on the fly, so he kept it in the wings for now. He would initialize it later, when he needed it.

And John would need it.

“Rose?”

Roxy Lalonde knocked on her daughter's bedroom door. Sheets of paper were clasped in one hand.

“Rose?” she said, knocking again. “Honey, are you there? Can I come in?”

The woman sighed. She needed a drink.

Roxy shook her head. No, no, it wasn't time for booze! Much as she craved that sweet nectar, she
had a job to do. To remind herself what that job was, Roxy looked down at the papers for the tenth time in the last ten minutes.

It was Rose's homeschooling course work for the last two weeks. Completely blank.

Momma Lalonde would be the first to admit (though not to a court of law, obviously) that she wasn't a very responsible parent. By the time her daughter was eight, the girl had already gotten into a habit of teaching herself all her course work. Apparently, Roxy had shown up to their lesson tipsy and slurring one too many times, and Rose just started doing it all herself. She even left Roxy with the answer sheets on her tests, just to prove she wasn't cheating. Not that Roxy ever thought Rose would. Her tests were all As, but the essays she put out were always well thought out. At least as far as Roxy could tell, drunk as she often was looking it over before sending it to the mail.

Okay, honestly time. What the Lalonde household was doing was almost certainly illegal, and contrary to the spirit of home schooling.

Which is one of many reasons why neither mother nor daughter talked to anyone official about it. Or about anything, because Roxy had a not unjustified fear of official looking people. For multiple reasons.

No, what broke Roxy Lalonde from her uninterrupted cycle of all-hours libation had to do with Rose's current work. Namely that Rose simply hadn't been doing it. And while Rose had such a consistent average that she could handle a few setbacks, less than stellar work, or even missed assignments, Roxy was beginning to worry. This was an alteration in her daughter's behavior, and Roxy was scared of inexplicable change at the best of times.

So pardon the mother for getting her act together, however briefly, to address her only daughter's mounting homework truancy. Or whatever one would call it.

Roxy frowned. “Rose! Are you there, honey?” she called, banging on the door harder. Looking behind her, she sighed, putting a hand on the doorknob.

“Rose, I'm coming in,” she said, opening the door. Peeking inside, she discovered...nothing. Her daughter's room was full of Rose's stuff, but bereft of Rose. Roxy opened the door wider and stepped inside. “Rose?” she mumbled, instantly feeling silly for calling out, as if her baby was engaged in an uncharacteristic game of hide and seek. “Man...”

The woman exited the room, rubbing the back of her head. “Rose? Where are you?”

Had she been more attentive, Roxy might have noted the stack of ancient tomes resting on Rose's desk.

“'Inheritor of the dying world, why seekest thou to enter our sacred hall?’”

Rose Lalonde stood in the middle of a room, clad in a black robe two sizes too large for a girl of fourteen. The walls were adorned with banners, made from colored poster board and paint, affixed by tape. At the cardinal points around the center were lit candles in cheap candle holders, beside each being various props. A handicraft sword and crown-headed wand lay by the West and East sides, respectively, while a plastic cup of water sat in the North. The South had a censer, and while it was plain and serviceable, it alone was made of sturdy metal. It wouldn't do to start fires, when working with smoke.

Not coincidentally, there was also a fire extinguisher ready in an otherwise unused corner of the
room, stacked on top of the book shelves and coffee table that had been moved there out of the way.

Rose stood in the center of the room, flanked by large cardboard pillars painted black and white. Before her was an end table, topped with a cheap black cloth and stacked with a red candle, some salted crackers, a plastic prop rose, and a shot glass full of her mother's wine. In the center of the table lay boxy objects taped together from construction paper, in the forms of a red cross and a white triangle.

Against the East wall, the stern-faced Rose visualized a figure of the god Osiris. At Rose's right hand, she imagined the figure of the goddess Thme.

Rose answered the question she imagined Osiris asked. “My soul wanders in Darkness and seeks the Light of Hidden Knowledge.” The girl recited her lines dryly, concentrating both on the figures she visualized before her, and the long string of dialogue she needed to remember. “I believe that in this sacred temple of Mysteries, knowledge of that Light may be obtained. I am truly willing to take a solemn obligation in the presence of this assembly to uphold the sacred Mysteries and the current of the Light.

“I understand that there is nothing contrary to my civil, moral, or religious duties in this obligation. Although the magical virtues can indeed awaken into momentary life in the wicked and foolish hearts, they cannot reign in any heart that has not the natural virtues to be their throne.”

She imagined the figure of Osiris speak to her. “He who is the fountain of the Spirit of man and of things, came not to break, but to fulfill the law. Are you ready to take this oath?”

Rose nodded minutely. “I am ready to take this oath.”

Kneeling down, Rose placed her right hand on the red cross and white triangle.

All around her, Rose imagined figures of the six principle actors in the ceremony. The Hierophant came down from the East in the guise of Horus the Elder, stamping a black serpent as he came. To either side of Rose were the Hegemon and Hieresus, while behind her stood Stolistes, Keryx, and Dadouchos.

The girl strained her mind a bit, imagining beyond these individuals dozens of silent figures, hugging the walls, clad in nondescript robes.

She imagined the Hierophant-As-Horus take her left hand. She recited:

“I, Rose Lalonde, in the Presence of the Lord of the Universe, who works in silence and whom naught but silence can express, and in this Hall of the Neophytes of the current of the Golden Dawn, do, of my own free will, hereby and hereon, most solemnly promise by and on this holy symbol of Light, to dedicate my life to the pursuit of the mysteries of the Golden Dawn tradition of magic and the completion of the Great Work. I solemnly promise to persevere with courage and determination in the labors of the Divine Science, even as I shall persevere with courage and determination through this ceremony which is their image. I pledge from this day forward to strive with enthusiasm and devotion, in the study of the Hermetic Arts, seeing that such teachings are not given to those who wish only a cursory knowledge thereof.

“I undertake to maintain a kindly and benevolent relation with all true seekers of the Light. I will respect all religions, seeing that all faiths contain a ray of the ineffable Light I seek.

“I pledge I will not suffer myself to be placed in such a state of passivity, that any person, power, or
being may cause me to lose control of my words, thoughts, and acti-"

Creak.

Rose jumped, nearly falling over onto the table before she could steady herself. The last word of that sentence died in her throat.

“Rose?”

Rose Lalonde whipped her head around, eying the door in the west wall as it opened.

“Rose, baby, I...”

Roxy Lalonde spied her daughter on the ground, squatting next to a table in a silly black robe. She locked eyes with Rose, whose face gaped dumbly at her.

Rose could only stare at her mother, frozen like a deer in headlights.

Her mother blinked, eyes wandering across the room. “Rose...what are you...oh!” She clapped a hand over her mouth. “I'm interrupting a ritual, aren't I?” she exclaimed, eyes lighting up in horror.

Rose's mouth quivered. “…ah...I...I...”

“Ah shit, ah shit!” Roxy moaned, frowning. “Sorry! I'm ruining everything aren't I? Just...” She backed up, waving her hand and pulling the door in front of her. “…pretend I wasn't here!” She creaked the door until it almost closed, but Rose could still see her mother's eyes peeking out through the crack.

The girl blinked, then slowly turned back around. “…uh...” She looked at her hands, which then climbed up to rub the side of her head. “Uh...!”

Rose sat bolt upright, clutching her head. “Shit! I lost my place!”

Then she fell back onto the ground. The little girl rocked back and forth, burying her face in her hands. “Uuuugh! F-fuck!” she whined.

Slowly, Roxy Lalonde slipped back into the room, frowning. “…oh...baby...”

The girl forced herself to sit up, shaking bitterly. Facing away from her mother, she tucked her knees to her chest and hugged them. “Humph...” she pouted, exhaling hard.

The woman hesitated a moment, looking from her daughter to the table to the many home-made arcane trappings in the room. What to do in this situation? Give the girl her space?

Roxy sighed, shaking her head. She wasn't going to win no matter what she did.

To hell with it. She walked over, sank to her knees, and pulled her daughter into a bear hug from behind. “Sorry baby.”

Taken by surprise, Rose stiffened. “Mmrr!” she groaned, leaning forward in an attempt to pull herself out of the hug. Her face was downcast, frowning stubbornly.

Her mother wouldn't budge, however, just pulling back even more. The woman's long arms locked Rose in. There would be no escape.

“Hmph!” Rose grunted, giving one last vain pull away. Defeated, Rose allowed herself to be
smothered by the hug, sighing angrily as Roxy nuzzled her face into Rose's hair.

The two sat there for a minute, in silence.

Roxy shook her head, mussing up Rose's ivory hair further. “Oh geez, Rose...I'm sorry. I fucked up.”

Rose sighed. “Mom...” she grumbled, “…what are you even doing here?”

“I couldn't find you, Rose, so I went looking,” Roxy said, frowning. “You didn't do any of your course work for two weeks, so I came to find you.”

“Oh,” Rose grunted, “now you care?”

“Rose no.” Roxy hugged harder. “Rose, I'm a drunk. And I'm basically the most terrible teacher, short of those fuckers what literally abuse their students. But...fuck, Rose, I care. Just because I can't be the mother you need...doesn't mean I don't care.” Roxy pressed her forehead into Rose's scalp. “I love you, baby.”

Rose scowled, a groan forming in her throat. But her eyes played briefly over the ritual table in front of her. The groan died before it started, and she just clasped her eyes shut. Her shoulders sagged, her whole body deflating. “...fuck...I messed up...”

“Shh...” Roxy said, a hand patting her daughter's arm. “It's alright. We're both fuck ups.”

The girl snorted, the smallest of smiles forming on her lips. “…yeah...” The smile faded, but she raised a hand to pat her mother's arm in return. She looked back down at the floor, eyes going unfocused.

Another minute passed in perfect silence.

Then, from deep inside Rose's belly, came a long, strong growl.

Roxy glanced over Rose's shoulder, looking down. “...hungry, huh?”

A tiny flush of color appeared on Rose's cheek. “…I was fasting...” she mumbled. “For the ceremony.”

“You gonna start over again?” Roxy asked, looking around at the (rather impressive) set decoration. It was nothing compared to Richter's old space, but...

“...no, I don't think I'm up to it now,” Rose said, leaning back into her mother. She shut her eyes, head tilted backwards until it rest on the woman's shoulder. The girl felt so profoundly drained.

Roxy squeezed the girl's arm, then sat up straight. “Well, in that case,” she said, smiling. “How about you help me put out all these candles – because fire hazard – and then we'll go to the kitchen and make you some food?”

Rose craned her neck to the side, stretching. She opened her eyes just a crack.

“...okay...”
melalui waktu, Darah-Nya sekarang Kembali untuk menebus kejahatan kita…”

Karkat Vantas sighed, grimacing. He hated visits like this.

He cast one backward glance at Kepiting Pak – his legal guardian – who shrugged. The tired old Indonesian refugee was quite a cranky customer on most days, but he smirked behind his bushy mustache, waving his charge forward.

Karket sighed again, rubbing his brow. He turned back around and stalked forward. He was joined immediately after by a robed aide. The two crossed out to the main room.

The place was hewn from solid granite, and plastered with intricate, colorful murals and messages in Javanese. The space was also filled to the brim with worshipers clad in gray hooded cloaks and large black sunglasses.

When the boy of fourteen appeared, the prayers variously died off or climbed in proportion, as every obscured eye beheld him. Karkat felt the energy rise in the room immediately.

“Penderita dilahirkan kembali! The Sufferer Reborn!”

“Glory be to his name!”

“We are not worthy!”

Karkat shuddered, forcing himself not to scowl. Instead, he pressed forward, meeting the throng. They parted like a wave to let him pass, kneeling at his feet and reaching out hands. Many were content – desperate, if anything – to merely touch Karkat's billowing crimson cape.

The boy sighed, looking around at them. These foolish, foolish people who put such respect, adoration, and praise on such a worthless piece of shit like him. Oh no, some of them were weeping. Oh no, fuck. Karkat hated when they cried over him. He extended hands to pap them on head or face, fingers tracing the lines under their shades to brush away the tears. “Shhhhh…” he shushed. “Don't go crying over me, okay? Shh. Shhhhh…”

All throughout, innumerable voices chanted psalms to him, in English and Javanese and Hindi and any other language they felt fit to praise his worthless ass in.

Any other person would feel profoundly freaked out by the display. For Karkat, this was homecoming.

These people went by many names – the Humble Physician Priests, the Children of the Sacred Scarlet, Pengikut dari Penderita, the Tenders of the Secret Flower Gardens. Mostly, Karkat knew them as The Cult, the Gray Cult, and/or My Thrice-Great Grandfather's Ridiculous Followers, Who For Whatever Reason Decided I Was Deserving Of Their Undivided Attention Since The Day I Was Born.

Karkat sighed. He was already halfway across the room. Just a few more meters, and he would be able to head through the tunnels towards the Chamber of Resplendence. At least there, he would be able to sit on a cushion and have the idiots sit respectfully around him. It would also mean sitting bored for a couple hours, in between being made to stand and engage in whatever esoteric rituals the elders considered pertinent this time.

Sweet Sufferer, Karkat hated Bask Days. Why couldn't he just sit at home and dick around on the Internet?
“Please...please!”

Karkat looked over the crowd, spotting a thin, gaunt man limp into the room. His hood had fallen back, revealing a bald head marred by ugly, dark discoloration. Like paint splatted bruises over his body.

Oh. Fuck. The boy gaped in horror.

“It is the Sufferer, please!” the ailing man cried, staggering forward as cultists shuffled aside to let him pass. He stumbled, falling to his knees. Still, he tried to crawl forward.

“Dawn Painter, no!” cried a woman decked in the clinical robes of the Melati Putih – the White Jasmine healers. She cupped a hand beneath the poor man's shoulder. “You are in no condition to be out of bed!”

“Aaagh!” cried Dawn Painter – for in the caves and while the robes and shades were on, Gray Cultists only identified by their fanciful chosen names – one arm steadying himself on the nurse's hands. His free hand extended out towards Karkat. He wept, blubbering pitifully. “...please! The Sufferer is there! If...” He sniveled, supporting himself on one knee. “...if I just touch him...I know I'll be healed!”

Karkat frowned. Great, now he was put on the spot.

The followers of the Sufferer parted along Karkat's path, allowing him to approach just beyond the poor fool's grasping hands. He turned to the nurse. “...what's it look like? Can you help him?”

The nurse looked to Karkat. Though her eyes were covered by shade and her mouth concealed behind medical mask, he could make out the pained expression beneath. She cast her face down to the floor. “...I'm sorry, Night of the World.” She shook her head. “I...we have failed. We can do nothing more for him, save make him comfortable.”

“Please...please...” Dawn Painter whimpered, staring plaintively at his messiah. “Only a miracle...just a simple touch...”

Karkat's heart clenched, as if in a vice. Despite his ancestor's purported miraculous powers, Karkat had no such ability. Even the Sufferer himself preached the pursuit of medical technology and expertise. If even the Cult's doctor priests – a goofy name, but they were better than an underground cult had any business having – could do nothing to help this ailing man, what was Karkat supposed to do?

His lips quivered. Studying the dying follower's face – a follower who had such absolute faith in him that he'd dragged himself from the infirmary to see him – Karkat's stomach sank. He didn't even begin to understand what ailed the wretch, save that it was apparently terminal and there was nothing the doctors could do.

Karkat almost ordered them to find “proper” doctors to treat him...except, again, the Melati Putih really were professionals. Religiously motivated professionals, but professional nonetheless. Several of them had abandoned promising practices to come here. They studied every aspect of medicine, including holistic and alternative methods, in addition to “proper” medicine. They knew what they were doing, and understood the body better than many med students. And they cared about their patients. If they thought an actual hospital could help this patient, they would have taken him there, damn the consequences.

That they didn't meant they understood his condition well enough to know it was hopeless, and
were doing all they could.

Karkat swallowed, shoulders trembling.

“I'm...I'm not promising anything, okay?” he said, slowly. “But...I'm here for you.” He stepped forward, holding out his hands.

“Ah!” Dawn Painter cried, smiling, tears rolling down his face. He offered his free hand, allowing the boy to clasp them.

Cold, at first. The digits were thin in Karkat's hands, and so very cold. As he held them firm, though, his hands began to tingle.

“Haah!” Karkat gasped, shuddering.

“Ack!” said the patient, almost at the same time. He flinched, then pressed himself into Karkat's hands.

Karkat shook, eyes wide.

He could feel the man. As if his and the man's body were one, Karkat felt every inch of the dying man. Not just the sensations the man himself was cognizant of – fuck, the man was in so much pain! Karkat felt more. The blood that coursed through his veins, the twitch of minute muscles, the creak of bones, the release of hormones, and the hum of signal through nerves, like electricity through wire.

It was an intimate understanding, shrinking down to the cellular level. Karkat felt the cavities in the man's molars, and the internal scar tissue sealing an old knife wound. The suppressed pathogens subsisting quietly in forgotten corners, and the countless gut fauna enslaved in the digestive tract.

Pervading the whole mechanism, Karkat beheld the infection. A black, cloying mass of...

...Karkat sincerely wished he knew more about medicine. Then maybe he would have an idea of what he was “looking” at. What he did know was that it dug in like a weed, sapping Dawn Painter's strength. And, if Karkat allowed himself to entertain such thought, he could almost feel a cloying, bitter malice. Karkat tasted it in his throat. Black liquid smoke.

It made him sick. “Fuck!” Karkat spat, scowling. Not only was it sick, it was sickening. From some deep part of Karkat's memory, words came forth unbidden to his mind. Rekindle the Righteous Rage, Burn Our Shameful World. They were words from the benedictions that served as his lullabies. They formed one part of Karkat's extended, True Name.

The boy squeezed the man's hand, leaning over to press his forehead against it. Karkat's entire body shook.

He didn't know if he wanted to burn the world. Didn't know if he would, or even could. But here, now, Karkat felt he had the power to burn away a plague.

Cultists all around stared in awe, watching the patient's body shiver all over. As Dawn Painter's head lolled back and his eyes rolled back with it, the plainly visible black stains retreated. Beneath pale skin, black dissolved, working back from the extremities towards the body's core. The black bands disappeared beneath the fabric of the cultist's cloak and medical pajamas. “...aaah...!” he moaned, shoulders shuddering.

His pallid skin grew darker, and more vibrant in warm colors. His sunken eyes grew fuller,
banishing dark bags. Visible veins disappeared, and the top of his head sprouted a half inch of rich, dark hair.

Karkat gasped, releasing the man's hand. He staggered back, staring wide-eyed at the changes he'd made.

The room grew silent, save the scuffle of the nurse taking to supporting the patient with both arms. She stared down at Dawn Painter, eyebrows high over the rim of her sunglasses. Her patient had apparently passed out, but with a giddy smile on his face.

She looked over at Karkat. “…B-bread of Life!” she stammered, bowing head towards the floor. “F-fill our starving souls!”

“Healer of the Dying!” someone in the crowd said, and just like that the words were on every tongue in the room.

“It is a Miracle! The Sufferer Reborn comes to ease our suffering!”

“Healer of the Dying, banish our choking plague!”

Karkat stared at his hands, vaguely aware that the elders were probably going to append that to his True Name. Right there, past Comforter of the Weeping.

Karkat Vantas could now work miracles. He was exactly the reincarnation of the Sufferer his followers always prayed for. “…fffffuck…”

And he was kind of freaking the fuck out about it.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to elanor_pam, creator of Cultstuck. While I've embellished, expanded, and integrated the ideas from that work into this World of Darkness, the core of the Gray Cult's ethos and style come from them. I could not have done the Karkat scene – or possibly any of Magestuck: The Ascension - without Cultstuck's influence.

On another note, I apologize if I butcher any foreign language translation. I rely heavily on the miracle that is Google Translate, which I know can be less than perfectly accurate. Forgive me if I make a mistake, and kindly correct me if I err in translation.
Thought Forms

Riiiiiiing!

“Alright class, remember to read chapter four and complete study questions 2, 4, 6, and 10! Have a great weekend!”

A flood of students poured to the front of the classroom and out the door.

John Egbert noted the assignment on his planner quickly, and began stacking his school supplies neatly.

“See you on Monday, John!”

The boy waved at a pair of his classmates amiably, finally getting his ducks in a row. John smiled, rising to his feet.

As he leisurely strolled out the classroom door, he kept the servitor hovering just over his shoulder.

A pleasant day, all things considered. Lunch had been pizza day, which was always a treat (even if the pizza wasn’t terribly high quality; high school food never impressed anyone). Fourth period science had a substitute teacher, so the class watched an educational film about frogs (which many of the students whispered through, though John himself found it interesting enough).

And he’d had plenty of opportunities to test his latest magical technique. Speaking of...

Since classes were over, John took the time to duck in a vacant recess between two rows of lockers. He looked down either side of the hallway. Seeing no one paying attention, John turned to the corner and shut his eyes.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Focus and center.

Lifting one hand, index finger outstretched, John drew the sigil in the air. Or, in this case, almost up against the bulletin board he faced. A wise move to disguise his behavior. Not because it would make what he was doing coincidental – there was nothing overtly supernatural about the spell – but because this was high school. Students (and teachers, for that matter) notice odd behavior like that. John was not about to casually give people rope to hang himself with, from a social perspective.

Okay, really John just didn’t want to be embarrassed. Despite how long he’d already been practicing magic(k), he still couldn’t escape the feeling that what he did was profoundly silly.

“Whispers...Wind...Carry...Ears...” John incanted, vibrating each word in time with his movements. “...Reveal!” With a flourish, he completed the sigil, willing his servitor to action.

He opened his eyes, his ears filling with the sound of a dozen different conversations.

“...can you come over to my house?”

“...four hours of homework, I just know it...”

“...where’d I put that bag?”

“...gotta help my dad take grandma to the doctor tomorrow...”
“...Mr. Barrows is such a hardass...”

“...oh my god, he's so dreamy!”

John shook his head, willing the volume down to a low, dull drone. At least it was getting easier to modulate the sound. He turned from his hiding place and stalked towards his locker, on the other end of the school building.

The walk gave him time to get a lay of the land, as it were. This spell was one John had considered for a while now, inspired from the pages of a Justice Society of America comic he'd read once (may JSA comics never be canceled). In principle, the effect was simple: manipulate the wind into drawing the sound of speech to him from afar. So long as the speech was within a few hundred feet of him, John could hear it, even if it were spoken in the smallest whispers.

When John focused in a particular direction and distance, he could magnify certain sources of speech while tuning out others. A skill he'd quickly developed over the course of the day, after trying it in a crowded hall that morning and nearly going deaf. With magic, it paid to exercise restraint.

“...wait, you haven't seen Kick-Ass yet?”

“Mom took one look at the title and vetoed it. She's of the opinion that any movie with swearing in the title is bound to be trouble.”

“Your mom is lame. Come on, we can watch it at my house.”

John pressed through a throng of students loitering in front of a bathroom. His attention wandered to behind the walls.

“Girls, I think I might have gained weight.”

“Nonsense, you look beautiful.”

“Yeah, you haven't gained nearly as much weight as I have this year.”

“I don't know. I don't want Heather giving me any crap.”

“You're still fine. What you really need to worry about is Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas...”

“Oh no!”

It suddenly occurred to John that it was probably inappropriate to listen in on conversations coming from bathrooms. Eavesdropping in general was kind of suspect, really, but the bathroom in particular was probably a sacred place. Especially the girls room. He hid his blushing face behind his books and trudged on, focusing elsewhere.

“...my life is over...”

“Huh?”

“I know I got a poor grade on today's math test. Dad's gonna kill me...”

“Really? Cause I'm pretty sure I aced it.”

“Go to hell, man...”
John rounded a corner, scaling a pair of stairs to the building's second floor. Why did the high school need multiple floors, again?

“...yo man, you got any grass?”

“Sorry dude. Easter Dave got busted last week on possession and assaulting an officer. Gonna need to find a new source...”

After a momentary halt at the top of the stairs, John figured that obvious attempt at a marijuana transaction was none of his business. Nor, indeed, much to worry about. John would classify himself as kind of a goody two-shoes, but even he figured that, on the list of drugs that would ruin a kid's life to take in middle school, pot was probably at the very bottom.

Or at least he started thinking that after Dave had gone on a half hour Pesterchum rant about the stupidity of marijuana laws. While John was fairly certain Dave himself had never smoked pot in his life, the self-styled cool kid made a number of good (if confusingly cryptic) arguments on behalf of legalization. So at the very least, John didn't mind the drug's existence.

He continued on, making a point to circle around to long way to avoid those two, though. It would just be awkward even looking at them, or knowing their identities.

John brushed off a conversation spoken in Spanish – he wondered briefly if a magic spell could be crafted to translate foreign languages – and finally made it to his locker. Fussing with the combination, he placed all the books and supplies he would need into his backpack and headed for the exit nearest towards his house.

Given it was Friday, and he had taken his sweet time so as to soak up as broad a swath of the school's gossip, John descended the stairs to the ground floor to a much more vacated hallway. A couple stragglers milled about, but most of the kids engaging in after-school activities would be around the football field or fine arts department. Both were on the other side of the school, so John was among sparse company.

He considered vaguely dropping his tech and dismissing the servitor – some sources on Chaos Magick he'd researched online maintained that simple Egregore shouldn't be retained beyond their usefulness, lest continued feeding through attention caused them to grow into crude sentience (and from there, perhaps, Sapience). While John was skeptical of this, he figured it wouldn't do to take chances with potentially emergent intelligence (which would, by necessity, be competing with John for mental energy). Once he mastered this spell, he could always just recreate the servitor later as needed.

Dave of course warned John against taking such fears too seriously, lest he alter his own personal reality until his fears were guaranteed to be actualized. In that way that only Mages and their ability to alter reality could, especially as related to their particular magical paradigms. Then again, Dave also maintained that squid aliens from another dimension come out of the sea and parasitically attach themselves to people, turning them into drone slaves. And even John wasn't gullible to fall for...

Slam!

“Where the hell is my money, Yancy?!”

Ms. LeForge walked out of her classroom, brushing a stray lock of brown hair from her face. She was just coming off a long day. She worried that all this stress would turn her wrinkled and gray
before long.

Adjusting her designer glasses, she made to walk down the hall. She stopped when she heard a commotion several meters away.

“Come on, Yancy, where's my money?” said an eleventh grade boy, tall and muscular for his age. LeForge knew this one, of course. That was Micheal Stevens, captain of the football team and very poor student. Ms. LeForge didn't have a lot of patience for poor students, and had been ready to fail him in her French class.

That is, until the school's football coach found out about it, and exerted pressure on the school board. LeForge had subsequently been “persuaded” to just give the entitled brat a passing grade. Someone who actually wanted to be there, teaching high schoolers proper foreign language skills, would have balked at the idea (though probably would have caved anyway once the board began discussing matters of salary and/or continued employment).

Ms. LeForge did not want to be there, teaching high schoolers proper foreign language skills. She didn't want to be there at all. As such, she acquiesced instantly. What did she care if the idiot boy floundered on French or any other subject? And why should she bother arguing the matter? She didn't need this petty school politics. That wasn't why Ms. LeForge was there.

She noted – with mild concern – that the young Mister Stevens was accosting a smaller, obviously weaker student in glasses named Yancy. Stevens was flanked by his football teammates.

“I'm sorry, Micheal!” Yancy cried, attempting to shield his face with a physics book. “I haven't got any more money. Not since you took all of it last week!”

“Shut up, Yancy!” Micheal said, grabbing the nerd by his shirt and punching him in the gut.

“Ah!” Yancy cried, clutching his belly, grimacing in pain. “Ow!”

In all this, Ms. LeForge did not move. She merely observed, in a sort of academic context.

She heard footsteps run up beside her. LeForge looked down.

Another boy in glasses, black of hair and buck of teeth, stopped at her side. His eyes were focused intently at the scene in the distance, widened in horror. He was dressed in a curious t-shirt with a ghost on the front, and had a backpack slung from his shoulders.

He looked up at the French teacher. Then he looked at the “fight” ahead of him.

From where Ms. LeForge could see, the other boys in Micheal Stevens' posse added their own shoves and kicks to the mix, causing Yancy visible distress. They even knocked the book from his hands with a slap.

The boy in front of LeForge looked back to her, then to the “fight” (described as such in the loosest sense, of course), then back to LeForge. His eyes and mouth quirked in confusion, and he jerked his head towards the students.

Ms. LeForge blinked.

The boy blinked back, frowning. He pointed at the altercation with his eyes more forcefully.

The French teacher frowned in return.
The boy, gaping dumbstruck, gestured silently at the...okay, it was obviously bullying. He looked angry now, waving his hands in outrage.

Still, Ms. LeForge did not move.

Intellectually, she understood the message completely. Why are you, a teacher, not stopping this?

Ms. LeForge merely shrugged, turning to walk in the opposite direction. Despite what the students may believe, she wasn't there to keep the peace in the school hallways. That was not the job she was there to do. And because she had only taken the job in the last year out of obligation, Ms. LeForge had no patience or energy to go beyond the parameters of her appointed job.

Especially since interfering – and bringing Mister Stevens's indiscretions to the school's authorities – would bring her into conflict, again, with the football-obsessed coach and school board. And Ms. LeForge had suffered the coach's bluster and the board's disconnected micromanaging more than enough for a lifetime.

Moreover, it had been a long day of trying to cram French terms into the heads of disinterested children. All Ms. LeForge wanted to do was go home and continue pining for the day when her assignment would end.

Predictably, the boy didn't take her refusal well. “...what is wrong with you!?” he fumed in a low tone, clenching his fist.

“...ugh...” LeForge groaned. She should have expected that. In a deliberately thickened French accent (practiced to the point where she didn't even need to put much energy into the ruse), she said, “...go home, kid. I will...” Reluctantly, she drummed up an excuse. “...I will bring it up with the principal...later...” She waved him off. Very likely, LeForge would do no such thing. Letting such petty details float away had been one key to surviving this job.

“Rragh!” growled the boy, stomping his foot. From over her shoulder, LeForge saw the boy clench his fists, scowl, then break off running into the group of teenagers.

Wait, was the boy intending to fight them? Ms. LeForge stopped and looked over. At the very least, she was curious.

“Leave him alone, Micheal!” the boy in glasses said, shoving the football player with both hands.

“Hey!” said Stevens, rubbing his arm almost as an afterthought. “What's it to you, Egbert?”

“He doesn't have any money to give you, Micheal!” said the interloper – Egbert, was it? “So shove off, you big bully!”

“Oh, and what are you gonna do about it, nerd boy?” Micheal said. His three companions – all a head taller than the Egbert boy – nodded and barked agreement with this sentiment. Micheal put on a cocky grin. “What, are you gonna fight me? Nerd!”

The football player shoved Egbert with one hand, who swatted the hand away with his own. His shoulders shook. “Rah!” he said, shoving with both hands again.

Ms. LeForge looked on in surprise as the smaller boy threw the larger boy back two meters, where he landed hard on the ground.

As the football captain's backup looked between the two in shock, Micheal Stevens rose
awkwardly to his feet again, rubbing his chest. “What the fuck?” he gasped, sucking in air.

The Egbert boy stood straight, clenched fists at his sides.

His opponent evidently elected to cease any lingering pretensions to fair play. “Get 'em!” he barked.

Egbert backed up in alarm as three burly football players advanced on him. “Wah!” he cried, hands overtaking him and pining him in his place. “Aaaaah! Let go!” Two of the boys were wrapped tight around his arms, while another circled around behind and grabbed his hair. “Aagh!”

Micheal Stevens smirked, as if he had something to be proud of. He shot forward and punched the interloper in the stomach as well.

“Gaagh!” Egbert gasped. “Aggh...aaagh...”

Yancy – the previous victim of abuse going by his lopsided glasses and ripped shirt – cringed visibly at that belly-centered assault.

Micheal grabbed Egbert by the front of his ghost shirt. “Not so tough now, are you nerd?”

“...rragh...get off of me...!” the boy growled, struggling vainly against the hands that bound him.

“Or what?” Micheal said, leaning in close. “You'll cry?” At this, Micheals goon squad chuckled. “Ha ha!”

Ms. LeForge continued watching, but didn't move. She merely adjusted the purse on her shoulder. Interfering now seemed like too much work. Might as well commit to inaction. If they started beating the boy, she'd probably just slink off and claim to have left before the violence started...

“...rraagh...” Egbert growled, tensing up. “...I...said...LET...GO!”

Ms. LeForge noted how the boy's voice vibrated on those last two words.

She noted this, right before all four aggressors exploded away from the Egbert boy in a burst of air.

The force of the burst dislodged everyone attached to the boy and slammed them hard against the surrounding lockers and floor. The metal rows of lockers rattled with the impact, then continued to rattle from a continuing flow of wind out from the boy.

Ms. LeForge gaped, a stray lock of hair falling over her face.

Four burly teenagers groaned, pushing themselves up to look at the Egbert boy.

“...don't...do that...again...” Egbert huffed, standing tall. His heaving torso shed a whipping wind in every direction, causing his shirt to billow and his hair to stand on end.

Micheal Stevens lay on hands and knees. His shoulders shook, and his face contorted with alarm.

Egbert looked down upon them. “Still want to go?” he barked.

The football captain flinched, then scrambled to his feet. With but a glance to his cohorts, he bolted away. Seeing their fearless leader abandon the fight, the trembling boys followed suit, casting wary glances back as they ran. They all disappeared around a corner.

The Egbert boy sighed, the wind dying. He patted his hair, trying to get the rambunctious black
locks to calm down. He looked down at Yancy. “Hey, are you alright?” he said, rubbing the back of his head. He extended a hand down at him. “Here, let me help.”

Yancy, shivering, crawled back against a locker. He shook his head, staring at the boy in terror.

Egbert frowned, cringing back in horror. Looking between Yancy and the direction his aggressors had retreated, the boy finally ran in the opposite direction.

He failed to notice Ms. LeForge hiding in an alcove, pressed against the wall. As he retreated further, LeForge crept around the corner to watch him.

Carefully, with only a brief glance around, LeForge dug a smart phone from her purse. She tapped the screen a number of times, then held it to her ear. With her other hand, she removed a tablet PC and began tapping through her digital copy of the student manifest.

The woman, whose name was not actually LeForge, smiled with shameless relief and boundless elation.

“Control. I've found the stray. His name...is John Egbert.”
Rose LaLonde's deep contemplation was interrupted by the sound of heavy books being dropped on the table in front of her.

“Ack!” she said, jumping back. She looked sideways.

Roxy Lalonde stood at her daughter's side, arms crossed, frowning sadly.

She considered saying something. Her mouth opened, taking breath in. Yet Roxy exhaled again, shutting her mouth. Her baby looked tired and irritable still. Roxy didn't want to press her daughter on anything until...

Ding!

“Pizza's done!” Roxy said, internally relieved. She walked over to the oven and extracted a pan of hot, steamy pseudo-Italian food.

It was a frozen pie – nothing artisanal – but it was all they had in the freezer, and Roxy didn't feel up to preparing anything fancy. Her baby was hungry now, dammit, and if nothing else Roxy could heat up frozen food. So long as she wasn't too hammered.

Besides, adding goat cheese and spices from the rack helped. That was also something she could do. Life Hack.

From behind her, Roxy heard Rose's stomach growl again. She didn't need to see to know Rose was blushing, and she heard the sound of her daughter shuffling in her seat. Even Roxy herself felt famished. Must be the lack of liquid bread in her veins.

Roxy suppressed the urge to pour herself some wine. Or vodka. Or bourbon. Or whiskey. Or Jack Daniels. Or...

The woman just grabbed a couple cans of some off-brand white soda from the fridge, planting them and a couple plates on the table. She slid the stack of books to the side, leaving the food in front of her daughter.

Rose looked uneasily at the books, then stared in barely hidden longing at the food. She cast a glance up at her mother. “...thank you...”

“No problem, baby,” Roxy said, taking her seat. She smiled a bit, watching Rose try to resist the urge to wolf down the food. Roxy suppressed a giggle with her hand when Rose failed to resist the urge. The woman herself rarely bothered to resist the urge, folding her slice like a taco and eating greedily.

The two sat in silence while they ate.

When the plates were cleared, Roxy sat at her chair and faced towards Rose. The girl averted her gaze, tapping the table nervously with her fingers.

Roxy didn't know how to approach the subject, and she frowned sadly. She laced her fingers in front of her, gaze moving towards the books. “...I...found those books in your room.”

Rose stared at the table, snatching a brief glance towards the tomes. “...okay...”
“I’m not angry, Rose,” Roxy said, waving her hands in front of her. “I just...where did you get them?”

Her daughter sighed, shutting her eyes. “From Dad’s secret study.”

Roxy was taken aback, jaw dropping. She frowned. “Oh no...” She rubbed her temple. Rose even knew about Richter, oh no... “...how did you find out about...the library?”

Puffing out her cheeks, Rose exhaled. “Last year,” she said, “I found you passed out at the entrance of the secret room, with the hidden door open.”

“Oh no!” Roxy cried, face sinking to the table. “I fucked up!”

“Yes, I believe you said that then, too,” Rose said, flatly. “...are you alright?”

In answer, Roxy moaned neutrally into the table's surface, then sat up. “...wait, I thought you said I was passed out?”

“You were,” Rose said. “Then you weren't. We talked for a time, and then you passed out again. I expected to continue our conversation later, but you evidently forgot about it entirely. It became awkward, so I just never mentioned it.”

“Stupid, stupid, stupid!” Roxy said, knocking on her head with her knuckles. She sighed, slumping down to the table surface again. “...so I guess I talked about your daddy, huh?”

“For what I am convinced now was the first time,” Rose said. “Was this man – Richter – your husband?”

“Naw, nothin' like that,” Roxy sighed, shutting her eyes. “Richter and I never got married. Never got a chance to. We talked about it a couple times, but there never seemed like a rush to do so.” Roxy opened her eyes, looking sadly at Rose. “...that was, until I got pregnant with you, Rose.”

“Am I to suspect father's death got in the way of holy matrimony?” Rose said, smiling just slightly. Perhaps it occurred to her that the subject was of a sore variety, and hastily dropped the smile.

“...he got taken away from me...” Roxy said, frowning. She really didn't want to cry right now. She wasn't drink, either, so she couldn't count on blacking out to dull the memories. “Rose, can we not talk about that right now?”

“Sure,” Rose said. “Perhaps more pertinent to the situation at hand, you also stated that my father was a Wizard.”

“...yeah...”

“My father really was a wizard, wasn't he?” Rose said in a resigned tone.

Roxy sat up, nodding. “You know, Rose,” she mumbled, “I thought you'd be more skeptical. That's kind of your jam.”

“Believe me, I was,” Rose said flatly. She shot a glance to the stack of books at her side. “Then...curiosity got the better of me, and I started reading father's books.”

Her hand inched out, then closed over the volume at the top of the stack. The tomes at the bottom were ancient, of course, but the one on the top was a more modern, machine-printed volume.

Roxy noted, internally, that Richter probably hated having mass-produced volumes in his library.
It just seemed like a matter that would bug him, though the man never complained to her about it.

Rose opened and thumbed through the newer book – Self-Initiation Into The Golden Dawn Tradition. “The more I read through his collection – especially what I assumed to be his own journals, but also his many marginal notations – the more I realized that the man took Magick very seriously.

“Then I figured out that his Magick, apparently, worked.”

“Hey Paul! Got a minute?”

Paul Egbert looked up from his slice of pizza. His co-workers around him gaze the briefest glance from their existing discussions around the pizza box, before moving on.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Sure, boss.” Putting the slice down on the paper plate, Paul rose to his feet.

Outside the break room, Paul's boss looked around the sea of cubicles around him. His hair had begun thinning at the top; it was a minor bit of office gossip that the man intended to not compromise hair loss, and just shave himself bald.

Paul leaned against a wall. “What's going on? Something happen?”

“Eh, not yet,” the boss said, wringing his hands. “Nothing definite. But I got a memo from the higher ups. Someone's looking to buy the company.”

Paul frowned in a stern, businessman way. “Oh dear.”

“Yes, that's what I thought,” said the older manager, shaking his head. “I think the particulars of the deal are being negotiated now. Hopefully it won't go through.”

“Here's hoping,” Paul said, crossing his fingers.

What neither man needed to say was that, in the wake of any sort of merger or buyout, the whole company would inevitably be reorganized. Inspections of the whole organization, from the highest executives to the janitorial staff – and everyone in between. The new owners looking to see what could be cut, which departments could be merged, and who could be let go. While the current state of affairs wasn't exactly loose where Paul worked, they would get a whole lot more strict, in the interests of saving money.

Or, just at the whims of the new owners. Sometimes reorganizations happened for no reason anyone at the bottom could divine. Naturally, this didn't mean the execs didn't have reasons. It would be myopic to assume the higher ups just hated their employees and wanted them to suffer (though that does happen...). But try telling that to the hard-working guy on floor three, who has been with the company for twenty years, when he gets laid off.

Paul Egbert shook his head. “Hate to ask...but who is in the most danger?”

“Fuck, Paul, I don't even want to think about...” The boss checked over his shoulder. He lowered his voice. “...who I'd have to let go. Not until they come down here and tell me for certain.” He sighed. “God, this is going to be a mess.”

Paul patted the man on the shoulder. “You'll be in prayers, man.”
The boss smiled, shaking his head. “Same old Paul. Nonetheless...I appreciate it.” He returned the shoulder pat. “Anyway, enjoy your lunch. And uh...don't tell the guys about this? I just needed to get it off my chest, and you know how to keep quiet.”

“Will do,” Paul said, giving a mock salute. He sighed, returning to the break room.

Looking over his colleagues, he dreaded the thought of any of them getting let go.

“What do you mean, 'did anything weird happen last week'?”

John Egbert squirmed on his feet, playing nervously with his shirt hem. “I mean...like, weird. Unusual. What’s the word in the hallways?”

Kyle Roads played unconsciously with the tail of his backpack's shoulder straps. Kyle was the kid to talk to, as he knew all the gossip at school. As a point of fact, John had consulted with him briefly last Friday morning, after John's first round of using his new spell nearly deafened him.

That John hadn't had any luck learning what he needed today, the following Monday, using said spell, was why he'd come to Kyle again.

“Well...if we're talking unusual, that precludes the many instances over the weekend of folks getting together, making out, breaking up...I think Litney over in third period gym got together and broke up with her boyfriend three or four times in one night, over at Chad's party. Impressive – a new record I think – but not unusual...”

John squinted, frowning.

“Well...it might have happened right after classes let out.” John supplied.

“John Egbert, are you holding out on me?” Kyle said, smiling slyly. “If there's something juicy like a fight, you should let me know.”

“I wanted to know if anyone knew about a fight, Kyle,” John said, eyebrows sinking low over his eyes.

“Did you get into a fight?”

“I plead the fifth, and it wouldn't be sporting to spread something around without details,” John said. “Did anyone get into a fight on Friday?”

“No,” said Kyle, finally. He sighed, probably disappointed for a lack of scoop. “No, I don't know of any fights that went down on Friday afternoon. And if I don't know about it, no one likely does. I'm very connected, as you know.”
John sighed. “Alright. I guess that's that.”

“Now about that payment...”

“But you didn't give me any information!” John scowled.

“Correction!” Kyle said, leaning forward and extending an index finger. “I gave you confirmation of a lack of information. You asked if I knew of a fight, and I answered to the best of my ability. All while, may I add, taking time I could be spending meeting with gossips who can confirm or deny events that may or may not have happened. Do you have anything to trade, or should I just put it on your tab?”

Rubbing his eyes, John sighed. “Fine. I heard Mike Smith and Harry Baker were going to make out later under the football bleachers.”

“Ooh!” Kyle said, twiddling his fingers. “So those two finally got together! The girls in seventh period are going to die!”

“Ugh! Now I feel bad, revealing their secret.” John said, shaking his head.

“Oh please, John,” Kyle said, waving his hand dismissively. “Everyone knew those two were an item in the making. We all knew it since the fourth of July party! This was a secret that was going to get out anyway.”

“Whatever.” John turned and stalked away. The break between fifth and sixth period was only four minutes long, and John had to make tracks or he would be late.

He wanted more than anything to raise his Gossip spell again and check around some more. But that would require him to stop, hide, and intone it. No time.

Moreover, it was becoming clear to John that no one knew about John's fight with...

**OH SHIT THERE HE WAS.**

John froze mid stride, staring forward as Micheal Stevens – football captain and bullying jerk – walked right for John. The older boy was flanked by two of his goons. They joked amicably between each other.

Drawing his hands into fists, John looked around, only to find there was no place adequate to hide him. He braced for what would probably be another fi-

Micheal Stevens cast only a momentary glance at John, not even breaking his stride as he walked right past.

John blinked, mouth gaping open. He looked over his shoulder, watching Micheal and his cronies continue on as if nothing even happened.

“What...the...hell...?” John mouthed. He faced forward again, clutching his books hard.

What was going on? Ever since the start of the day, not even a shred of evidence pointed to people knowing what went down. This despite several bullies, a fellow nerd, and a teacher having witnessed at least part of the altercation. Even Micheal Stevens didn't seem to recognize John, let alone betray any lingering animosity.

Briiiing!
“Fuck!” John jumped, looking up. “Shit!” That was the one minute warning, sounded before the bell marking the start of the next period went off.

The boy ran forward, ducking around crowds of slow people.

“Mom, can you give me a second?”

Roxy blinked, then nodded.

Her daughter smiled, rising from her chair and running off. Just as Roxy began to worry that she'd just accidentally let her baby off the hook, Rose returned with a stack of notebooks under one arm, and a box in another.

The woman watched with curiosity as the girl removed a small, white candle from the box, and set it in front of her. Taking a seat, Rose positioned her hands over the candle, staring at it intently. The hands began to wave over the candle, dipping up and down, forming a rough bubble around the candle.

After a moment, Rose began to mutter under her breath. “Nuriel ignis Domini. Intende in adjutorium meum, et in tenebris stravi accendunt lucernam. Nuriel ignis Domini...”

Roxy began to grow concerned. Such intense chanting brought back memories of Rose's father. Recalled to Roxy's mind the terrible forces Richter could – and had – brought down, simply through his words.

“...et in tenebris stravi accendunt lucernam. Nuriel ignis Domini. Intende in adjutorium meum, et in tenebris stravi...”

Rose's voice was steady, her chant the barest of whispers. Her eyes focused hard at the candle. A brow twitched ever so slightly, and a sheen of sweat formed on her forehead.

Roxy took a deep breath and relaxed. She was worrying over nothing. Richter made it clear, years ago. One could not bend the universe without a titanic force of Will, and a knowledge of the forces channeled by the magic. Any child could be shown a magical incantation on a chalk board, and even be taught to speak it. Only with Intent and Understanding could a magus ply their Art. In much the same way that Doctor Langley couldn't perform her technological miracles without knowing the (albeit unconventional) Science behind it, it ought to take years of training to develop even the barest of...

“...Nuriel ignis Domini-”

The candle wick ignited before Rose's eyes, causing her to jump back.

Roxy gaped, staring into the tiny flame. She blinked, looking up from it.

Rose blinked as well, breathing heavily. The little light reflected off her eyes, and her hands were frozen inches out on either side of the candle. A bead of sweat rolled down her brow.

Then she smiled. Broadly at first, then a sense of decorum hit her, and she moderated the embarrassing expression. She coughed into her fist, eyes daring to leave the candle only in furtive glances to her mother.

“...gack...!” Roxy sputtered, “R-rose! You...” She felt shock, but also a bit of cautious, mounting elation. “You can use True Magick!?”
Rose blushed, looking away. “What? This thing?” She waved at the candle. “No, no, I haven't 'Awakened' to some great cosmic awareness. At least, I don't think so. I probably would have noticed if I had, if father's scattered notes are anything to go by.”

Roxy frowned. “Then I am confuse.”

“This...” Rose said, pointing to the candle, “…is what dad's books call Hedge Magic. The product of raw effort and rote study. Anyone can do this...so long as they understand the principles, that is.” Rose dabbed her brow with a paper napkin. “Whew. I'll have you know, mom, that is exhausting.”

“Oh.” Roxy leaned back, processing. The feat itself, while tiny, was still impressive (and, to be frank, wondrous) to the woman. She felt just a bit of pride, and knew that Richter would probably feel the same...were he there. On the other hand, it was a bit disappointing. “…so, you didn't actually awaken, huh?”

“Not yet,” Rose said, shrugging. “Although that's the eventual goal. Even learning that...Working...required two months of persistent practice. It's a proof of concept, more than anything.” She rested a hand on top of the stack of books. “It proved beyond a doubt that Magic was real.”

Roxy whistled. “Wow, Rose...” The woman tapped the table. Realizing her daughter was staring (seeking validation?), Roxy smiled. “I mean that's great! I'm proud of you, Rose.”

Rose cocked an eyebrow.

“Really, I am!” Roxy waved her hands in front of her.

The very edges of Rose's mouth turned up.

“...so, back there...” Roxy said, pointing a thumb over her shoulder. “Was that more magic?”

“No, that was just an initiation ceremony,” Rose said, shrugging. She picked up “Self-Initiation...” and thumbed through it. “It was a modified version of the Golden Dawn's Neophyte grade initiation ceremony, to be performed by solitary students. Very complicated. Since I don't have any other organizations ready to initiate me into their arcane mysteries...” Rose tilted her head forward slightly.

It occurred to Roxy that her daughter might know more than she let on. “…uh...” the woman said, looking sideways.

Rose smirked. “...I knew I'd need to initiate myself. Technically, since is my second time running the Neophyte ceremony. It's good practice, repeating it, as I'll only have exponentially more involved rituals to perform later.” She closed the book. “All evidence points to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn being a front for – or product of – an older Hermetic organization. A Rosicrucian – or possibly pre-Rosicrucian – Order devoted to secret wizardry.” Rose tapped the spine of her book, the edges of her mouth turning up slyly. “You wouldn't happen to know anything about such an secret society, would you mom?”

Roxy sighed, looking down at the table. “…the Order of Hermes...”

“Yes, that's the name that came up several times in father's notes,” Rose said, taking up one of her notebooks and flipping through it. “Probably for the sake of secrecy, he didn't elaborate in any book that wasn't in another language, or wrapped up in some inscrutable cipher. Decoding some of the lesser ciphers in his books has proven a challenge in and of itself.”
“Well...” Roxy said, crossing her arms. “I don't know a whole lot about the Order of Hermes, other
than what your daddy told me.” Her lips contorted, the woman drawn into contemplation. “Let's
see...the Houses of Hermes were formed around the end of the first millennium AD, by a bunch
of wizards who previously were just dicking out Europe, doing their own thing. Successors of
Egyptian, Greek, and Roman ceremonial magicians and mystery cultists. Zoroastrians, European
pagans, and even some esoteric Christians and gnostics. I think some Alchemists, too, but...I think
he told me there was something more about that last part...something that made it a
whole...thing...”

Rose's eyebrows lifted. “Mom, I'm impressed,” she said. “Maybe you should give yourself more
credit. At least for knowing about Mystery Cults...or Zoroastrianism for that matter.” She tapped
her fingers on the table. “But, in summation, a collection of masters versed in the High Ritual
Magick of the West.”

“Mm hmm...” Roxy nodded. In truth, she couldn't make heads of tails of Western Occultism.
Couldn't tell a Crowley from an Agrippa. She was still astounded that there were multiple seals of
Solomon. That bit of “knowledge” she spouted was a line she quoted from Richter almost
verbatim. “...anyway, one of these wizards – Bonisagus – got tired of his peers feuding in wizard
wars all the time, and developed methods what let him and anyone he taught erect shields against
magick for themselves. And then taught as many wizards as he could, so they could all meet
without worrying about killing each other. And after a lot of bickering and talk, they formed an
Order devoted to perfecting...what did you call it?”

“High Ritual Magic.”

“Yeah,” Roxy nodded, “that. A bunch of wizards formed this group, breaking themselves into a
series of smaller, more specialized Houses. Flambeau, Tytalus, Quaesitor, Verditus...ugh, a whole
bunch of House names I can't even remember. Or pronounce. It doesn't help that half of them died
off or got demoted to minor houses over the centuries, replaced by newer ones.” Roxy shook her
head. “What I do know for sure, though, is one of the houses: House Bonisagus, founded by...well,
you know.” She looked at her daughter, smiling. “Your dad was in that one.”

At some point in Roxy's impromptu introductory lecture on the Order, Rose had pulled a pen from
her pocket and started frantically making notes. From Roxy's viewpoint, she could vaguely make
out Rose writing “Bonisagus”, and underlining it three times.

“Your dad, like most folks in House B, was a magical researcher,” Roxy continued, rubbing her
hands. “I think he studied with some Flambaeu Mages for a while, and maybe some others, but at
his core he was devoted to furthering Hermetic magical theory and practice. The legacy of the B-
man himself, I guess.”

“Fascinating,” Rose said, eyes focused on her notes. “I suspect, by this detail, that other Houses
had their own areas of expertise?”

“Yeah. Quaesitors prosecuted Hermetic law, the...Fortunae, I think, dealt with money and fate,”
Roxy said. “And Flambeau fought...uh...”

Rose's pen stopped. She didn't look up, but her ears were trained.

“...they...defended the Order,” Roxy said, head sinking. She looked away awkwardly.
“...yeah...they had a lot of flashy fire magics, and were the Order's martial arm. You know, in case
the Order got attacked...uh...”

Rose looked up. Roxy felt sweat form on her scalp.
Her daughter narrowed her eyes, but returned to the notes. “Let's move on. How did father go about advancing Hermetic theory?”

“Oh...well I barely know anything about that,” Roxy said, exhaling. She felt tension in her muscles melt away. Close one. “Although I do know one thing: the Order's magic requires a lot of expensive materials. Richter was rich already – and he knew enough of alchemy to make gold if he needed it – so that weren't always a problem. But apparently, some materials are expensive because they're just so rare. That meant looking for stuff that was hard to find, and often that no one but a wizard would want. Apparently researching new magic required even rarer stuff, just to get things to work. It was the job of other wizards to perfect rituals, and make them more economical.

“That's a lot of what we did, actually. Go around and search for rare materials.” Roxy gestured vaguely with her hands, smiling. “Me and Richter and a whole bunch of other folks...”

“Mages like Doctor Langley?”

Roxy blinked. “I talked about her too, huh?” The woman frowned.

“Briefly,” Rose said. She frowned, looking at her mother. “Sorry. I was lead to believe she passed as well. And...that she was also your...something?”

“I was her Consor,” Roxy said, shrugging and looking at the table. “A non-Awakened person who hung out with Mages and helped them out. I learned a lot about how to maintain Doctor Langley's equipment, and even how to use her simpler devices and processes. But I never Awakened. Still...” Roxy smiled slightly. “...Doc Langley was nice. Really smart, too. She wasn't a Hermetic like your dad, she was more of a...'Progressive Scientist'. She and I and her mentor – Old Man Harley – would do our mad science thing. But...sometimes we'd team up with other kinds of Mages. That's how I met Richter. So for years, me and Langley and Richter and sometimes Old Man Harley and Swooping Gull and Di-”

Roxy slapped both hands over her mouth. Shit, she almost revealed Dirk was a code wizard ninja. Shit!

An eyebrow hiked high on Rose's face. “...is something the matter?”

“N-naw! Naw!” Roxy said, waving her hands around. “It's just, there were so many folks we ran with, over the years. Mages and Sorcerers and Consors, of every mystical and scientific stripe you could name.” She scratched her face. “Gee, I wonder where any of them went. Haven't talked to most of them since...since the bad times...never did find out where Swooping Gull walked off to. Ha ha!”

“Mom.”

Roxy frowned, looking at her daughter.

Rose leveled an even stare at her mother. “What happened?”

The woman sighed, gulping. “...at a certain point, your dad changed,” she said. “At first, he was mostly allied with the group to have help tracking down rare spell components. He'd help with their problems here, and they’d find a tree of a certain type what got struck by lightning, or a black pearl, or rare yellow dye from India made through unethical treatment of cows...”

“Mom...”

“Right, right...” Roxy sighed. “At some point, the group's problems became...his problems. Got
closer to all of us – me especially, obviously...” She looked away. “But that also meant...he took the loses seriously. Stopped being the sedate, jovial researcher...and became the more driven...avenger...”

“Mom!”

Rose sat up straight, waiting for her mother to meet her eyes. When Roxy did so, Rose tapped the pen against her notebook. “Maybe it's time we stopped dancing around the elephant in the room.”

Roxy frowned, nodding. “Okay.”

“Right.” Rose flipped through her notebook, searching for a particular page. When she found it, Rose said, “It's a matter you referred to, last year. One that, despite my best efforts thus far, I know only vaguely about. But one that is, perhaps, the most important detail of all.

“Mom,” Rose said, looking right in her mother's eyes, “...what is the Ascension War?”

“John Egbert.”

John stopped in his tracks. The afternoon air blew through his hair, drawing to his nose the smell of cologne, aftershave, and shoe shine.

His eyes passed over the sidewalk, street, houses, and some buildings surrounding him. He caught sight of the pizza parlor to his right – the good pizza place, with the wood-fired ovens. Turning past it, he looked cautiously over his shoulder.

An exceedingly well-dressed man of perhaps thirty stood three meters behind John, just at the corner of a high painted fence. He stood clad in a designer suit, perfectly tailored to him. The boy knew enough of suits from his father to know it wasn't off-the-rack. This man wore a bespoke suit – fitted exactly to him. That cost money. The detail and fine quality of the outfit spoke of even higher expense, though John didn't know enough about tailoring and fashion to guess its true price. Much more money, probably.

The man smiled. A sensation of calm – and even interest – passed through John's head. But it was...off...

John forced himself into meditative focus. Breathe in. Breathe out.

There. As John turned fully towards the man, he realized those positive feelings – a perfect first impression – were not natural. The boy shuddered, taking the man in again.

The man's smile was predatory, of a kind sported by crocodiles or snakes.

“...I'm...sorry...” John finally muttered. “...you must have me confused with someone...”

“John Egbert,” said the man, quickly. “Son of Paul Egbert and the late Sarah Egbert, maiden name Sarah Hopkins. Place of residence: 413 Price Street, Maple Valley, Washington. Fourteen years old as of last April. Attends Maple Valley High, grade nine. Home's annual income...”

“Who are you?” John asked, scowling. His heart raced, fingers tingling. His shoulders shook.

“...heh...” said the man, coughing. “Yes...Mister Egbert...may I call you John?”

“You may not, stranger,” John said flatly.
“Mister Egbert it is, then!” The suited man adjusted his tie. “Mister Egbert, I represent some very important, very powerful people.”

“Are you with the New World Order?”

This gave the man a slight pause. He finished adjusting his tie, exhaling slowly. All in all, he affected the air of pretty cool customer. “I suppose that simplifies matters. Hmm...” He smiled, adjusting his cuff links. “However you came to know what that is, we can move a few steps ahead of schedule. Fortuitous!”

He brushed fingers through his hair. “But no, I am not a member of the New World Order.” He pointed with one finger towards the direction over John's shoulder. “The two men about one hundred feet that way – and the one or more behind me – ARE New World Order.”

John's heart sank. With widening eyes, he resisted the urge to look around. If they were who the man said they were, John wasn't going to find them anyway.

With dawning horror, John realized he was already caught in a net. His face broke out in a cold sweat.

The man smiled. “Don't worry, Mister Egbert. They,” he said, unbuttoning his suit jacket slowly, “are simply here to protect me.” Keeping his hands in full view, he unfurled a jacket flap and fished a hand in a jacket pocket. As he did so, he slowly walked forward. He rushed nothing, treating the situation as one would before a wild animal.

John couldn't help but notice the gun holstered on the man's side. The outline of the man's suit hadn't implied the firearm's presence even slightly.

The man stopped flat a meter away from the boy, maintaining a completely relaxed demeanor. He removed a card from his jacket. “Here's my card.” He said, offering it to John. “My name is Brandon Tallfield. I'm a member of the Syndicate.”

Mr. Tallfield smiled his smug, predatory smile. “Mister Egbert, as a representative of the Technocratic Union, I'm here to offer you a job.”
“Hell no.”

John Egbert scowled at the man, refusing to even touch the business card offered.

Syndicate rep Brandon Tallfield didn't even blink. “I see we've gotten off on the wrong foot.”

“How did you find me?” John said. He had an idea, of course, but it would help to know what he did wrong. Might help him avoid attention next time. Assuming there was a next time.

“How...” Tallfield pursed his lips, retracting his card and slipping it back in his jacket pocket. “April of last year, the Union's Statisticians informed me that someone would become Inspired. But...simulating who out of billions of people would gain such understanding of the world is a...difficult prospect, even for our best. We didn't know who it would be...only that they lived somewhere here in Maple Valley.” He inclined his head. “That someone was you, wasn't it Mister Egbert?”

John frowned. He shrugged, hoping to distract from his face. “...maybe.”

The Syndicate rep smiled. “Well, when that prediction came, we took steps to find whoever it was. You know...” Tallfield gestured with his index finger. “...there's a stereotype about orphaned...Inspired individuals. That they end up on the streets before long.” He shook his head. “Nonsense. Oh certainly, I know for a fact that many do, after their...Enlightening...but these are outliers. They only bolt if the initial use of their Inspired ability manifests in a violent manner, one that prevents them from maintaining their lives. That a newly minted Enlightened person simply cannot get a hold of themselves, is a vast underestimation of the human ability to adapt.

“So, yes, the one we predicted could have left town shortly after – and yes, we were on the lookout for signs of violent awakenings...” Tallfield waved his hand. “House fires, inexplicable deaths, unexplained events, and other volatile happenings that could signal new...talent. But anything short of that, and I question the assumption that they...you...would leave right away. When your world is in upheaval, you clutch all the tighter at the life you know. You don't throw it away unless the life is already soiled.

“As such, I took steps to establish a Union presence in town.” Tallfield ran fingers through his hair. “Whatever residents could be bought to our purposes, we bought. And, as necessary, we insinuated our own people into places where their eyes and ears could do the most good. The police, the newspaper, TV station, malls, park services...and schools...”

John gulped. Shit.

“You made quite a scene back there, Mister Egbert,” Tallfield said, shaking his head. “But it's alright. Our agent happened to witness your little act of bravery first hand. Our agents moved in quickly, cleaning up the mess before word got too widespread to control.”

Ms. LeForge. That explained a lot. The boy winced. “Did...did you do something to their brains?” John said. His fingers twitched.

“Don't feel guilty, Mister Egbert,” Tallfield said, shrugging. “Erasing the memories of your fellow students was completely harmless. Moreover, they really are better off not knowing. It helps them sleep at night, knowing their fellow students won't manifest inexplicable powers and try to kill them. Really, we were going to do this anyway. That it saved you the headache of dealing with the
“What do you want from me?” John said, glaring.

“Mister Egbert,” said Tallfield, folding his hands behind his back, “what I want is to talk.”

“Just talk?”

“Just talk. Unlike what you may think, I would prefer to convince you to join the Technocratic Union of your own will. It would be easier on everyone involved, and you'd have much to gain from doing so.”

John frowned. He ought not listen to a word this man said. Tallfield already attempted to mess with John's mind once already, and the boy doubted he was done trying. Even the business card from earlier seemed sinister. Like it would influence him somehow, just having it. The intelligent thing would be to leave.

But...John had the suspicion that Not Talking wasn't an option. Not just because he was surrounded by Technocrats, but because they knew where he lived.

“...we talk somewhere else,” John said. “Somewhere public.”

Tallfield chuckled. “Whatever you wish.”

“Your MiBs stay outside.”

“That can be arranged.”

John looked to his left. “That pizza place. I'm kind of hungry.”

“Sounds lovely.”

“You pay.”

The Syndicate rep smirked. “Easy.”


Roxy Lalonde scratched her head. “I think I heard somewhere that there may have been an extra secret, forgotten Convention that worked behind the others. Whatever.” She weaved her fingers together, resting the hands in front of her. “These groups comprised a coalition of mages who, following the middle ages, formed the group called the Order of Reason. Their purpose was simple: stamp out everything supernatural, and create a united reality. One God, One Church, One World.

“At least, that was how it started. It changed considerably since then.”

Rose Lalonde's pen moved swiftly over the page. “...Void Seekers...Cosians...? Gabrielites?”

“They had a bunch of names. The Cosians were also called the Hippocratic Circle, and the Gabrielites – or Knights of Gabriel – were also called the Cabal of Pure Thought.” Roxy brushed a lock of hair back. “It's not really important anymore, as the Order of Reason changed a lot in the five hundred years since its creation. Some, like the Grand Financiers of the High Guild, just sort of rebranded themselves. Others, though, changed considerably, merging Conventions, spawning
new ones, and destroying others as they grew 'outdated'. Eventually, the Order of Reason morphed into its current form: The Technocratic Union, or Technocracy."

“What did you mean by a united reality?” Rose said, resting her pen after making only a short notation.

“Did you know that mages do magic because of their belief?”

“From a Hermetic perspective, I would think Will would be important,” Rose said. “Are you implying that there is a distinction between Will and Belief?”

“It's how Shamans, Wizards, Witches, Zen Masters, Miracle Workers, and Mad Geniuses are all able to work their...for lack of a better word, magic. They believe it to be true, and their belief, along with their Will, shapes reality.” Roxy shrugged. “Technically, everyone does it. Mages are just those capable of doing it consciously. And if you get enough folks believing the same view of reality, that reality becomes more true.”

Rose's eyes lit up. Her eyebrows furrowed. “You're certain of this?”

“I know it sounds crazy, Rose,” Roxy said, shaking her head. “But it's the truth. It's the only way so many contradictory systems of magic and science could operate simultaneously.”

The girl tapped her finger on the paper. “...then that's what you meant. About this Order of Reason – this Technocratic Union – seeking One Reality. They want to eliminate competing ideas...”

“Paradigms.”

“Yes...yes!” Rose leaned forward. “That's a good word for it!”

“Well, it's not my word,” Roxy shrugged. “Someone smarter than me came up with it. Point is, you had folks with Awakened power all around. A bunch get together to form their own vision of the world. To hell with everyone else.”

“This is how the Ascension War started?”

“Naw, Rose,” Roxy said, shaking her head.

“...no?” Rose said, looking puzzled.

“Well, it is,” the woman said. “But that's only the Ascension War in its current form. Groups of Mages have been forming ever since time began. Competing over Paradigm and Practice, for the hearts and minds of all the little people. The Order of Reason was just one of the more recent ones...and one of the most successful. And when they came in and started fights with every other magical practitioner, they were a threat to everybody. They formed, in fact, around the time reality started getting more rigid.”

Rose breathed. “...For the world was changing...” she said. “...The numinous powers abroad in its young age gradually receded...Man retreated too, away from nature and into himself...the climate had retreated from magic.”

Roxy blinked.

“...sorry...” Rose said, looking away and smiling. “A beautiful, sad quotation from one of my own books.”
“That's really what it was like, though,” Roxy said. “Except magic receded cause of the Order of Reason. The Order of Hermes were their first and greatest opponents, but even those wizards couldn't stand against the war machines, cannons, and flying devices of those early Technocrats. So they got together with a bunch of other witches, and spread the word all over the world. Magical groups everywhere met, and after much arguing, they teamed up. In the end, nine groups joined forces, forming the Council of Nine Mystic Traditions.

“They...we lost some Traditions along the way,” Roxy continued. “But we gained others. Defectors from the Technocracy, who could see the Union for what it was: a bloated construct grown corrupt with its power. The Council numbers nine again: The Akashic Brotherhood, Celestial Chorus, Euthanatoi, Sahaga...Saja...the Cult of Ecstasy...” Roxy stuck her tongue out, scowling. “Sorry...the Dreamspeakers, Order of Hermes, Sons of Ether...wait, should that be Society?” Roxy stroked her chin. “Fuck, I haven't kept up with the memos, even though I'm kind of a part of it. Whatever...the Verbana, and the Virtual Adepts. Ugh!”

Rose held her pen over the notebook. “Um...could you repeat those?”

“Later. Man, the list is too long and complicated.” Roxy stuck her tongue out in disgust, shutting her eyes. “And they keep changing the names! I can't even, Rose. I can't even.”

Rose sighed. “I take it from context that the Tradition Council and the Technocratic Union have maintained a constant state of war for centuries. A conflict over ideas, resources, and students.” She tapped the end of her pen against the side of her head. “And given the state of the world, the Technocracy's campaign of rationalism has been winning.”

“Bluh. Yeah.” Roxy said, sighing. “I mean, I love Science. But not like this. Not like how the Technos do it. It's...so sterile. So...unfun. And so often...immoral. Doctor Langley left the Union on account of how disgusted she was with its disregard for life or decency.” Roxy sighed. “And I like Wizards too, and all that magic stuff. I want to live in a world where Magic and Science can live side by side.”

Her daughter blinked. “...yeah, that sounds...” She blushed. “...better...”

In truth, the thought had been nagging at Rose for a year. She considered herself a rational person. A believer in scientific methods. But the fantastic appealed to her as well. Hermeticism seemed ideal, because it was a very rigid, yet fantastic, method of operation. Yet, Rose still felt keenly that cognitive dissonance, between believing in Rationality and believing in Magic.

Could it truly be as simple as just...accepting both of them? No contradiction? Surely it couldn't...surely it was some kind of cop out, accepting both.

...but...what if it wasn't? What if Rose could damn the contradiction, and just...go with it?

The skeptic inside her told Rose to stop entertaining the idea. In fact, it told her to stop entertaining the idea of reality being the aggregate of human belief.

And yet...Rose could start a fire with just her Will. With just chanting, concentration, and WANTING it bad enough, Rose could cause a candle wick to spontaneously combust.

Rose had to accept that her prior understanding of how the world worked was fundamentally flawed. At the very least, both Science and Hermeticism were equally valid models for reality. Once she accepted this, how hard was it to accept other kinds of magic too?

“...so,” Rose said, finally. “How were you involved in this Ascension War?”
Roxy puffed out her cheeks. “...well...”

May 1991

The wall of the Technocracy Construct exploded.

“Red Alert! Red Alert!” shouted a man in a black suit and mirror shades. “We're under-ACK!”

A beam of blue shot through the Man In Black’s heart. He slumped to the floor, face first. Overhead, a siren began to blare.

Half a dozen men assembled in the hallway around the breach, weapons trained at the wall of billowing smoke. Their various firearms clicked and clacked.

None dared move. None dared make a noise. They simply sat at what cover they had, and waited.

In the back, one of the guards – dressed in a gray jumpsuit and brandishing a very unconventional rifle – felt a tug on his torso. “Huh?”

Invisible hands grasped the man and yanked him from the ground. “Ah!” he cried, flying past his comrades. The others glanced at him in alarm, as he flew straight towards the breach.

A form jumped out from the hole, smoke trailing in ribbons. The overhead lights shined off a blade held in the figure's hand.

Shing!

The two flying people met in the air, the new figure sweeping the blade through the Technocrat's stomach. Scarlet sprayed everywhere.

“Blargh!” the Technocrat gurgled, his two halves disappearing into the smoke.

The teenager landed, his white, spiky hair standing out amid the smoke. The hair would match his white shirt, save for the scarlet splatter that marred it, just as it ran down the cold steel of his katana.

He looked up, eyes hidden behind a pair of anachronistic triangular shades.

They would be anachronistic, for anyone who couldn't see how cool they'd be several years in the future.

“Son of a bitch!” cried one of the Technocrats, leveling the gun at the youth's head.

BANG!

A bullet the size of a baby's fist flew out from the smoking hole in the wall. It flew over the teenager and obliterated the Technocrat's head.

“What the fuck?!” someone cried, but more shots fired from the breach.

Most of the Technocrats returned fire on the hole, bullets flying at unseen targets. Another enormous bullet made for them, followed by a bright blue laser.

As Technocrats dropped like flies around him, one of their number ducked low and opened fire on the teenager.
Dirk Strider ran forward, katana flashing. Bracing with both hands, he swung and batted a bullet away, then another. With the rest of the volley, he danced around, ducking and weaving. He was everywhere the bullets were not, and did not stop.

His attacker froze in horror, only able to see the blade as it swung for his face.

KABOOM!

On another side of the building, another wall exploded. Several more guards rushed towards it, brandishing their firearms.

A single figure jumped through the smoke, landing inside. He had an Indian complexion and a bushy mustache. He wore black jeans, but his torso was clad in a cotton shirt and a long, silver and black Sherwani. The jacket was unbuttoned, exposing a necklace running down over his sternum. A pendant hung from the necklace, bearing the symbol of Ohm over a lotus blossom.

As the Technocrats closed in around him, the man's face turned up, no longer hiding his eyes beneath the wide brim of his cowboy hat. He smiled.

“Freeze dirtbag!” one of the guards shouted. “Don't-”

“How...”

The Technocrats froze.

“...how...do you say...” said the Indian man, in a thick Indian accent. His face jerked up. “Gunslinger” Devdan smiled. “‘Draw, partners!’”

His jacket – the Sherwani – flared out, exposing gun holsters at his waist. In the blink of an eye, he pulled two pistols out.

The Technocrats opened fire. However, Devdan twisted his body oddly – painfully, actually – and the bullets all missed. The revolvers in his hands twirled around his fingers – they didn't need to, but he liked the showy display anyway. Coming to a stop, he began firing quickly and in every direction.

The air was filled with the din of exploding shells, the cries of men, and the acrid smell of gunsmoke.

Stopping flat, Devdan tipped the brim of his hat up, looking around. His opponents all lay on the floor around him, gurgling in pools of their own blood.

The Euthanatos brought the pistols to his lips and blew away the smoke. Standing up, he holstered his guns, then clapped his hands together. In his native Punjabi, Devdan uttered a solemn prayer. “Shiva, forgive me for distributing the Good Death, though it was painfully necessary...”

“Aaaa-” a Technocrat cried, sneaking up behind the Indian man with a gun drawn.

In the corner of his eye, his spotted the smoke billowing from the wall shift. His horror mounted, as a silhouette of a gangly humanoid formed in the smoke. His scream was stifled when the figure's otherwise invisible hand clapped over his face.

The shade slammed the MiB into the inner wall, then grasped him with both arms. The Technocrat was thrown bodily down the hall. “Aaaaaaagh!” he cried.
The Indian man removed one of his revolvers and waved with it. “Thank you!” Devdan said, before aiming and firing after the tossed MiB.

“AH!” cried the voice at the end of the hall.

A different kind of Indian – a Native American – climbed through the hole. He was clad in khakis and a light brown shirt, with beads and a feather necklace hanging from his neck. A messenger bag was slung from his shoulder, and he gestured with a turtle shell tied to the end of a femur, which rattled.

“Your spirit saved my hide, Swooping Gull!” the actual Indian man said, nodding and smiling. “Thank you!”

Swooping Gull nodded politely, then began whispering in the ancient tongue of his people to the rapidly disappearing spirit.

Back at the first hole, Dirk carefully checked the fallen for survivors. When one of them tried to reach for a firearm, he booted them in the head until they stopped.

From the breach, a teenage girl climbed in, carrying a huge energy rifle. Her hair was as white as the boy's.

Roxy Lalonde checked around the corner, looking down the sights of her weapon. Seeing nothing, she walked backwards and called over the hole, “Doc! Mr. English! It's clear!”

While the cousins guarded the hallway, a tall, beefy elder climbed over the wall. He wore thick coke-bottle glasses and his traditional safari clothes. In one arm, he gripped his immense, modified elephant gun. He huffed, rubbing his lower back as he landed. Lifting up his free hand, he took that of a woman. “Here we go, my dear.”

A mature woman – brown of hair and high of cheekbones – steadied herself on the older man's hand. “Thank you, Jake,” said Doctor Langley, her white lab coat billowing as she landed. One her waist she wore a tool belt, stocked with test tubes, devices, and two curious gun-shaped machines. “But you didn't need to do that. You're not a young man anymore.”

“Lana, I haven't been a young man for decades,” Jake “English” said, twiddling his eyebrows. Of course, at home and amongst his closest colleagues, he was Jake Harley. But when on the job – when going on Adventures – he stuck to his nom de plume: Jake English. “Still, I'm not stopping just because my bones have started to creak a bit. That would only worsen the situation.”

Boom!

The ceiling shook.

“And that would be Richter, if I had to guess,” said Langley, grinning slightly when she spotted Roxy looking up excitedly. “He should take care of the helicopters. Let's...”

She spotted a figure creeping up on her student. “Roxy! Down!”

Roxy ducked, her mentor pulling out one of her guns and firing. Instead of a bullet, the device shot a dart, which struck the chest of a wounded, but armed, Technocrat.

The MiB looked down at his chest in alarm, then began to swoon. In a moment, he toppled over to the ground, unconscious.
Roxy gaped at the fallen man. “Whoa. Whoops! He he...” She grinned nervously over her shoulder.

“Let's just move already, okay?” Dirk said, wiping his sword clean with a downed Technocrat's shirt. He stomped towards the inside of the building.

“Yes!” cried Jake, “Tally Ho!”

September 2010

“I'll have a personal pan pizza, with pepperoni, sausage, bacon, Canadian bacon, onions, garlic, and green peppers! Oh, and a coke.”

The waitress smiled. “Okay, hon. And what will your...”

“Uncle,” said Tallfield, smiling.

John Egbert frowned, but let it go. He could try to claim the man was a kidnapper, and that John needed help. But for all John knew, this snake could charm his way into making the waitress believe anything, starting with him being John's uncle and working up from there. Or down from there, as the case may be.

The more he thought of it, the more John realized just how much this “businessman” terrified him. The boy shivered.

“I'll have a Caesar salad and an iced tea.” Tallfield steepled his fingers. “Oh, and can I get a large pepperoni pizza to go, ready for when I leave?”

“You sure can, sir.”

Tallfield looked into the middle distance, distracted. “Actually, make that one half pepperoni, and one vegetarian.”

John realized, from a certain angle, that the Syndicate rep had an object in his left ear. Was that how he kept in contact with his team? The boy gulped.

When the woman wandered away, the Syndicate man leaned back, facing the boy. “So, Mister Egbert,” he said, “how did you come to know about the Technocratic Union?”

“No matter,” Tallfield said, shrugging. “Let's move on. You appear to have a low opinion of the Technocratic Union. What have you been told about us?” He smiled. “I promise not to take it personally.”

John sincerely hoped this guy couldn't read his mind. The boy tried to not think about Dave. Don't think about Dave Strider. Don't think in excruciating detail about Dave Strider, member of the Virtual Adepts, who lives in Dallas, Texas.

Shit!

“No matter,” Tallfield said, shrugging. “Let's move on. You appear to have a low opinion of the Technocratic Union. What have you been told about us?” He smiled. “I promise not to take it personally.”

John drummed his fingers on the table, looking around. The two were seated in a booth, with a few more booths nearby, obscuring the two. The area immediately around them was silent, which implied they were relatively alone. The sound of conversations and cutlery could be heard from just beyond their location.
He didn't know how to feel about being so isolated from his fellow men. Didn't know if it was good for him, or bad for him, or what.

Taking a deep breath, John steadied his nerves. Breathe in, breathe out.

“The Technocratic Union was founded hundreds of years ago, with the intent of destroying human belief in magic and the supernatural,” John said, quickly. “Currently, their Conventions are five: Iteration X, devoted to cybernetics and industrial engineering; the New World Order, devoted to information control and manipulating human psychology; the Syndicate, who are corporate scumbags and underworld manipulators...” John glared at the man, though the boy was slightly perturbed at how his words only seemed to amuse Mr. Tallfield. “...the Progenitors, biologists, cloners, and developers of super drugs; and the Void Engineers, who explore space, the spirit world, and the most obscure parts of the planet.

“You used to have two other Conventions,” John continued. “Until the Society of Ether and the Virtual Adepts decided you were jerks, and defected to the Traditions.

“The Technocracy, as ever, wants to promote a Consensus devoted to inflexible physical laws and absolute control. Civil control, political control, information control, technology control. Belief control. More than anything, you seek to dictate what the masses believe, and thereby keep Reality itself under control. No matter if you have to destroy hope, creativity, wonder, religion, community, local culture, or especially human lives, just to do so.”

“Go on,” Tallfield said, twiddling his thumbs.

“You brainwash people – your enemies, your enemy's friends and loved ones, innocent bystanders. You even brainwash your own people, to stop them questioning your dogma or your cause. Anyone you can't mentally enslave, you kill. Or you take their brains out and put them in robot bodies, removing all autonomy, identity, or individual will. You create monsters in labs, then sick them on people. You experiment on people, just to see what happens. You destroy people's savings, their relationships, their health, their sanity. If it helps you get what you want, you'll stop at nothing. And in all of this, you have no accountability to anyone but yourselves, because you are the science illuminati. It's you.

“Oh, and you're killing magic. I can't go flying because of you. Asshole.”

Brandon Tallfield whistled. “Wow.”

John gulped. Maybe he went a little overboard.

“Drinks!”

The two men turned to see the waitress standing there, carrying a tray with their respective beverages.

John sucked coke through a straw nervously.

On the other side of the table, Syndicate rep Brandon Tallfield sipped his iced tea thoughtfully. He tapped his finger.

Finally, he said, “Well, Mister Egbert...you aren't wrong.”

Blink. “I'm not?” John said.
“Not entirely, no,” said Tallfield, looking away. “Factually, our organization is up to much that you describe. We fight Traditionalists where pressed, convert them when we can, and eliminate them when we must. We are capable – and willing – to bring social, economic, and psychodynamic forces to bear, should these prove more convenient at handling problems. Our Progenitors do engage in rigorous biological experimentation, some of which has military applications. Our Iteration X do create weapons and are staffed by cybernetically enhanced personnel. Yes, we do subject the Union's membership to psychological conditioning, so as to better ensure loyalty.”

Tallfield looked around, then dug into his ear with his fingers. Out came a tiny, white device, no larger than an ear bud. He placed the device on the table.

John blinked, frowning.

The Syndicate rep leaned close. “And yes, Mister Egbert...” he whispered, “...we do promote a singular vision of reality, so as to foster a consistent, orderly Consensus. One devoid of overt supernatural elements and geared towards science.” He looked over his shoulder. “Don't tell my colleagues I said that, though. I'm technically not high enough clearance to know that. I'm just telling you because I don't want to insult your intelligence.”

“...why?” John said, scowling. “If you know the scientific Consensus is a sham, why go along with it?”

The adult merely smiled. “That's simple, Mister Egbert.” He spread his hands out. “Because I, like every other Technocrat who knows the truth, agree that it is the only sensible solution. It is a lie that benefits humanity as a whole.”

“...I don't know if I believe that,” John said.

“That, Mister Egbert, is because you've only heard one side of the story. Would you acquiesce to hearing mine?”

The boy squirmed in his seat. He looked down at the booth seat next to him.

Over the last year, John heard from his friend Dave just how terrible the Technocracy was. How they couldn't be trusted. How even talking to one could lead John to have his mind influenced. And, of course, how the Technocratic Union lied to everyone, like any competent conspiracy. Even to themselves.

...but...

Brandon Tallfield was right about one thing. He was taking Dave's word for it that the Technocracy was irredeemably evil. And Dave had warned John against trapping himself in an echo chamber.

Plus, the guy was treating John to lunch. It would be rude to not at least hear the man out.

“...okay,” John said. “I guess...”

Tallfield smiled. “Good. Allow me, then, to give you the Technocratic Union's history, from its own perspective. It all started with Mistridge, the Order of Hermes, and a group called the Craftmasons...”
“YAAAAA-”

The tip of a blade stopped just short of the secretary's throat. The scream died as she threw her hands up.

Dirk Strider stared at the woman from behind dark shades. “Get the hell out,” he said, pointing a thumb over his shoulder, towards the exit of the room full of desks and filing cabinets.

Nodding, the woman ran past Dirk, eying the Punjabi cowboy with the two pistols warily. Devdan pointed the revolvers into the room and motioned towards the group of staff and researchers huddled on the floor.

Jake English stepped up behind them, followed by the rest of the party. “Everyone kindly vacate the building! Leave now, and you will not be harmed.”

The cowering men and women looked at the group of armed and violent superstitionists with fear. Finally, a bald-headed man in a lab coat walked out from behind a desk and made for the gap in the aggressors. When the Union employees saw their compatriot escape unmolested, they grew emboldened and followed.

Swooping Gull eyed the group as they passed. When the last of their number, a short man in spectacles, made to move past, the Native American seized him by the shoulder. “Not you.”

“Oh!” said the man, throwing his hands up. “W-what did I do? I-I'm just a lab tech.” He let out a forced laugh, donning a nervous smile.

The other Traditionalists looked over at their compatriot.

The shaman's eyes bored into the other man's. “This one has access to the lab.”

“I-I don't!” said the man in the spectacles. “I'm just- AH!”

Dirk came up behind, his katana curving around to sit in front of the man's neck. “Then you stay.”

Roxy looked over from her spot at the rear door of the filing room. Keeping her energy rifle trained out the door, she caught the “lab tech's” eye. She smirked, lifting the rifle up slightly.

Click.

Devdan cocked his pistol a foot from the man's head.

The man in the spectacles broke out into a heavy sweat. “H-how did you...?”

“Your mind is like an open book...” said Swooping Gull, gripping the rattle tightly. He bowed his head slightly. “...Doctor Phillips.”

The doctor's shoulders sagged. He threw up his hands. “Fine. This way. But don't complain to me if you don't like what's in there.”
“That,” said Jake, hefting his elephant rifle, “is for us to judge. Lead on.”

**September 2010**

“Are you familiar with the Order of Hermes, Mister Egbert?”

John Egbert shrugged. “Vaguely. Those are the European high wizards, right?”

“Exactly so.” Brandon Tallfield fussed with his suit sleeve. “In the dark ages, they formed one of the strongest groups of Enlightened persons in the western world. However, they were prideful, decentralized, and elitist. And, in the case of the Hermetic Covenant at a place called Mistridge, terribly corrupt. The Mistridge wizards were tyrants, ruling their feudal domain with terror. They wracked their people with curses, plagues, and storms...simply because they felt like it.”

John cocked an eyebrow.

“I know, it sounds like propaganda,” said the Syndicate rep, “but it's true. Ask a Hermetic, and if he’s honest, he'll admit as much. The wizards of Mistridge were out of control. Now, at that time, there were many smaller groups of Enlightened persons who practiced primitive forms of what we today call Science. Among these were a group called the Craftmasons.”

Tallfield leaned forward, shielding his mouth with a hand. “Incidentally,” he whispered, “I'm not supposed to know about them, either. I'm not sure why a bunch of craftsmen and architects are so offensive to the Union's official dogma, but them's the breaks.

“Anyway...the Craftmasons didn't like what they saw at Mistridge. Some claim the Craftmasons were, at some point, a part of the Order of Hermes. So they lodged a complaint with the management.” Tallfield shook his head. “The Order's leadership – such as it was, being then as now divided into Houses – refused to act against the Mistridge covenant. The Order held a very hands-off attitude towards its various members. 'Do what thou wilt, shall be the whole of the law', and all that. It wasn't their business if some of their number acted like gods, and terrible ones at that. After all, Hermetics think they are gods by default.

“This didn't sit well with the Craftmasons. So, around the year 1200 or thereabouts, they got themselves and a bunch of their friends together and destroyed Mistridge.”

“Destroyed it?” John asked, frowning. “I mean, that's probably a good thing, but...”

“Destroyed,” Tallfield nodded, “its walls blasted to atoms with cannon fire, its towers toppled by catapults, and its vile members slaughtered by sword and by artifice, almost to a man. It had to be done.” The Syndicate man stirred his iced tea, then took a sip. “But when the dust settled, and the Craftmasons were finished patting themselves on the back for a job well done and an evil vanquished, they looked at the world around them. And they didn't like what they saw there, either. Mistridge itself was merely symptomatic of a larger problem: Superstition and Mysticism.

“The Craftmasons saw a world where an elite controlled all that was Inspired and Enlightened in the world. Where wizards sat in towers, hoarding knowledge and power for themselves. Where witches cursed the common folk, while other witches sold brews or amulets or counter-hexes to protect against same. Where shamans and medicine men acted as aloof keepers of tribal wisdom. Where churches and temples and synagogues and mystery cults passed down edicts to the people from distant gods, the ones the priests and seers claimed to represent.

“Where in China, society was shackled by propriety and tradition by legalistic dragon wizards.
Where death cultists and necromancers in India took upon themselves the mantle of judge, deciding who lived and who died. Where in America, empires were built on the blood of human sacrifice to appease heaven. Where the dark night outside a person's door held blood-drinking undead and shape-shifting beast men. Where the forests were filled with capricious, haughty fae, who snatched children or played mean-spirited tricks on the innocent. Where every map said 'here be dragons', and where dragons were exactly the thing you were guaranteed to find. Where the dead didn't stay dead, but would hang around as ghosts, or hop into a corpse and shuffle around as a revenant.

“And where the common man – the people you and I were not too long ago, and where most of the people you'll ever meet are – was powerless to stop any of them. Where your average Joe or Jane was a farmer, or a blacksmith, or a shoe cobbler, with only their hands, a sword if they were lucky, and a few charms passed down through the family. Wards and protections that wouldn't necessarily work, and often did nothing but make the person feel better.”

Brandon Tallfield breathed deep, adjusting his tie. “That was the kind of world the Craftmasons saw. One where only a select few had Inspired power – what they called 'Magic'. A world that was hard, unsafe, uncertain. A world of monsters and prideful mystics.” He leaned forward. “Is this the sort of world you would fancy living in, Mister Egbert?”

John gulped. Sweat formed on his brow. Frowning, he said, “No. No, I don't think I like the sound of that all too much.”

“Exactly. It was too horrible...” Tallfield sat up straight. “Which is why these Craftmasons decided to do something about it. And they did. These craftsmen and architects got together with artisans, explorers, astronomers, forward-thinking clergy, and, of course, high merchants...” His eyebrows raised slightly. “...to form a new order. One built on control, artifice, egalitarianism, rationalism, education, and repeatability. One that prided itself on the creation of tools, systems, and techniques that anyone – Enlightened or no – could use to shape and master the world around them.

“In short, an Order of Reason.”

“And then you started killing Traditionalists, right?” John said.

“When we needed to,” Tallfield shrugged. “The Order of Hermes was first, taking offense at us attacking one of their own, despite any objective measure showing it to be the only moral choice. They took it all too personally, and even today refuse to forgive us usurping their power. Whenever we could, however, we fought for control of the world in the realm of academia, industry, commerce, and craft. Because...well, let's be honest. Yes, Reality as we know it is based on human belief. I won't deny it, like many of my colleagues. But they only deny it for the same reason we denied it in the public idea space: to establish a standard. We want a Consensus of reality that is uniform, because a uniform Consensus creates predictability, reliability, and safety.

“We didn't like that the edges of the map were unknown, and therefore capable of spawning horrors. So we mapped them. We despised that any country bumpkin could levy curses against people. So we banished superstition. We lamented the confining arenas of local markets. So we expanded trade. We pitied the sick and the crippled. So we advanced and standardized medicine, and crafted prosthetics. We chafed under the strictures of oppressive religions, so we provided philosophical alternatives, and means of sharing ideas more readily. And we loathed the presence and predation of monsters. So we put a gun in every hand, and a firm foundation of skepticism in every head, so that the common man could drive the monsters in the darkness away.

“And now look at the world, Mister Egbert.” Tallfield waved a hand, gesturing generally around. “The Technocracy has won the war for reality. The sick can be mended, the wilderness tended.
Humans have unprecedented economic mobility and a means of interacting with civil and social systems. You can speak to someone on the other side of the world as easily as you talk to me right now. Goods from anywhere can reach markets anywhere else, and you can travel to most anywhere on a plane, train, or automobile. All of these things are available to humanity in general, not just the Enlightened. And best of all, there are no monsters.”

“What about vampires?”

“...excuse me?” Tallfield said.

John frowned. “Vampires. They still exist, right? I know they do. Has the Consensus driven them to nonexistence?”

“...no,” Tallfield shook his head. “No, you are right. Hemovores still exist. And they will be dealt with in due time.”

“Why not now, though?” John tapped his finger on the table. “You say that you've won Reality. Why waste time fighting the Traditions, who largely just want to adhere to their practices in peace? Why did your...what's it called? The Program?”

“The Pogrom,” said Tallfield. “Admittedly, not the best use of the Union's resources...”

“Yeah, that! Why was your Pogrom targeting tribal mystics and martial artists, when you could be fighting the blood-sucking Draculas killing innocent people?”

Brandon Tallfield swallowed, tilting his head until his neck cricked. “You have to understand, John. The Union's resources are ultimately limited...”

“I told you not to call me John!” John said. He shuddered, shutting his eyes in effort. “And get the hell out of my head!”

“...sorry...” Tallfield said, nodding his head.

“And what do you mean you have limited resources? Your entire schtick is being corporate money makers. You Syndicate people control the economy!”

“Not...as much as...we would like...” Tallfield pressed an index finger to his lips, puffing out his cheeks. “Hoo...Mister Egbert, there is more to Resources than just money. If it were just money, we'd have won the Ascension War centuries ago. Other considerations get in the way. Create bottlenecks. For instance...the Union is always short on Enlightened personnel. As much as we'd rather it were otherwise, 'Awakenings' cannot be manufactured. They can be anticipated, cultivated, or found in the wild, but never ensured.”

He coughed, brushing hair back with his fingers. “Hence why the Union wishes you would consider joining. The Union has all but crushed the Traditionalists, but the work of consolidating control over the world...and ensuring the safety and security of Humanity...is ongoing. And really, the Traditions are old news. They are more annoyances than anything. There are bigger problems to face, and bigger improvements to man's lot to be made.”

“According to the Union's schedule and designs, right?” John said, scowling.

“Would you expect us to have it any other way?” Tallfield said. “We control the release of technology to the common man, because it must be controlled. Some potential inventions and technologies are simply too powerful and too dangerous to be released into the wild. Some of them must be introduced slowly. You've seen plenty of science fiction films where new technology
disrupts society or human life to a dangerous degree, have you not?"

“Yeah...yeah, I guess...” John looked thoughtfully down at the table. “...wait, I'm confused. Why
do you let science fiction become so popular? Isn't that sort of thing contrary to your intentions for
an orderly Consensus?"

“A calculated risk, I can assure you,” Tallfield said, grinning. “First, everyone knows that SF – and
Fantasy, for that matter – is fake. It would be impossible to be rid of them entirely –
counterproductive, even, since SF also promotes optimism and belief in Science. So we turn them
to our use, by packaging these elements as broad, uncomplicated escapism. It scratches the public's
itch, allowing them to go home satisfied and uninterested in actual mysticism.”

“That's...devilishly clever.” John's mouth twisted quizzically.

“Thank you. It's one of our better tactics,” Tallfield said, smiling broadly. “Secondly, however, we
support SF as a means of illustrating the dangers inherent in the technologies we work with.
Everything from Radiation to Cloning to Genetic Engineering to Artificial Intelligence to
Nanomachines, we've studied and developed for. A truly preposterous amount of money has gone
into researching and perfecting these technologies and resources. But as the ones who know them
so well, we also know that they can be hazardous. And we want Humanity at large to understand
this, too. So, long before the Science is ever released to the masses, we allow Science Fiction to
explore the possible implications of it. It gets the masses thinking about the problems that could
arise, before it becomes necessary for society to adapt to it, for corporations to monetize it, and for
lawmakers to legislate it.

“That we in the Syndicate get to generate vast wealth from the entertainment industry is merely a
bonus.”

John leaned forward, tapping his chin and thinking. “…you do all that?”

“Me? Sometimes. The Syndicate as a whole has the job – nay, the responsibility – to manage the
Union's finances, and make sure money goes towards where it's most productive.” Tallfield threw
his hands up. “Now, if you decide to join the Union, you don't need to join my team. There are four
other entire Conventions to consider, and dozens of Methodologies within them.”

“Hey,” John said, “I never said I was joining the Union.”

“Granted,” Tallfield said, bowing his head. “I'm just giving you my pitch. Is that so wrong?”

“...I guess not...”

“That's right. If you DID join the Union, there are so many possibilities. Join the Progenitors, and
you'll be on the bleeding edge of medical advancement, pharmaceuticals, and treatment. Curing
diseases, creating better drugs with fewer defects, and guiding humanity towards its next stage of
evolution, perhaps. Join Iteration X, and industrial engineering will be your bag. Micro-processing,
cybernetics, statistics, even just making better industrial materials. Our best It X people are
studying everything from green energy and materials to hover craft and fully automated
EVERYTHING.

“The Void Engineers...okay, I have to admit...” Tallfield scratched his head, looking away. “...I
really have no idea what those space jockeys are doing out there in the Void. And it's my job as
keeper of the purse strings to know what it is I'm moving funding towards.” He leaned forward,
whispering, “Another perk of being in the Syndicate: you know about everything coming down the
docket, and get to decide where the priorities are.” He sat up, coughing. “But really, the Void
Engineers confound me. They've become progressively more...militaristic as of late. Not against Traditionalists, mind, but against...whatever it is they're fighting out in space, or under the oceans, or in other dimensions.”

“Ghosts?”

“Maybe...they'll never call them that, but...yes, essentially,” Tallfield said, tilting his head. “They probably have their own theories. Not that they share. They are so tight-lipped. They just stroll into our offices, demanding more funding, more weapons, more recruits...it's a never-ending list of wants. That's nothing new, of course...every single Convention has its own exorbitant demands for resources, and it's our job – the Syndicate's job – to rein them in, and push them to accomplish the same things with less. Again, our resources aren't limitless. We must adhere to a budget, and Conventions must be able to explain why their projects are so essential to the Union's operation, the Time Table, and Humanity's advancement/survival. The Syndicate keeps its mind on the practical matters.

“But the Void Engineers...they just ask for their allowance, and refuse to explain what they need it for. Or to let inspectors visit their off-world facilities. Or to account for why so many recruits – Enlightened or otherwise – disappear or return in body bags.” Tallfield rubbed his forehead. “...I shouldn't even be airing this out here. Sorry...”

“...uh...that's okay,” John said, shrugging. “Sounds rough.”

“You have no idea.” Tallfield breathed deep, sighing. “...where was I?”

“You were telling me about the other Conventions.”

“Right, right. The last, you're probably most familiar with. The New World Order isn't all Matrix, Agent Smith rejects.” The Syndicate rep tilted his head back and forth. “Well yes, we have those, but that's not all they do. They are the experts in the Soft Sciences. While the Syndicate learned a lot of the principles of hypereconomics from its roots in the Renaissance High Guild, it was from the NWO that we mastered the art of advertising. How to catch attention, and how to keep it. How to disseminate information, and how to control it. And they are masters of Sociology and Psychology. The NWO make for the best therapists. They keep the Union sane.”

“And brainwashed...” John said, frowning.

Tallfield huffed, frowning. He stared at John.

“...hey, you said it yourself,” John said, pointing at the Syndicate man. “The Technocracy brainwashes people. You confirmed it.”

“'Brainwash' is a loaded word, Mister Egbert,” Tallfield said. “We prefer the term 'Conditioning'. A series of psychological training programs and subliminal programming to ensure loyalty and prevent subversion. When you've got some cultist sacrificing innocent people in a tenement building, summoning demons, the last thing you need is an ally defecting at the last minute. Whether that's because their convictions to the Union's ideals and goals were too shaky to stand up to rhetoric, or because some superstitionist started probing their mind.

“And then there's secrecy...say what you want about the Consensus, it exists for a reason and it's a damn good one, Mister Egbert. It protects people with a velvety cushion of Disbelief...which is so fragile. Conditioning is needed to keep our agents, citizens, and scientists from breaking and compromising our secrets. Both to protect the Consensus and to guard agents in the field on delicate operations. You wouldn't want a police sting operation foiled and its undercover cops put
in danger, because someone's lips were too loose, would you?"

“No...no, I guess not.” John scratched his head. “It's just...it's still mind control. And you use it on people without their consent, and turn people into drones.”

“Yes, we do use it when the occasion warrants it,” Tallfield said, sighing. “But that's not as common as you'd think. Most of the time, when it comes to civilians, a little memory erasure is all that's required. And as I've said, those folks are better off not knowing about the supernatural.

“More to the point, there are degrees to Conditioning. Because, despite what you may have been led to believe, the Union doesn't want mindless drones. Drones have no initiative, personal enthusiasm, or creativity. And in an organization where outside-the-box thinking and drive are often essential to scientific breakthroughs or refinements, we are ill served by someone who might as well be a robot. Because at that point, I should just be signing the paperwork to fund and install a robot.

“A lighter touch is always preferable, Mister Egbert,” Tallfield continued. “It is the governing philosophy of the Syndicate – we believe that Competition is a good thing, within reason – and it's just good operation. Especially when it comes to Conditioning.”

“So you don't deny that I'd get run through mind control if I signed on to the Technocracy?” John said, crossing his arms.

“I can't deny you would get Conditioning,” Tallfield said, displaying his hands. “What I can promise is that those who volunteer to the Union are given the lightest of Conditioning. We reserve more...invasive procedures for those...ah...”

“Those who are captured, right?” John said, pointing at the man.

John couldn't believe he'd entertained this offer for so long. All that talk of the Conventions, of the potential advancements members made in Science...even Tallfield airing his misgivings about the Void Engineers. The young man began to think that every bit of it was a ruse. Distracting him from the Union's shady behavior.

“Well...” Tallfield said, rubbing his hands. “The Traditions and other, disparate superstitionist groups comprise a sizable collection of perfectly good Inspired individuals. And all going to waste, devoting time and energy towards backwards, outdated world views and activities. Instead of devoting themselves to Science, and the orderly operation of modern economies, and to the betterment of Mankind as a whole. Not just THEIR people, or to abstract, extradimensional beings who do not have humanity’s interests at heart. They need to get with the program, and start looking forward, rather than backward!

“Sometimes, that means they need to be taken and educated as to their true potential. Be glad we've moved away from the Pogrom, where those who didn't fit the Union's system were simply killed.” Tallfield clapped his hands together in front of him. “I hope, still, that you can understand where I'm coming from. That...”

John shivered. He realized the subtext of Tallfield's sentence, even as the Syndicate man let it drop. Understood the implication: he hoped John would get with the program, so more intense Conditioning wouldn't be necessary.

It was becoming increasingly obvious to John that, regardless of how he proceeded, the Union expected to have his loyalty in the end. Noncompliance was not, and probably never was, an option.
May 1991

“Welcome, Doctor Philips!” said the automated, synthesized voice. Ding! Swish!

The door to the laboratory slid open. Light poured in from outside, the silhouettes of several figures standing at the doorway.

Dirk nudged Doctor Philips in the back. “You first.”

“Okay, okay...” said the scientist, holding up his hands. He stepped forward, taking tentative steps into the darkness.

Dirk and Devdan followed shortly after, keeping one eye each on the unlit black expanse, and another each on the doctor.

Roxy and Swooping Gull kept back at the room’s entrance, guarding their flank. As the two Etherites strode inside, Swooping Gull whispered. “The wall between this place and the other side is too thick. My spirit companion will not be able to aid us here.”

Jake looked over his shoulder. He nodded. “That's quite alright, my friend. We'll handle things.”

Dirk scanned the darkness. His triangular shades cast a dull glow on his face. “Okay, enough of the stealth act. We're all fucking magic. We know you're there. Just turn the lights on already.”

From somewhere in the darkness, a person sighed. “So much for that.”

Overhead lights flickered on, bathing an expansive, sterile laboratory in florescent light. The ceiling extended ten feet high. Black lab tables lined the walls, topped with microscopes, centrifuges, test tubes, and many unidentifiable, yet well-maintained, scientific instruments. Doors leading off from the room stood every three meters. Some of them were standard swinging doors, while other were glass and slid sideways. Some of the glass doors were frosted, with numbers painted on the front.

Doctor Philips, realizing the jig was up, ran across the room and stood next to another scientist. While Philips was short, stocky, bespectacled, but young-ish, the second man was tall, thin, wrinkled, and topped with gray hair in a buzz cut. Clipped to his lab coat, an ID card read “Doctor Kovacs”.

Kovacs rolled his eyes. “Really, Philips, you brought them down here?”

“Tried to escape, Doctor Kovacs,” Philips said, breathing hard. “Tried to pose as a lab tech. These superstitionists can read minds.”

“Of course they can, Philips,” Kovacs said, rubbing his temple.

“Alright, doctors!” Jake said, stepping forward and hefting his elephant gun. “Where are they? Don't pretend you don't know to whom I refer!”

“Yeah, assholes!” Roxy shouted from the door, “Give them back!”

“Very well,” said Kovacs, shrugging his shoulders. His tone was dry, and his expression neutral. “You've slaughtered enough Union personnel getting here. Might as well have an impromptu
exhibition.” He snapped his fingers. “Philips, if you wouldn't mind. Time to show off to the toughest of judges.”

Doctor Philips, eying the Traditionalists warily, edged over to one of the frosted doors and flashed his ID over a panel next to it.

The door slid open, revealing a woman with blond hair shaved to the scalp in a few places, strapped to a chair. Where the hair was cleared away, electrodes were taped to the skin, wires running off to a box with a screen. More wires led away to a glass container next to the woman’s chair. Inside was a black cat, head encased in a bizarre, wired helmet, while its legs were tied like a hog. The poor animal was left to lay on its side.

The panel of instruments hummed, and the cat thrashed around in pain. “MMMROW!”

“AH!” the woman cried, shuddering. She seemed too weak to keep her head up. An IV ran from a suspended bag – colored milky orange – to her arm. Her fingers gripped the arms of the chair.

Trisha Nightingale of the Verbana and her cat Hemlock had seen better days.

“Land sakes!” Jake barked, his coke-bottle glasses sliding down his nose. “Trisha!”

“Sweet Shiva!” Devdan exclaimed. Behind him, Doctor Langley covered her mouth in horror. Scowling, Devdan pointed pistols are both men. “What abominations have you wrought here?”

“Don't ask me,” said Doctor Kovacs. “Philips?”

Doctor Philips trembled, but a smile crept to his face. He swallowed, clapping his hands once. “It’s an experiment. What else would it be?” He stepped over, pointing to the trapped woman and animal. “Long...have I wondered at you mystics and your...'Familiars'. Plainly, some psychic bond exists between the superstitious Inspired and those beasts they sometimes consort with. But of course, none of you seem to really know how that connection works. So, when the Union picked up the witch and her pet, I got them to postpone her trip to Room 101, in lieu of some time in the lab.”

Dirk gagged. “Ugh...sick fuck...”

“Holy shit!” Roxy cried from the doorway. At her side, Swooping Gull merely stared, stunned.

Lana Langley frowned. “This is horrible, Doctor Philips!”

“I concur!” Jake said, leveling the elephant gun at Doctor Philips. “Release them both. NOW.”

Doctor Philips backed up into the wall behind him, throwing up his hands.

“Oh come now, ladies and gentlemen...”

Doctor Kovacs tilted his head. “We can't be doing that...” From his lab coat pocket, he pulled out a small remote. “...not before I've had my turn to present.”

With a press of a button, glass doors all around the room slid open, one by one.
Conventions

September 2010

John stared into the Syndicate man's eyes.

He had to find some way out of this.

“...I'm sorry, Mister Tallfield,” John said. “This is just...a lot to take in, all at once.”

Brandon Tallfield opened his mouth, preparing to speak. “I...”

“Hello! Food's ready!”

The two mages flinched, the waitress walking up, arms laden with two trays of food. In one hand, a tray that steamed, giving off the scent of meat, vegetables, and cheese. John's pizza. In the other hand, a tray with a bowl, topped with crisp lettuce, slathered in creamy Caesar dressing and tiny crouton squares. Brandon Tallfield's salad.

John looked up at his food. The barest shell of a plan formed in his head. “Thank you, Miss,” John said. “Say, I'm suddenly very in a hurry. My dad is going to be worried if I stay out too long. Do you mind wrapping that to go, please?”

“Oh of course, dear! Uh...” The waitress tilted her head. She turned to the Syndicate man.

Tallfield looked gravely at John for a brief second. Then he turned to the woman, smiling. “That's not a problem. If John needs to go, I can't stop him.”

“Alright!” said the waitress, placing the older man's salad in front of him. “I'll just get you a box.”

“Uh, if you don't mind, I'll come with you,” John said, rising from his seat and grabbing his backpack. Sweat ran down his neck. His muscles tensed, wanting to move as soon as he could.

“No problem!” she said, indicating towards the front. “You come up here, and I'll pack this for you.”

“Yes, have a good day, John,” Tallfield said. As the boy moved to pass him, he gently grabbed John's shoulder.

John's heart skipped a beat. He sucked air quickly, looking down. The grip didn't hurt, but it felt firm nonetheless.

“And John...” Tallfield said, looking up into the young man's eyes.

John gulped nervously.

“...do think about what we've talked about here today,” the Syndicate rep said, flashing his predatory smile. “It is, after all, about your future. I do hope you'll make the right choice.”

Body shuddering, John nodded. He breathed, tension flowing out the moment the Technocrat released his shoulder.

He only dared look back towards the man's direction when he'd gotten out into the main part of the
restaurant, where plenty of people could see him. From John's vantage point, he spied the man dramatically forking lettuce leaves into his mouth. The man's eyes were set firmly on John.

“Here's your pizza, sir!” said the waitress, handing John the box. “I assume your uncle is handling the bill?”

“Yeah...yeah, he's good for it.” John cast one last nervous glance to the Technocrat, then bowed his head respectfully to the woman. “He's really good for it. Oh, and he wanted me to tell you to give everyone a round of drinks on him.” John managed a smile. “He's always doing that. You know, spreading the wealth around.”

“I'll be sure to do that, dear!” she said, smiling. She waved as John retreated from the pizza parlor.

When he hit the streets, John wiped his brow with the back of his wrist. He smiled slightly. At least he managed to prank the Syndicate man before he left.

As he walked down the street, eyes peeled in both directions for MiBs on his tail, John groaned. A pit formed in his stomach. That prank was probably going to come back to haunt him sooner rather than later.

John dashed ahead to the street corner. He was almost sure, now, he was being watched. He ducked around, carrying a pizza box with one arm and fishing through his pocket with another.

When he looked around, John spotted a figure in the corner of his eye, approaching from behind. He turned to it, fighting a wave of fuzziness. Breathe in, breathe out. Focus.

Through a cloud in his mind, John saw a tall, thin man in a suit slowly approach. The figure stopped when John turned to face him. The man was bald, gaunt, pale, and short on readily identifiable facial features. The large mirrored sunglasses didn't help.

John's heart raced. His fingers, probing around house keys and change, finally gripped what he searched for.

In a quick movement, John pulled the junior magician's smoke pellets from his pocket. The MiB flinched, hand straying close to his jacket, and what was likely a gun. But he seemed hesitant, and John used that chance to throw the pellets down. “Wah cha!” the young man said.

The pellets fell to the ground and promptly did all of nothing.

Both John and the agent stared at the pellets for solid seconds.

“...god dammit...” John said out loud, frowning. “Man, this is embarrassing. Stupid cheap piece of garbage...”

The MiB looked up at John, not displaying any readable emotion. His hand dropped from its position, poised towards the gun, though.

John's mouth quirked. Maybe if he just...

The young man stomped on the smoke pellets, causing them to rupture and release a billowing cloud of black smoke.

“Ha HA!” John cried, his body rapidly enveloped by smoke.

The agent took a step back, staring at the scene bewildered. He observed the smoke for precious
seconds, then walked forward. His hand was poised back towards his gun holster, but he displayed no loss of control or apprehension. Standing before the cloud, he swiped a hand through it, dissipating large swaths of the smoke.

The young man was gone.

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**May 1991**


Doctor Kovacs pressed another button on his remote, cutting off the siren. “That's enough of that. Come out, subjects!” He pressed the remote again.

From the recesses of the darkened rooms, figures shuffled out.

The men who left the rooms were tall and thin. They weren't skinny, but there was no evidence of overfeeding either. Only in that respect could they be considered healthy by conventional standards. Their skin was jaundiced, oozing with pustules or deep bruise-like expanses, and crusting with yellow scabs. A mustardy fluid flowed intermittently down their skin, staining their white medical pajamas a rancid yellow. The sleeves on their gowns were short, and many had taken to unbuttoning their shirts, exposing their grotesque chests.

They moved in jerky fashions, staring lazily out at anyone in the room with milky, watery, sunken eyes.

Langley recoiled in horror, clapping her hands over her mouth. “Jesus Christ!” she cried, looking frantically at the dozen or so wretches that filed from the doorways. “Doctor Kovacs! What have you been doing to these poor people?! This is monstrous!”

“Well first,” said Doctor Kovacs, waving his “subjects” into the room lazily, “unlike Doctor Philips here, I don't need to rely on rare case studies or captured test subjects. These are all clones – clones of me, in fact – all the better to control variables. I admit, they don't look terribly well, but that's what first experiments are for. What I learn from this batch will help me improve the next. They are treated as well as possible, without compromising the validity of the test, and their sacrifice serves a higher purpose.”

“Clones or not, they're human!” Langley cried, pointing at the wretches. “What is wrong with you people? I mean seriously, was I the only Progenitor in our entire Convention who took the Hippocratic Oath seriously?!”

In front of her, the Punjabi cowboy clenched his teeth. “Shiva...forgive me...” he whispered in his mother tongue. He pointed a pistol at one of the “test subjects”.

“Whoa, dude!” Dirk said, looking sidelong at Devdan. “What are you-?”

“These ones are in pain!” Devdan said, pushing down his hat to hide his eyes. “They must be put down. May they find less suffering in the next life.”

“Ah!” Langley cried, tears rolling down her face.

Doctor Kovacs...seemed strangely unfazed by this suggestion. If anything, he leaned forward eagerly.

“Goodnight, poor things,” Devdan said. He fired at one of the figures, aimed directly at its face.
A splatter of yellow fluid shot out the back of the wretch's head, a hole punched between the eyes. It staggered back, wobbly. Its head swayed back and forth.

However, it did not fall.

Jake gaped. “...zombies?!?”

“Hey!” Kovacs yelled, scowling. “Don't you dare sully my science by comparing them to the undead!” He breathed deeply, smiling. “As you can see, however, my work has paid dividends. Care to guess what I've accomplished?”

Langley shook all over, gripping her mouth. “…decentralized vital organs. You've modified these people towards modular, redundant organ structures.”

“Exactly! Even a traitor to our Convention, Doctor Langley here understands the principle!” Kovacs beamed, pointing at Langley. “The human body fails because of its dependence on single, fragile parts. Redundancy and modularity, on an anatomical level! Modular circulation. Modular lymphatics. Modular nervous system. Shoot them as much as you want, their back-up organ clusters will keep them running!”

“Can these...can these subjects even think?” Langley said, scowling.

“A shortcoming in the current batch, yes...” Kovacs said, throwing up his arms and shaking his head. “True sapience is beyond them, at present. But they don't need to be intelligent; they are merely a proof of concept. I'll hammer out the matter of intelligence in later iterations. For now, though...”

He grinned wickedly, raising a hand to the air. “…they are bright enough to train. Bright enough to follow orders. Subjects!” He gestured violently towards the group of Traditionalists. “Eliminate the intruders.”

The Modular Men (yes, that is what Jake English would call them for years to come) jerked to attention all at once, then began to advance. Despite their ungainly movements, they approached at a quick pace.

To the mounting horror of the traditionalists, they were surrounded by them.

“Oh fuck this.” Dirk gripped his katana with both hands and ran in front of Devdan. His blade swung once...twice...three times in rapid succession.

Off popped the Modular Man's head and right arm, followed by his left arm, and then by both legs. It fell to pieces on the floor, severed limbs and stumps spewing yellow fluid everywhere.

Dirk whipped his katana to the side, a shower of yellow flying from his blade. “Fine,” he said, “if they won't die, I'll just break them.” He glanced down at his shirt, seeing the yellow splatters added to the red. “Ugh...I'm gonna have to burn this shit, aren't I?”

“Shoot to disable!” Jake said, blocking a charging Modular Man with his elephant gun. Pushing it away with a grunt, Jake pointed and fired low. The creature's knee disintegrated, sending it toppling over.

“Ah!” Roxy cried, ducking against the doorframe, as Swooping Gull did the same. A hail of gunfire flew from the doorway. “Guys! We got company out there!”
“There's company in here!” Devdan shouted over his shoulder. Suddenly, he dove to the ground as one of the normal, unopened steel doors crashed in. A beam of red plasma flew over his head.

The cowboy scrambled towards the wall, firing at the door. From his vantage point, he saw the silhouette of a man, face lit red by the charge of an arm-cannon. Devdan jumped as another blast struck the floor by his feet. Diving under a work table, he pushed with his foot, flipping it on its side and pushing it into the room. Scientific instruments crashed to the floor.

“Cyborg!” Devdan yelled, popping up and firing at the doorway. His target ducked into the passage. “Take cover!”

Lana Langley ran for the overturned table, pushing away a grabby Modular Man as she went. Her lab coat billowed in the wind. She ducked behind the cowboy's meager cover, clapping hands over her ears as Devdan laid more suppressing fire. Reacting to movement in the corner of his eye, Devdan bashed a Modular Man in the face with his elbow.

Working by Devdan's example, Jake charged his way through a smattering of mutants, grabbing a work table near the door they came in. “Roxy, cover me!” he shouted, upending the table.

Roxy charged her plasma rifle and cut through a Modular Man with a bolt of blue. It fell over, but she frowned as it started to rise again. “Shit, shit, shit!” she yelled, striking another approaching mutant with the butt of her gun.

Nearby, Swooping Gull minded the exit, chanting and shaking his turtle-shell rattle. Locking eyes on one of the Modular Men, he barked a command in his native tongue.

The mutant shuddered, then bolted through the door.

“What the fuck is- AAAH!” came a cry from outside, along with more gunfire.

“Get it off me! Get it off me!”

“Ow! OW! What the fuck is hitting me? I don't see it!”

Swooping Gull smiled. “Thank you, my friend,” he muttered under his breath.

In the middle of the room, Dirk slashed at aggressors on all sides. “Godammit, Richter, where are you?” he grunted, cleaving a Modular Man in half. “It's goddamn bedlam down here! Ah!”

One of the mutants charged, tackling Dirk and wrapping its oozing arms around the young man's waist.

“Dirk!” Roxy cried, looking up from her spot of cover with Jake. She blasted one last Modular Man in the face, then jumped over the table. She bolted across the room, making for her nephew.


A Modular Man went flying as a beam of azure plasma sheared through its torso.

“Rrrragh!” Roxy growled, squeezing the trigger again. To her alarm, however, the gun began to spark. “What?” he cried, feeling the mechanisms in the weapon jam up in her hands. She clicked the trigger over and over, but nothing happened. “Oh man!”

She frowned. That rifle had been given to her by Doctor Langley. The Doc had worked on it for
months, to get everything right. And now the machine was busted.

Must have been all that Paradox. Turns out shooting a bright blue plasma beam weapon over and over, in the middle of broad daylight, was just a but Vulgar. And 'Dox decided to take the fine out on the tool.

“Shit!” Roxy said, looking down at the Modular Man pile. Scowling, she grabbed the rifle by the barrel and swung it like a bat into the closest yellow bastard. “Get off! Get off!”

“Roxy!” Langley yelled over the table. “You'll only...hang on!” She pulled a pair of scalpels from her belt and jammed them both into a Modular Man that approached her. One went in the thigh, another in the shoulder. The creature shuddered, locking up. The ex-Progenitor examined the paralyzed mutant, then gently pushed it over. “You'll only break the gun further if you keep bludgeoning things with it! I can't fix it if it's totally destroyed!”

“Oh! Right...” Roxy frowned, setting the rifle on the floor. Instead, she closed a fist and punched a Modular Man in the head, knocking it over. Pulling back a leg, she roundhouse kicked another mutant in the chest, sending it flying.

Dirk sliced a mutant's hands off, climbing to his feet. He adjusted his glasses, noting with minor irritation that the lenses were splattered with yellow droplets. “Fucking...Richter, get down here! I know you can hear me, you magical asshole!”

“Richter! Save us!” Roxy cried, punching a mutant twice in the face, sending it flying.

Suddenly, the ceiling exploded.

All eyes shot up, and concrete, steel, plaster, and tile rained down on the room.

The mutants all froze, looking up as a man in a finely-tailored robe descended from the smoking hole. His body fell slowly, air blowing out from his feet, his robe billowing when he touched down. His head rose proudly, displaying his high cheekbones and well-tended brown beard. His arms stretched out on both sides of himself, his right hand gripping a half-meter long wand of cedar. His other hand was locked in an enigmatic sign.

The backs of both hands bled, branded with arcane symbols. Yet his hands trembled not. From his nostrils flared a cloud of gray smoke. Yet, his throat coughed not. His eyes played over the room, focused like a laser, blue in hue, and deep like the oceans.

“Richter!” Roxy cried, smiling. Her cheeks flushed a soft red. She almost forgot the Modular Man gripped in one hand, with her fist raised for a punch.

Richter Whitewood, bani Bonisagus, smirked jovially. He raised his free hand and gestured mysteriously with his fingers. “You called?”

The wizard snapped his fingers. A wave of force exploded out, striking the group of mutants around him and sending them flying.

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**September 2010**

“Whaaaat?”

Rose Lalonde's jaw dropped. “With one snap?”
“Yeah, girl!” Roxy said, grinning like an imbecile. “I mean, I'm pretty sure there was some wizard gesturing going on. But yeah, one snap!” She snapped her fingers. “Richter always said that a true wizard's tools are his Will alone. Everything else is as a means of, like, honing that Will to a razor's edge.”

Her daughter gaped.

A wizard whose Will alone moved the world. This revelation floored Rose. And to use the Art so casually...to bend Reality so easily. It took all of the girl's concentration to light a candle, and this Richter Whitewood – her father(!) - performed crowd control to show off.

Rose's mind grasped for words to describe it. She tried to resist the urge to just call it Cool.

She failed to resist the urge. “...that...that is...so Cool!” Rose said, blushing at her idiocy, yet also balling her fists in awe.

“I know, right!?” Roxy said, waving her hands in the air. “So there we were, surrounded by mutants and shit. Richter raised his wand and started electrocuting fools left and right, and I was there doing my martial arts...because awesome! Then...”

The Man in Black waved a hand through the smoke. The boy had disappeared.

In a second, this development was relayed telepathically to the other MiBs in his team. Data was exchanged in rapid-fire velocity.

The others were correct, of course. The MiB gave a silent mental impulse, and the implant in his brain went to work. His senses were fine-tuned. Visual information his eyes couldn't normally make sense of came into focus.

He looked around, seeing the world in infra-red. Heat clusters stood out.

In the corner of his eye, he spotted the shape of a warm, short body sneaking away. The figure carried a slab of a heat signature in his arms. A mundane sight check told the MiB what he – and his team – needed to know.

The boy was attempting escape while invisible. Clever. Ineffective, but clever. Reality Deviants often were too clever for their own good.

Thoughts flew back and forth, a mental dialogue running between the disparate bodies. In a fraction of a second, the group reached consensus.

The MiB continued looking up and down the street, making an elaborate show of having lost the boy. All the while, he kept the boy in sight, though out of focus. The mirror shades helped obfuscate his eyes.

Truthfully, it would be easy to grab the child, subdue him with tranquilizers, and evacuate the entire operation. It would be easy to claim the prize, and walk away. Another Inspired individual to shore up the Union's never-adequate ranks.

Even the lone MiB could do it. Taking a circuitous route through the hedge rows and back alleys, the MiB could catch the boy unawares and have him in an instant.

But this was not the Plan.
Agent Brandon Tallfield was in charge of Plan. And as much as the MiB harbored a desire to take a more direct – though no less subtle – approach to apprehend the boy, the Plan was The Plan. There was no going against the immediate superior. If the Plan called for convincing the boy to join the Technocratic Union of his own will, that was what the team would work towards.

This didn't mean the MiB had to like it.

He pressed two fingers to his ear. “Agent Tallfield,” he said in a sub-vocal volume. The implants in his throat would pick the words out just fine. “Primary Target escaping.”

“That is the plan, yes,” said the Syndicate rep on the other end of the line.

“Target discovered my presence shortly after leaving restaurant,” the MiB continued, “and employed a cloaking technique in an attempt to disappear. He used a...” The MiB stooped down, picking up a still-smoking pair of crushed plastic tablets. “…pair of stage smoke pellets to mask his Adjustment.”

“That's...surprising...” said Tallfield. The MiB could hear the man chew something. “Welf...gulp...we'll keep that in mind for later. I presume you weren't fooled?”

“Negative,” said the MiB, watching the boy dash down a side street from the corner of his eye. “For the viability of Mission Parameters, I've allowed Primary Target to retreat. The rest of the team and I can pursue through...indirect means. We are confident we can remain unseen.”

“Do so,” said the Syndicate rep. “Pursue, but do not engage. Either he's running home – in which case we know where he'll be – or he's looking for another hiding place. In the latter event, we can track him, or inform local law enforcement of the Child Runaway. If we're lucky, we might be able to convince his father to let us investigate his room for clues.” The man laughed on the other end of the line.

The MiB's teammates were already moving. The one who stood in the street remained, to keep contact with their superior.

They still wanted answers. “Why did you remove your ear piece, Mr. Tallfield?” he said.

“An attempt to get the boy on my side,” said the Syndicate rep. “If he believes I can be forthright with him – even against the Union's policy – it would be easier to reel him in.”

“We could still hear your conversation...Sir.”

“I know. You have permission to speak freely. I can guess you are all upset.”

“Knowledge concerning the Craftmasons is above your clearance.”

“And you knowing it's above my clearance means you, too, are in possession of knowledge above your clearance. And I'm of higher rank than you, Men In Black.” The Syndicate rep paused deliberately. The MiB heard him sip tea from a straw. “So let's cut the bullshit. Is this going to be a problem?”

“...you revealed sensitive information to a civilian, outside the bounds of the Union,” the MiB said. “In public.”

“I had Procedures in place to drive spies off,” the Syndicate man said. “Moreover, if the boy's sympathies still lie with the superstitionists, I told him nothing they don't already know. Lastly, when we nab the boy, I trust the New World Order can safely scrub any sensitive ideas from his
head. Am I wrong?"

"...no sir."

"Excellent. Keep me posted. And...if it makes you feel better...I'll have your pizzas ready for when
you get back. Be seeing you."

"Affirmative." The MiB sighed. He took off running towards the back alleys, careful to keep eyes
peeled for the boy.

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**May 1991**

"There...I think that's the last of them..."

Roxy wiped her sweaty brow with her shirt sleeve. A twitching, writhing, jaundiced mass lay at her
feet. She gave it a generous kick, then sighed.

She looked over her shoulder. In the distance, she spotted Dirk carving up a number of Modular
Men that lay prone on the ground, ensuring they wouldn't rise again. Devdan held a knife, and was
busy stabbing the bodies in select locations. Their struggles ceased under his blade. With each
execution, he removed his cowboy hat and uttered a somber, forlorn prayer to Shiva.

In a corner, Jake held a pistol to Doctor Philips's head, overseeing the slow release of Trisha and
her cat. The doctor sported a rather nasty shiner. Swooping Gull stood nearby, watching. It always
creeped Roxy out when he would just stand there. And watch.

Richter leaned against the wall, clutching his face and shaking his head. "Guuugh..." he groaned.

"Richter...are you alright?" Roxy said, walking over. She placed a hand on his shoulder.

The hermetic turned to look at her. He hissed under his breath, dabbing a handkerchief at the
bloody brands that formed on his cheeks. "Ah, Roxy...I'm alright." His words billowed out with a
prominent gray smoke, which he casually waved away.

"Jesus! You don't look alright!" Roxy held her hand out, but hesitated. She didn't know whether
she ought to be touching his face, wounds or no. "Dox got you pretty bad, huh?"

"I've had worse," Richter said, giving a pained smile. "Ugh..." he groaned, his facial muscles	wringing.

The teenager frowned.

Richter smiled softly, taking Roxy's hand in his. "Thank you for your concern. It is...appreciated."

Roxy blushed profusely. "Oh...oh man..." she babbled, blinking heavily. "I-I..."

The man patted her hand affectionately. "Perhaps...you ought to attend to Doctor Langley,
however..."

Roxy looked over her shoulder. She saw Lana Langley bolt towards an adjacent door, hopping over
the smoking, bullet-riddled body of an Iteration X cyborg. Tears ran down her face, but her mouth
was fixed in a scowl.
Resonance

May 1991

Doctor Kovacs rushed around his office.

The “office” was, in fact, a large room several meters down the hall from the main lab area. It contained a half-dozen glass tubes, standing from floor to ceiling, and filled with unidentifiable fluids. Suspended in the tubes were almost fully grown, naked, adolescent males. They shared the faces of the wretches dying in the other room. They also shared a face with Doctor Kovacs, though naturally considerably younger.

The old man muttered coarse invectives under his breath, hands pawing over the desk and filing cabinets that had been moved into the room, nestled between tubes. Kovacs had a briefcase, and he messily stuffed folders and stacks of paper into it.

“Doctor Kovacs.”

The Progenitor froze. Slowly, he turned around, snapping his briefcase shut.

Doctor Langley stood in the doorway. A gun-shaped device was wielded in her hand.

“Oh come on, Doctor Langley,” Kovacs said, taking the suitcase by the handle. “You should know by now that medical advancement entails a certain amount of sacrifice. Look around. I'm already growing the next batch of clones, using everything I learned from the last. Think of...”

“Okay, shut the fuck up, Doctor,” Langley said, scowling. “Putting aside the abominations you turned those poor people into. Putting aside even that you used them as cannon fodder...you also sat back and watched one of your colleagues pursue unethical experiments on a woman and her soul-bonded companion. You don't get to play suffering man of science.” She pointed the gun at the man. “You're just another Frankenstinian.”

Doctor Kovacs slid his free hand over his desk. The fingers shuffled a tall stack of papers. “And you, Doctor Langley...are just another Reality Deviant!” His hand knocked the papers away, exposing a pistol beneath. He grabbed it, making to pull it on the woman.

Langley's thumb manipulated a knob on the device she carried. Her finger pulled the trigger. She aimed right over the man's head.

Kovacs saw the device spraying light, shooting over him. Unable to help himself, he looked up.

Langley's Appearifier summoned a cinder block over Doctor Kovacs's head. His eyes went wide as gravity caught the block and dropped it right on his head.

He fell to the floor with a thud, the block landing loudly nearby. His head turned over, a bloody bruise forming on his brow and coloring his face with a trail of scarlet.

Langley sighed, lowering her Appearifier. Slowly, she walked over, kicking the fallen pistol away. She replaced her Appearifier to her belt, and removed the dart gun. She fired a paralyzing agent into the man's chest – just to be safe. Frowning, she fished through her pockets and pulled out a home-made medical patch. She slapped it on Kovacs's face, letting the drugs absorb into his skin and handle what it could.
Taking the suitcase from the floor, she found a metal waste bin and dumped the papers inside unceremoniously. She lit some sheets with a lighter, setting the notes ablaze. She assumed the sprinkler system would come on soon to douse the fire, but she didn't care. It was the principle of the matter.

Sighing, Lana ran a hand over the glass tubes. She felt a sensation of slime, though the surface was factually smooth and clean. It was the feeling she got listening to Doctor Kovacs. One part of her wanted to flush the clones – to dispense with the oozing product of his madness – while the stronger part abhorred the very thought.

Though she just gave Kovacs a concussion in all likelihood, and previously spent minutes disabling his creations (thereby allowing Devdan and Dirk to euthanize them), Langley was ever cognizant of her Oath. First, Do No Harm. She didn't always succeed – least of all in her Awakened life – but she tried all the same.

“Doc!”

Langley looked to the door. Roxy stood at the threshold, lips pouting. “You okay?”

The woman sighed. “Not as much as I'd like to be, Roxy,” she said, shrugging. “But I'll manage.”

“Hey girls!”

Dirk called from down the hallway. Behind him, Devdan carried the Verbana witch on his shoulders, while Swooping Gull held her cat in his arms. The Dreamspeaker cooed softly to the feline, whispering in some unearthly tongue.

The teenage boy smirked. “We got Trish and her cat. Jake's getting the portable Transportalizer ready. We're bouncing!”

Langley nodded. “Coming!” she shouted, walking towards the door.

Roxy smiled, turning and walking side-by-side with her mentor.

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**September 2010**

“What happened after that?”

Roxy Lalonde sighed, coming down from the excitement. Her fingers were shaking from the adrenaline.

She frowned. “...”

Rose Lalonde hesitated. “I'm sorry,” she said. “If you don't want to talk about it...”

“No, that's not it at all,” Roxy said. “I...I've wanted to talk about this...fuck, for years. It's relieving, you know?” She shook her head. “It's just...it also hurts. Give me a minute.”

Rose nodded, jotting down in her notebook. After a moment, her pen paused. “Mom...what was the name of the other teenager in your group?”

Roxy froze. “...uh...”

“The one with the katana,” Rose continued. “You sort of danced around that person's name. You
talked about men like Devdan and his inexplicable fascination with American cowboy culture, or Swooping Gull and his spirit allies. But this guy with the sword…”

“Oh, he was just...a guy, Rose!” Roxy said, waving her hand dismissively. “Not worth talking about!”

In reality it was Dirk Strider, Roxy’s nephew, and one of the few remaining family members she had. The relative who first introduced her to the Traditions and, through them, Jake “English” Harley, Doctor Lana Langley, and, finally, Richter Whitewood bani Bonisagus. If not for Dirk, Roxy's daughter never would have been born.

A nervous shiver went up Roxy's spine. She still didn't feel comfortable, revealing the connection between Rose’s cousins and Magick. Why?

No, Roxy knew. If she told Rose about that part of their lives, it would open Rose up to the Traditions. And if that happened...Roxy feared it would lead to the girl getting involved in the war...

“Nnngh!” Roxy groaned, clutching her head.

“Are you alright?” Rose asked, eyebrows furrowing in concern. “We don't need to talk about any of this if you don't feel up to it.”

“No.” Roxy sighed, rubbing her face into her hands. “No, I want...fuck, I need to talk about it.”

She breathed deep. “It wasn't more than two years after that...that the cabal started getting picked off. Devdan was first. One of his pals in the Euthanatoi got...sort of hyped up on bad juju...”

“Bad juju?” Rose asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“When you deal a lot with death magic,” Roxy said, “like the Chakravanti do, it leaves an echo of what you did inside you. Or something, I could never understand what it meant when Devdan tried to explain it. 'Jhor' he called it...bad juju...as tenders of the Wheel or whatever, they have to deal a lot with death. Talking to ghosts, working against...or with...disease...even sending people on to their next reincarnation, if they think it's necessary. Either cause someone is too sick or hurt to recover...or because they're too dangerous and wicked to reform. Sometimes, dead is better, you know?”

Rose frowned, but nodded her head. “I guess so.”

“Too much of that, though, begins to warp your mind,” Roxy said. “The Euthanatoi need to spend a lot of time guarding themselves against Jhor. Refreshing their minds, purifying their souls...cause if they don't, they lose touch with the Life part of Life and Death. They lose empathy, become morbid as hell...they turn into sociopaths, Rose. It can happen to any Mage, but they are most vulnerable to it, because they work with Death all the time.” Roxy shrugged. “The Euthanatoi have to look after one another. Sometimes, they have to put one of their own down. That's what Devdan had to do. One of his friends went kill-crazy, and had to be shunted off to the next life.

“But the dude didn’t go down easy,” Roxy said, shaking her head. “Devdan went off alone to do the deed – said it was his job to do the dirty deeds, so the rest of us could stay clean – but it meant he got himself injured.” She sighed. “Worse, their fight drew the attention of the Technocracy. They were happy to finish Devdan off...or so I heard. Di-...one of our pals was looking out for him, from afar, but couldn't save him.”

Rose swallowed. “...I'm sorry...”
“It was stupid, Rose,” Roxy said, shutting her eyes. “It wasn't fair, having the Technos butt in at the worst possible time. The...uh, friend who was watching over Devdan took it hardest of all. Kept saying he should have been there to stop it.” She shook her head. “None of the rest of us took it well, either. Your dad, especially, I think took it hard...”

“He did?”

“Richter was good at controlling his emotions,” Roxy said, nodding. “He didn't act all broken up or weepy...you need to be strong to be a Hermetic, I think. But...that didn't mean he didn't show signs. The two weren't close, your dad and Devdan. Richter would often call him a loose cannon or a poser, because of his gunslinging. But he respected the guy when it came time for like...big magic. He had control when it was needed, and Richter could see the...I guess artistry in that? I don't know, Rose. Point is, Richter never said a bad thing about the guy, after he passed.

“Year or two after that, Doctor Langley got caught up in a disease breakout, in a small town in west Africa. She couldn't stand by and watch so many folks suffer.” Roxy rubbed an eye, blinking away the slight glisten of new tears. “When she called me, she said she figured out that the disease might have been released from a Technocrat research lab nearby. Don't know if it was accidental outbreak, or the Union releasing it to see what happened. Langley said she had to go in and investigate, and that there wasn't time to call in backup before the Technocrats covered everything up...

“I never heard from Doctor Langley again...”

The woman covered her eyes, fighting back a sob.

Rose got up, carrying her chair over. She parked herself beside her mother. “There, there...” Rose said, patting Roxy's shoulder. She leaned over the table and pulled a box of tissues over. “Here.”

“Thanks...” Roxy said, taking a tissue. Blowing her nose, the woman continued, “...Jake...Mister Harley, that is, he brought her body back a few days later. He was devastated, of course. She was my mentor, but she was his student, after she left the Union. Now Jake, he wasn't one to sit around and grieve quietly...or even sit around crying. He picked up his elephant gun and his hat, and went adventuring. It was the only way he knew how to deal with feelings, you know? Sometime after, he retired to his island...”

Rose's eyes shot up. “Wait! THAT Harley?”

“What? Did you think it was an accident that Dave introduced you to Jade?” Roxy said, smiling slightly behind the tissue dabbing her eye.

The girl's face flushed crimson. “Ugh!” she said, burying her face in her hands. “I'm such an idiot!”

“It's okay, baby,” Roxy said, taking her turn to pat the girl on the shoulder. The woman frowned. “But yeah, Jake adventured his sorrows away, and I just cried, and settled her old affairs. Langley had plenty of money, actually. I mean, I wasn't exactly poor to begin with, but then the Doc gave me all this extra in her will. Not sure why the Syndicate didn't jump all over it, but whatever. Maybe they didn't care anymore. The lab out back was hers.

“Heh...by then, Richter and I were an item,” Roxy said, smiling. “Even before she passed, she had this house built for us. I mean, I was ready to shack up with Richter in his London apartment, but Langley...Lana insisted. She figured we were gonna get married soon, so she wanted us to be set up. Plus, it helped obfuscate the lab better. Why would anyone be driving out to the middle of nowhere forests, otherwise? Suspicious.”
Rose smiled, stifling a laugh.

Roxy sighed, frowning again. “...but Richter...man...everyone else was sad. But when Langley passed...Richter got pissed. Maybe it was because she was my mentor, and he hated to see me sad. Or maybe he was just...tired of seeing his friends die one by one. He got angry...vengeful...”

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June 1995

“Richter! Where are you going?”

Richter Whitewood stomped down the halls of the two's post-modern home. From a window nearby, lightning flashed. Roxy trailed five steps behind him, wearing a night gown.

He spoke over his shoulder. “They can't get away with it, Roxy,” Richter growled. “I won't allow it!”

“Richter...stop!”

The man did not stop. The air crackled around him with an awful static. Richter Whitewood bani Bonisagus resonated with a storm. As if the thunder outside were a reaction to him. “They've gone too far this time. The Ascension War isn't just a matter of principle for me, Roxy. It's personal.”

“You're going to die out there, if you try fighting the Union head on!” Roxy cried, reaching out in vain for the man.

“I won't allow another ally...” He shook his head, gritting his teeth. “...another friend get destroyed by those monsters!”

“Richter!” Roxy said, pausing to lean on a banister. She panted, sweating. Her heart beat hard and fast. He stomach knotted up inside.

The man descended the steps to the first floor. The front door was in sight, right across the foyer.

“Richter! I'm pregnant!”

He halted in place, frozen. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

Richter turned to her. “...what?”

Roxy swallowed, then descended the stairs. By the time she'd reached the bottom, her man met her, taking her into his arms. “Richter...I. Am. Pregnant.” She looked him in the eyes, staring fiercely.

The man's mouth gaped. He looked down to her belly. Taking a hand, he slid his fingers over her stomach. He muttered a string of incantations under his breath as he went, shutting his eyes.

He opened them sharply, then hugged the woman close. “Roxy!”

Roxy hugged him back. “It's your baby, Richter,” she said into the taller man's shoulder. “That means you don't get to go on any suicide missions. You have to be here, where you can protect our child. You hear me?”

“Oh...oh Roxy...” Richter said, burying his face in her ivory hair. He patted her back.
He frowned, gripping the woman's shoulders and pulling her off.

“Richter? What are you doing?” Roxy said, face contorted in confusion and fear.

“This...this news you've given me...it fills me with more joy than you can possibly imagine,” Richter said, forcing a smile on his face. He frowned. “But my mind is made up. My conviction is honed like iron. I cannot deviate from the path now.”

“...yes, you can!” Roxy said, grabbing the front of his robes. “Richter, you are smarter than this! Don't leave me...don't leave us alone while you get yourself killed for revenge!” Tears formed under her eyes. “I've lost too much already...don't die on me now...”

Richter swallowed. “Well...” The man brushed a tear from the woman's eye with one of his large, strong thumbs. He leaned in and kissed Roxy.

The woman shut her eyes, kissing back. Savored the taste.

He pulled away. “Then I'll just have to make sure I don't die.”

Tears flowed down Roxy's face. She slumped, leaning into his arms. “P-promise me?” she choked out.

“On my honor as a Magus of the Order of Hermes,” Richter said, hugging her one last time, “I promise not to die.”

He patted her on the shoulder, then turned away with a flourish. Marching to the door, he opened it. His robe billowed as wind and rain poured in.

Roxy clutched her shoulders, watching the father of her child cast her one last glance, before disappearing out the door.

She sank to the ground, sobbing.

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September 2010

“And then they took him, Rose. The Technocracy...the Ascension War...they took Richter from me. They took everyone else, and then they took him.”

Roxy sniffed, wiping fresh tears from her eyes. “Fuck...I thought I'd be over crying about it by now, you know...it's been fourteen years already...”

Patting her mother's shoulder, Rose said, “So that's why you have to keep everything secret. The library, the War...dad...” She frowned, looking away. “...sorry, mom.”

“Oh...what are you apologizing for?” Roxy said, squeezing Rose's hand. “You weren't even born when all this stuff went down.”

“But I dredged all of this up again,” Rose said. “I went into a library I wasn't supposed to, and chased after secrets you wanted buried. Now you're reliving the grief, and it's my fault.” She hid her face in her palm. “All because I wanted to read some books and...perform dumb magic tricks.”

“Rose, no,” Roxy said, taking her daughter's hands in hers. “You are a bright, shining star, Rose. I am so proud of you. Every day, you find new ways to impress me. Why just today, you performed real life magic, right in front of my eyes! I don't care if it's hedge sorcery or whatever.” She looked
deep in her daughter's eyes. “You DID that, Rose. You accomplished that feat, and with your own Will. Richter...I know your daddy would be proud of you. I certainly am.”

The girl blinked. “So...you aren't going to tell me never to touch these books again? I thought...I thought you were soured on magic.”

“Baby, I hate that the Ascension War took everything from me,” Roxy said, smiling. “A bunch of dumb fools getting all up in each others' business, on account of who gets to dictate what people think. Or worse, sniping each other, on account of pride and revenge. I spent all this time hiding the books away because I was afraid you'd get involved in all that.

“But I don't want you to give up magic, Rose. It's yours and yours alone. No one should have the right to take that away from you.”

The woman coughed. “That said...I also want you to stop neglecting your school work.”

Rose blushed. “...yeah...I'm sorry, mom. I got...distracted...”

“That's okay, Rose,” Roxy said, nodding. “We all make mistakes. We especially make them when we're really passionate about stuff. From now on, though, I need to know that you can balance your mystical side with the practical matters. You're too young to be cloistering yourself away from the world.”

The girl nodded. “Okay. I can do that.” She went silent a moment. Finally she said, “Hey mom...”

“Yeah?”

“If dad was a member of the Order of Hermes...does that mean you know people from there, too?”

Roxy blinked, frowning. This was the part she dreaded. “...maybe...”

Rose smiled wide, beaming. She said nothing, letting her face say what she wanted to ask.

“Heh...heh...oh man...” the woman laughed nervously. “Uh...” Roxy looked away.

The girl leaned in close, her nose nearly touching her mother's.

Roxy could feel her daughter's excited breath on her face. “…alright, alright!” she said, gently pushing the girl out from her personal space. “I'll make some calls. Introduce you to a few of Richter's old friends. What the hell, you've already got some high sorcery down. And you're so young. They'd have to be idiots to pass you by!”

Rose sat back, grinning. She stifled a giggle with her hand.

“But!” Roxy said, raising a finger. “My feelings still stand. Rose...” She leaned over to the girl. “I need you to promise me. That you won't get involved in the Ascension War. That means no fighting Technocrats! Understand?”

Rose nodded. “That was never part of the plan, anyway,” Rose said. Suddenly, she fell silent again. She cupped her chin with her hand. “Hmm...”

The woman blinked. “Uh...Rose?”

“I have one last condition.”

“What?!” Roxy said, sitting up. “But I already agreed to introduce you to the Order of Hermes!”
“And I agreed to keep up with my school work,” retorted Rose with a smile. She held up three fingers. “That means I've agreed to two concessions, while you've only agreed to one. We're not even yet.”

Roxy frowned. Damn. When did her daughter become such a shrewd negotiator?

“Mom...this isn't just for me, you know,” Rose said, mouth a hard, grave line. “I'm thinking about you, too.

“I want you to stop drinking.”

July 1996

“...Paul...”

Paul Egbert inched his chair closer, leaning towards the hospital bed. “I'm here, honey.”

“...where is...John...?”

“He's at home. Mother is taking care of him,” said the man, softly. “Sorry I couldn't bring him today...”

“Shh...”

The woman raised her hand weakly, papping the man's face. “Shh...shh...it's alright...you can bring him...next time...”

Paul nodded, taking her hand. “Anything, dear.”

Sarah Egbert smiled. She turned to the window, basking in the warm sunlight. “...it's so beautiful today. Make sure...to take John out...I'd hate him to...miss this...”

“I will.” Paul squeezed her hand.

“...there were...things I needed to tell you, Paul...” Sarah said, blinking hazily. “...so much to do...so much to say...but I can't...think of what they all were...”

“It's alright, dear,” Paul said, raising his wife's hand to his face. He pressed the cold fingers to his skin, trying desperately to warm them. “We still have time. At least a little bit.”

Sarah smiled weakly. “...here's hoping...Paul?”

“Yes?”

“...love you...”

“I love you, too.” The man squeezed her hand with both of his. “I'll always love you. You are my moon...my sun. My starry sky.”

“Heh heh...you...flatterer...” The woman managed to squeeze her hand in return. “...you always were the...perfect gentleman...Paul...”

“Only the best...for my lovely Lady,” Paul said. He face leaned down, and he kissed her hand.

“...ha...Paul...I'm kind of tired...”
“Sleep, then, dear. I'll stay by your side...”

“Hmm...” Sarah said, pressing into the pillow. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her breath slowed.

“...I'll stay by your side, Sarah,” said Paul, brushing a single tear from his face. “Until the very end.”

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**September 2010**

Roxy blinked. “...”

Rose tilted her head. “Mom?”

“I...”

“Mom!” Rose grabbed her mother by the shoulders. “It needs to stop. You've been self-medicating with alcohol for as long as I can remember. This has quite possibly been the most sober conversation we've ever had. And that's frightening to me.”

Roxy frowned. “Rose...”

“Mom...you need to stop.” Rose frowned. “Your are drinking yourself into an early grave, I can feel it. You can't sustain this lifestyle forever. And besides...” The girl sniffed. “I...I barely know you. The real you. Not the you that sits behind a veil of booze. The woman who fought cyborgs and mutants and Agent Smith wannabes. You talk about not cloistering myself away in a library. But you've been cloistering yourself in alcohol for far longer.

“It...it has to stop...I want it to stop, Mom...” Rose's lower lip quivered. Her eyebrows sagged, sadly. “I don't...I don't want you to kill yourself through mishap or poison, and have my only memories of you being of you drunk out of your mind!”

...

Roxy sniffed. She gasped, lips contorting in pain.

She threw herself into her daughter, clutching her tight in a hug. “...sniff...Rose...”

Rose hugged her mother back. “Mom...please...”

Roxy swallowed, squeezing tighter. She strained to hold the tears back. Her chest hurt.

The woman's hand squeezed Rose's shoulder.

It was time. “Okay.”

Roxy Lalonde disengaged the hug, gently pulling herself back and resting her hands on Rose's shoulders. Her eyes were closed. “Okay.”

Rising to her feet, Roxy stalked the kitchen, reaching racks upon racks of wine bottles.

She wanted a drink so bad. She wanted to rip a cork off the nearest bottle and slam the contents back. She longed to quench a thirst grown bottomless in depth, and Biblical in scale. To guzzle the mana of the gods, commune with Dionysius, God of the Vine, and drown her sorrows under an ocean wine dark.
Roxy grabbed a bottle. The cork was in her teeth, and she wrenched it free. Spat the cord to the floor.

Oh God, the aroma. It hit her nostrils, and made her legs feel like jelly. Red. Great with lamb, just fine swigged alone. The woman could practically taste it already on her dry, aching tongue.

“Mom...” said Rose, somewhere behind.

Roxy pushed the bottle away, holding it at arm's length. She walked to the sink.

Overturn the bottle, and watch the red pour down the drain. See the flow burble and sputter, bubbles of air lurching into the vessel with every fluid ounce lost. Squander the sauce, and waste the wine.

Roxy bit her lip, eying the precious drink drain away. She shook the bottle, trying to will the last drops clinging to its mouth to fall. Righting the vessel, she sat it down on the counter.

Her fingers shook violently. She clutched them in her hand, wanting them to stop.

“...Mom...” Rose said, staring in awe.

Roxy grabbed two more bottles of booze – another red wine, and some bourbon – and opened them up. She had to whip out a bottle opener. Roxy didn't want to smell them. Upside down she turned. Down, down, down the booze flowed. Down the drains to...god only knows where. Did they have a septic tank? Roxy figured she was always too drunk to recall.

Count that as a blessing. She now had no excuse not to learn what her house of fifteen years had as its plumbing situation.

“Rose...” Roxy said, not turning around.

“Yeah?” Rose said, sitting up in her chair.

“Help mommy with this, baby.” Roxy looked over her shoulder, smiling weakly. “I don't...know how long I have the strength to keep this up. It hurts, Rose.” It really did. Her heart felt as if in a vice.

Rose blinked, then smiled. She stood up. “Of course.”

The girl took a place at her mother's side, fiddling with the bottle opener and handing uncorked vessels off to be dumped.

Roxy smiled. She still wanted to drink. But it was getting easier with each bottle. Easier and harder at the same time. But she smiled nonetheless. “After this, we'll tackle the bottles in my room.”

“Alright,” Rose said, nodding.

“And after that...” Roxy said, tilting her head. “...just...if you find any more bottles around the house...just dump them. Don't ask, just...get rid of it.”

Her little hermetic smiled. “That was the plan.”
A phenomenally cool dude kicked the door to his room open.

Waltzing nonchalantly inside, Dave Strider threw his backpack (which was ironically adorned with bootleg versions of Disney characters) to the foot of his bed. He plopped a bag of fast food burgers down on his desk. He grabbed a comb from his pocket and ran it a few times through his ivory hair.

Dave stretched his back, preparing for an uneventful night of empty calories, YouTube videos, and updating his ironically shitty webcomic-

“Baah!”

Which would all have to wait, as someone was pestering him.

“Baah!”

Urgently, it would seem.

Dave shrugged, drawing back his desk chair and sitting down.

“Baah!”

“I hear ya, I hear ya...” he said, adjusting his glasses. He jiggled his mouse, banishing his ironic screen saver. He looked at the chat log.

“...son of a bitch...”

-- ectoBiologist [EB] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] --

EB: daaaaaaaaave!
EB: holy shit, i'm in so much trouble!
EB: dave are you there? answer my pesters, you ironic jackass!
EB: oh man, oh man. i am so doomed. my life is over.
EB: dave, for gods sake answer me!
EB: wait, are they outside? shit!

-- ectoBiologist [EB] went idle --

-- ectoBiologist [EB] is no longer idle --

EB: i thought i saw something. oh man.
EB: dave please respond! i'm freaking out!
EB: the fucking technocracy is on my ass, i just know it!
EB: oh jeez, i hope they aren't monitoring this conversation.
EB: oh fuck, if they are then all i'm doing to leading them right to you! shit!
EB: should i even still be here? maybe i should just run now?
TG: whoa hold your horses dude
TG: restrain those fuckin equines
EB: dave!
TG: gotta bridle yourself before you idle yourself
EB: where the holy fuck have you been?!
TG: getting dinner but nevermind that
TG: fuck is this about the technocracy
EB: they know who i am, dave! they found me!
EB: i'm so fucked! they're gonna brainwash me and everything!
TG: calm the fuck down john
TG: be cool
TG: tell me what happened
EB: okay. fuck.
EB: remember last week when i told you about beating up those bullies?
TG: yeah you used vulgar magic to do it
TG: wait shit dont tell me the technos got wind of it
EB: worse. they've had spies on the inside of the school. have had since last year.
TG: you know this how
EB: because a guy from the syndicate approached me today and basically started bragging all about it!
TG: fuck
TG: are you okay
TG: asshole didnt do anything to you did he
EB: no. he just kind of showed up and tried to convince me to join the technocracy.
and like i said, he was bragging about how, ever since last year, he's had technocrat spies all over town.
TG: why were technocrat spies in maple valley washington
EB: he said they used statistics or something to predict when someone would awaken.
so they figured out i existed, and have been looking for me the whole time.
TG: they can do that yeah
TG: bog standard precognition dont let them quote numbers at you its all bullshit
EB: anyway, i think the french teacher at my school was in on it. she was there when i confronted the bullies. i thought it was weird she wouldn't jump in and help.
TG: turns out she was just a different kind of asshole than you thought
TG: a technocratic asshole
TG: shit
TG: what happened today are you alright
EB: yeah, i'm not hurt or anything. this syndicate guy,
EB: tallfield I think he said,
EB: he confronted me on the street, saying how he already wiped everyone's memory of the fight. and that's true, because micheal stevens didn't seem at all pissed today.
EB: but now, obviously, i have a bigger fucking problem!
TG: so this syn dick just showed up and started braggin
TG: then asked you to join the technocratic union
TG: i assume you bounced out of there right away
EB: ...no.
TG: what do you mean no
EB: i mean no, i didn't run away. not at first, anyway.
TG: that is stupid and risky john you never give the technos the time of day
TG: we talked about this
TG: stranger danger and all that except with dudes wanting to violate your mind
TG: and stick super science shit in your head
TG: we had this entire discussion about how that was a metaphor for a pervert trying
to molest your ass
EB: i know, i know!
EB: you have to understand, dave, this guy wasn't alone. he had mibs with him, hidden
away. i only managed to see one of them. i think they have some kind of mind cloak.
TG: shit
EB: as an aside, mind cloaking is kind of brilliant. Gotta try that some time. and i think
i know what with...
TG: so howd you get away
TG: or are you already brainwashed and now trying to lead them to me
EB: what no!
TG: because gotta be honest john
TG: real low
EB: you jackass! i wasn't brainwashed!
EB: not yet, anyway. i mean, i don't think so. the syndicate guy was trying to influence
me a couple times, but i had my, like, mind shields up.
TG: okay so what happened over there
EB: we talked.
TG: talked
TG: see cause thats a bad fucking idea
TG: you said yourself he was trying to mess with your head
EB: that was only like twice, dave. and i think he was trying to nudge me emotionally.
EB: mostly he just made his pitch.
TG: his pitch what to join the technocracy
EB: yeah.
TG: please tell me you dint listen to his bullshit
EB: ...
TG: oh god dammit john
EB: hey! you were the one who said not to live in an echo chamber, alright?
EB: he was giving me the technocrat version of, like, history. and the ascension war.
TG: john the technos are the textbook definition of an echo chamber writ large
TG: its like a fucking dolphin apartment complex
TG: all echolocating at each other about how much they love science
EB: also he treated me to pizza.
TG: dont you dare eat that pizza john its evil
TG: its pizza of the science devil
TG: probably spiked with drugs to make you more amenable to suggestion
EB: i don't think they spiked the pizza made by the restaurant, dave. i was the one who
suggested we talk there.
TG: and what makes you think the technos didnt already pay off the restaurant to drug
the pie
TG: hell they could have subtly influenced you to suggest it in the first place
EB: dave that's
EB: wait.
EB: shit, maybe.
TG: i told you about the pizzas bro
TG: i fuckin told you
EB: he did confront me within view of the place. so maybe he could have. shit!
TG: see dude never trust technos
TG: they even use delicious pizza against you they are evil
EB: okay well, i haven't had any of the pizza yet. i left as the food was ready, and
haven't touched it.
TG: dont its booby trapped
EB: what a waste of perfectly good pizza...
TG: so whatd he tell you
EB: a whole bunch of stuff. about how they were founded to fight an evil cabal of wizards. ones from some medieval town called mistridge.
TG: okay yes thats true enough
TG: the mistridge wizards were kind of dicks
TG: getting their sorcerous overlord on real hardcore
EB: and how the technocracy was doing a bunch of stuff to advance medicine, technology, economics...
TG: yeah real advanced economics and medicine
TG: hold on while I get this much-needed surgery on insurance i cant afford
TG: plus i'm a virtual adept technology is all we do
TG: us and the etherites we got that shit on lockdown we dont need the technos
EB: and how they basically gave us cars, telephones, the internet...
TG: WE gave you the internet john thats our thing
TG: or i dont know maybe the scientific revolution had more to do with normal folks than the technocracy wants you to believe
TG: why were you even listening to that sleeze
EB: he made very persuasive arguments, dave!
EB: i just dont know if the technocracy is as bad as you've made it out to be.
TG: sigh
TG: okay look john
TG: maybe they have some good points
TG: fuck knows we over here in the traditions arent fuckin perfect or saints or nothin
TG: except the celestial chorus obviously because being saints is literally their entire thing
TG: and even then theyve had bad eggs all the trads have
TG: but weve been on the business end of five hundred plus years of technocratic bullshit
TG: to use an alchemical metaphor
EB: you know alchemy?
TG: been branching out for the sake of my rhymes
TG: but our traditions have been through the fire for centuries
TG: and weve come out leaner hardier and purer than before
TG: weve had to take a good look at ourselves in the mirror and start handling our various and sundry issues
TG: but then weve got the technocracy which has largely enjoyed nothing but success for centuries
TG: to the point where they enjoy massive control over the world its technology and its ideas of what reality is
TG: even if they started out with noble goals they arent made up of wide eyed idealists
TG: theyre made up of folks whose opinions have never been challenged
TG: who have not had to struggle with convincing folks of the viability of their methods
TG: and who consider the traditions at best a nuisance
TG: they are bloated on their own power and up their own asses
TG: the technocracy is corrupt plain and simple
TG: and the fact that they will pressure you to shut up and conform to their standard is reason enough to distrust them
EB: …
EB: i guess you have a point.
TG: damn straight i do welcome to the reality check
EB: i guess i should have figured that out when the syndicate guy admitted i would probably be conditioned if i joined.
TG: fuckers cant even trust their own people enough to let them operate without mind control
TG: whos surprised
EB: shit! so what happens now? am i even safe here?
TG: howd you get away
EB: the guy let me go. But he made pretty clear that it was only to “consider his offer”.
EB: one of their mibs tried to follow after me, so i used a smoke pellet from my stage magician stuff to get away.
TG: holy shit you used a smoke bomb
TG: are you sure you dont want to be a ninja i could give you pointers dude
EB: maybe later. i used it to go invisible. but the guy already knows where i live. so i'm not really safe here, am i?
TG: probably not shit
EB: do i run? do i try to hide? oh man, i don't want to leave my dad behind. who knows what they’ll do to him!
TG: hold on one second im gonna do a thing
EB: oh. okay?
EB: damn, i wish i knew more about, like, tactics and stuff.
EB: i'm pretty sure the technocracy already has people watching the house. i can't see them, but it would make sense.
TG: okay i checked your future
EB: !!!
TG: dont get your hopes up i can only see about a day ahead
TG: after that peering into the future gets fuzzy
TG: i dont see anyone coming in and capturing your ass but who knows how reliable that is
TG: you might have some breathing room tho
EB: okay. i can work with that. gonna need to wrack my brain for plans and contingencies.
EB: hey dave?
TG: what up man
EB: do you know how to make smoke bombs? ones that go off reliably if you throw them on the ground?
TG: i can find out
EB: good, because the pellets i had were pretty bad. i had to step on them to make them burst. cheap jokeshop crap! i need something more effective.
TG: ill see what i can look up
TG: in the meantime prepare a suitcase fulla clothes and shit
TG: you might need to bolt at the slightest notice so its good to be prepared
EB: that sounds like a smart idea.
TG: and john
EB: yeah?
TG: if youre ever in danger
TG: call me immediately
TG: i may be a thousand miles away but
TG: shit whats distance for a hacking wizard like me
TG: ill see if i cant help you out
TG: so dont hesitate to call it might be the difference between freedom and mind slavery
Days Later (But Not Many)

“Come in, Karkat.”

Karkat Vantas passed through the doorway, set in a frame of solid stone. He looked around. The Grand Elder's office was as choked with books and scientific equipment as ever.

Karkat coughed. “You wanted to see me?” he said. In truth, the boy was relieved. It was nice to get away from his...more enthusiastic followers.

“I did,” said the Grand Elder, nodding, “if you wouldn't mind.” He gestured to the open seat in front of the desk.

The Grand Elder was a giant of a man, nearing seven feet tall. Like all of the Gray Cult, he wore a long, plain gray robe and a pair of dark sunglasses. Despite his age – an age Karkat could never guess – he looked very fit and healthy. His long hair was still jet black, and smooth as silk, falling down to his knees. In his huge, strong hands, he gently manipulated a tablet PC with a stylus. These he placed down on the desk.

His face was chiseled, with taught facial muscles. Despite this, he smiled. “How are you holding up, Karkat?”

The boy pulled out an empty chair and sat down. “Not terrible,” Karkat said, shrugging. “Not great either. I'm just...tired, is all.”

“I would think so,” said the Grand Elder. “You've had a very busy last few days.”

“Tell me about it,” Karkat said, rubbing his temples. “It's...it's all too much.”

One huge production after another. Every day, a new ritual. Every day, another round of psalms to read (or reread). Every day, more meditation to help him get control over his...new powers. And every night, vivid dreams that assault him. It's a wonder he could even sleep at all.

Followed, thereafter, by having to deal with the scrawls on his walls. And dealing with the revelation that he'd been making them since he was a child, and just never noticed until now. Scrawls the elders considered prophetic. Since Karkat had to sleep down in the caves – both the elders and Karkat agreed it would be best to stick around until he got his runaway miracle powers under control – that meant having everyone and their mother crowding around his chambers, checking his walls.

Or, at the very least, it was one of the reasons everyone was crowding around his room every morning.

The Grand Elder nodded. “I understand. It must all be very overwhelming. Hopefully, it will get better soon.”

“Yeah, let's pray to my fucking thrice-great grandfather than day happens really fucking soon,” Karkat said, rubbing his eyes. “Or wait, was he even supposed to be god? Am I supposed to be a god? Because believe me, Grand Elder, I really don't feel like a god right now. Or ever, really, but least of all now.”
“That is probably a good attitude to take,” said the Grand Elder, shrugging. “Hubris can be a problem, for those with power. Then again, I like to think that if a human were also a god, they would know that innately.” He smiled, raising a hand. “But let's get back to that. How are your studies going?”

“Well, I've stopped turning stone into butter and cloth into paper,” Karkat said, sighing. “So, there's that. Also, I think my blood is becoming, like, innately magic.”

“How so?” the Grand Elder said, raising his eyebrows above the line of his shades.

“I cut myself a bit on a tiny shard of glass,” Karkat said, showing off a bandaid on his finger. “Next thing I know, the glass is turning into a seed and sprouting into a flower.” He buried his face in his hands. “Fuck...looks like all those stories about my blood being holy were true.”

“Possibly,” said the Grand Elder. He picked up a pen and wrote a note down on a stray sheet of paper. “Well, sooner or later, we'll get you back to your house, and take all this...messiah business slower. Of course, the other elders have been planning more rituals. I'll put a good word in to help them understand that you need rest. How does that sound?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Karkat groaned, leaning back. “Grand Elder, have I told you that I fucking love you?”

“Not since you were a small child, but the sentiment is appreciated, Karkat.”

Karkat smiled fractionally. This was why he liked the Grand Elder. Unlike basically every other person prostrating themselves before Karkat, Grand Elder knew how to have a sense of proportion about things. He treated Karkat like a kid when he was a kid, and treated him like a young man now. Didn't try to coddle him or throw outrageous, senseless praise at him. Grand Elder seemed to get, in much the same way as Karkat did, just how silly the rest of the Gray Cultists were being, all the time.

The boy sighed. “So...anything else we need to talk about?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Grand Elder said. “Returning to the matter of rituals, I would like you to give a little thought to making your own. You are, after all, the centerpiece of our little religion. Your feedback and guidance would be helpful in the long run.” He waved his hands in front of him. “You don't need to feel any pressure to consider the matter now. You have enough to worry about. Just...give it some thought when you have the time.”

Karkat sighed, slouching in his seat. “...maybe...” he said, noncommittally. Just being part of the cult was weird and fucked up enough. Taking the reins on it and dictating procedure seemed a step much farther than he wanted to go. Besides, he didn't know a whole lot about religious ritual, other than what he'd witnessed over the years. He couldn't exactly invent new ones even if he wanted to.

On the other hand...he had power now. Real power. He didn't know first thing about what it was or how it worked. If it was holy power – whatever that meant – he'd probably get it from exercising holy ritual. Or at least that's what made the most sense in context. For all he knew, he was some kind of comic book mutant. Still, he had power. And as much as it appealed to him to abuse the shit out of that power, Karkat thought of himself as enough of a useless waste of life already. He was a failure, and he knew it.

If he could somehow bend his new power to constructive use...maybe it would go a little ways towards making him less horrible. Make the mistake that was his existence matter, in ways it never had before.
As much as he hated to admit it, that kind of appealed to him, too.

Karkat studied the bookshelves that lined Grand Elder's walls. He wondered...beyond the power he inherited...if he shouldn't become a doctor or something. It couldn't hurt. But...there were more pressing matters. “Grand Elder...”

“Yes?”

“...what’s the deal with this...power I have?” Karkat frowned at him, holding up a weakly clenched fist. “You're the only one I trust to give me an answer besides 'you're the Sufferer Reborn'. And believe me, that answer isn't cutting it for me right now. Before, being the Night of the World was just sort of Whatever. It's the thing I've heard my whole life, so it's so much white noise. Now, the question actually fucking matters.”

Grand Elder smiled. “I like your attitude, Karkat,” he said. “Luckily, I do believe I can explain something about your power...and that of your thrice-great grandfather.” He rubbed his large, calloused hands together. “For starters...though the rest of the Sufferer's followers would deny it...or else rationalize it away...the power you and the Sufferer wield is not unique in the world. Nor is it limited to historical holy figures, though there is always a question of how holy any given holy figure is, of course.”

Karkat's eyebrows rose. “...really? There are others like me?”

“Plenty of them, actually,” Grand Elder said, nodding. “There is no way of knowing how many exist at any given time, but you can be assured that you are in good company.”

The boy's mouth hung open. “What?”

“Allow me to explain. It is sometimes possible for a person to manifest great, wondrous powers. Powers that seemed shaped by the method used to channel them. As such, there are countless ways these people go about using their gifts, and countless more names they use for what they are. Magi, Saints, Geniuses, Enlightened...all attempts to explain the same phenomenon. That is, those who performs miracles, to use our own terminology.

“I think that may be why your ancestor promoted the study of medical science, in lieu of his followers relying solely on his miracles. He saw medical science as an equally valid tool for healing as faith, and championed the method that the common man could use. Then again, I've also seen faith healers of other religions, some of whom I'm fairly certain were not mere charlatans, but genuine in their workings. Not all of them, as well, may have had the same gifts as you, Karkat.”

Karkat blinked. “Wait what? You lost me, there.”

Grand Elder laughed. “My apologies. To set it straight, there are the miracles that you Gifted are capable of wielding, and those miracles that those not similarly gifted can use. These are not mutually exclusive, though I have it on good authority that the Gifted take their miracles much farther. Moreover, one could argue – and many folks I've talked to have – that any craft of humankind falls under the latter category. Medical science, for instance, is fundamentally amazing, from the perspective of base humanity. Speech, too. I am, after all, communicating my thoughts to you, using nothing but an elaborate series of animal grunts, hisses, and clicks. “

“Uh...”

“I understand that may seem a little abstract. Allow me then to further illustrate with a more specific example: myself.” Grand Elder leaned forward. “Tell me, Karkat. How old am I?”
Karkat tilted his head. “How...old?” The boy scrutinized the elder's face. “…fuck, I give up. Whatever I say was going to be wrong anyway. How old are you?”

“Over a hundred years old.”

“Jesus fuck!” Karkat said, eyes going wide. “You're fucking with me right now, right?”

“Absolutely not,” Grand Elder said, his smile not wavering. “I am that old. Some of my fellow elders are similarly old, though they look the part better. You see, Karkat, I have been studying the cult's body of knowledge for decades, and have contributed much to its store. There are, in fact, levels of medical technology and technique beyond what is possible within the scientific community. It can take forms herbal, alchemical, or scientific, but the results are the same. Miracles beyond what should be possible...and indeed, what is allowed. Now, the medical community is slowly pushing against these limits, bringing more of the old miracles to common use. The greatest, of course, are only usable by someone with your Gifts – only they can truly understand the methods and make them work – but someone like me can come not too far from them.

“Through the research of myself and my fellows within the Melati Putih, we have developed certain live extending regiments. Mixtures of exercise, herbal concoctions, chemical baths, and meditations that slow the advance of age. It's a complicated method, and a demanding one. Not everyone has the time, energy, or commitment to follow it. This is why very few of the elders are as...well preserved as I am.”

Karkat didn't move. His face was stuck in full gape.

“I understand if this is hard to believe.”

“...it would explain why you take so little of this bullshit seriously,” Karkat finally said, looking down in contemplation. “You are practically old enough to have met my ancestor...you didn't actually know him, did you?”

“Perhaps another time, we'll discuss my history and involvement with the Sufferer's followers.” Grand Elder rose to his feet, towering high over the seated Karkat. He moved to the bookshelf and picked out a binder. “Right now, there's a far more important matter to discuss. I shouldn't have to ask this, but...what do you know of how your ancestor perished?”

Karkat blinked. “Well that's easy,” Karkat said. “Back in Indonesia, he preached for a while, spreading ideas like universal brotherhood, charity, healing the sick and feeding the poor. All that shit.”

“Indeed, all that shit,” Grand Elder said, smiling. He sat down.

“He wasn't preaching in time with Islam, however, which was and is dominant in Indonesia,” Karkat said, scratching his head. “People did what they do best when confronted with someone trying to form a religion outside the norm. A mob of pissed off Muslims broke down his door, dragged him out to the town square of the place he was visiting, and clapped him in red hot irons. He got beaten, whipped, and finally shot with an arrow, until he died. All the suffering part that made him the Sufferer. That right?”

“All factually true,” Grand Elder said, nodding. “It can even be verified, though one must go digging to find sources alluding to it. This is, of course, our design. The Cult has survived this long through anonymity and obscurity. However, we also survived by being very good at knowing who our enemies are.”
Grand Elder flipped through his binder. From Karkat's vantage point, it seemed mostly to be filled with photocopies of documents, with occasional photographs. “Following the Sufferer's...suffering...there was a whirlwind of activity. The movement of the followers underground – literally – and the spiriting away of the Sufferer's first, beloved Disciple. While she and their unborn child – your twice-great grandmother – were moved from Singapore to Hong Kong and on and on until finally reaching the United States, the followers sought to understand what, exactly, happened.

“Our investigation turned up startling details. While the animosity of the local Muslim population was real – religious tensions between established faiths are frequently severe, so our little cult would have gained scrutiny no matter what we or the Sufferer did – the impetus for his assassination were not entirely natural. Looking into it, we discovered that several ring leaders in the mob that captured your ancestor were paid off. In effect, hired to escalate the conflict.”

Karkat's eyes widened. “Who the hell would do that? Who would care?”

“We tracked that very question, at first, to officials within the Dutch colonial government that occupied Indonesia at the time. At first, we were willing to end the investigation there. The Dutch wanted to get rid of a potential destabilizing element. It seemed plausible enough. On the surface, that is. However, the explanation seemed unsatisfying. So we dug deeper, and found that there was yet another layer to the conspiracy. We have spent the following century and a half piecing together the full implications of that conspiracy.”

The man frowned gravely. “We believe we have an idea now of what went on. We do not like what we have learned.” He breathed deep, sighing. Grand Elder turned the binder around, turned to a particular page. He pushed it before the boy. “Those Dutch officials were themselves being manipulated – partially through bribes, and partially through powers that could only come from...extraordinary gifts.”

Karkat frowned, looking at the page. “Gifts? Wait, like mine?” He looked up, pressing his hand to his chest.

Grand Elder nodded. “There are forces beyond the nations of men, working in this world. Forces who fight on the stage of wonder and ideas, and use miracles as their weapons. One such group influenced these Dutch officials. It was, once upon a time, called the High Guild. Now, it is known as the Syndicate. In either form, it is a collaboration of Gifted businessmen, bankers, corporate executives, and black marketeers. Their group is aligned with a larger organization: what was previously known as the Order of Reason, and is now known as the Technocratic Union.”

Grand Elder continued, his voice deep and solemn. “The Technocratic Union's goals are multitude. Through contact with certain other Gifted groups, we have only managed to learn so much. One goal is certain, however: the control of all Gifted individuals and miraculous techniques. The Union seeks nothing less than the suppression of so-called supernatural activity and power within the public consciousness. Anything they cannot control, they eliminate.

“We believe that this Syndicate used its wealth and connections to arrange our founder's assassination. And that they did so to bury him and the miracles he could perform. All to promote the idea within the popular understanding that such things do not exist.” The Grand Elder gestured around them, to the carved stone walls that made up their sanctuary. “It was persecution by hostile religious fundamentalists that drove us underground in the first place. It was persecution by a hostile, worldwide conspiracy that kept us here.”

Karkat's eyes played over the page in the binder. Clipped to one sheet of paper was a copy of a faded, yellowed photograph. Several men were pictured within, as well as a single young woman.
She had dark skin and Indian features, and a long mane of dark hair. The photo was marked with numbers, one for each figure. On an accompanying sheet, the numbers listed information as to the people's identities, as far as could be determined. Names, nationalities, and, most importantly, political affiliations.

Most of the men were identified as Dutch colonial officers, or were obviously native Indonesians with a Dutch allegiance. Two of them, however, were labeled “Syndicate”. The woman was one of them.

Her location of origin was marked as Kerala, India. The list provided no name for the woman. It only listed as such: “H.I.C.(?)”

“Hey Paul? Boss wants to see you in his office.”

Paul Egbert nodded at the intern curtly, then rose from his seat.

He passed by row upon row of cubicles, nodding politely to his coworkers as he went.

The man knocked twice on his boss's door.

A sigh issued from within. “...come in.”

“Boss?” Paul said, peeking inside. He opened the door wide and approached the desk. “You asked for me?”

The man behind the desk had apparently shaved his head. The boss rubbed his now-bare temple. “Paul...have a seat, will you?”

This gave the businessman pause. Finally, Paul sat down.

“You remember the other day, we talked about that buyout?” the boss said.

“Yes.”

“Well it happened,” the boss said. “You probably noticed the folks coming in earlier, interviewing people, looking through files. A reorganization is happening, and it's as bad as I...dammit...” He buried his face in one hand.

Paul's mouth was dry. He said nothing.

“...I'm sorry Paul,” the boss said, showing his hands. “I tried to talk to them, but they weren't having any of it. And they came with a list of folks that needed...laying off.” He sighed. “Sorry Paul...but we're gonna have to let you go.”

Paul blinked. “Oh...”

“I tried my best, man,” the boss said. “You're one of our most experienced. Always punctual, always professional. Always putting your best into your work. And I tried to get the upper floors to understand that. But...they weren't having any of it.”

“Who else is going?” Paul said, finally.

“...Chambers, Louis, Baker...” the boss listed off, each one making him scowl. “We're losing so many, and all the details of the re-org haven't even been sent down yet.”
Paul sighed, shaking his head. “Poor Baker,” he said wistfully. “He's got three kids.” He frowned.

“I know,” the boss said, also shaking his head.

“...I suppose I'll start clearing out my desk, then,” Paul said, getting up.

“Sorry again, Paul,” the boss said, rising and offering a hand. When Paul shook it, he said, “I don't want to give you any false hope, but they're going to have positions to fill after this is over. I'll call you if anything opens up.”

“Thank you, Fred,” Paul said, nodding solemnly.

“...are you going to be alright? Is...is your family going to be alright?”

Paul put on the best smile he could muster. “John and I will manage,” he said. “One way or another.”

The man turned away and walked out of the room. He moved slower than before. Paul wasn't exactly in a hurry anymore.

As he traveled to his desk, he wondered just how he was going to break the news to John.
Seeking

“Huff...huff...”

John Egbert cut through a neighbor's yard, hopping their fence once more and landing next to his house. He crossed the lawn, reaching the back door.

Looking frantically over his shoulder, John fished the keys from his pocket. He fumbled briefly with them, then unlocked the door.

Inside, he shut and locked the door behind him. Leaning against the door, he sighed with relief.

The young man spent the last five days fretfully sneaking around town. Ever since his encounter with the Syndicate man and his New World Order allies, a fear clung to John's heart. It raced, thinking of the danger. He jumped at every shadow, distrusted every object in the corner of his eyes. It got to the point where John was out the door an hour early each morning, desperate as he was to prevent his normal travel patterns from being discovered.

Well okay, that wasn't the only reason John was out the door in the wee hours of the morning.

John rubbed his eyes, yawning. He couldn't hardly sleep at night. During the early hours, he lay awake, mind troubled, anxious. Even when he could sleep, his dreams were assaulted by nightmare visions. He frequently woke with a start, spooked from slumber by some onerous nightmare.

Horrible visions. Of men in mirror shades dragging him away. Of dragging away Dave, and Jade, and his dad. Even of them hooking his mother – that woman he'd never even met – into a chair, and subjecting her to arduous mental torture.

And, of course, nightmares of harlequins. Since his Awakening, the harlequins seemed to return only sporadically to his slumber. They never quite left, though. They just seemed more distant. Not that he could always remember them.

John shook his head. Rubbing his temple, he walked from the laundry room to the kitchen. From the fridge, he extracted a soda and material to make a sandwich. Maybe some food would alleviate his stress.

Probably not a good idea to make a habit of that. Some teachers from school had commented on stress eating, and how it could lead to bad habits and poor health later in life.

Exiting the kitchen with his sandwich on a plate, John took a moment to nod at the portraits of Mom and Nanna.

John stopped in his tracks. He could feel something.

The young man hadn't spent the last few days idle. His life and/or freedom were in mortal jeopardy. So whenever time was spare, John prepared for coming confrontations.

He silently placed the plate down on an end table, right next to the full-sized stuff harlequin (no, he still hadn't moved it). One hand traced a pocket on his cargo pants. They felt the home-made smoke bombs kept within. Another hand carefully slipped off one of his backpack straps. As quietly as possible, he pulled on a zipper and slipped a hand inside. He pulled a hammer from the recess, and held it firm in his grip. It was his special hammer, affixed with a sigil in permanent marker and bathed in the blood of a Paradox Imp.
Keeping his knees bent, John crept up the stairs.

In the time he'd had, John had worked to expand his magical arsenal. He'd already tested some of his smoke bombs, down in an abandoned quarry at the edge of town. They worked well enough for consistency, so John's physical tools were sorted. More important, however, were the tools one couldn't see.

Among them, he'd frantically learned how to sense the minds of others. Their presence, their emotions, perhaps even flashes of their intent. He wasn't even close to reading minds – or affecting them – but John could keep a servitor running in the background, giving him forewarning of hostiles. The servitor hung behind his back, informing him of a mind.

Someone else was in the house.

Step. Step. Step. John kept to the outer ends of the steps, avoiding squeaky boards. Sweat formed on his brow. He adjusted his glasses, keeping his hammer at the ready.

On the second floor, he had a better idea of the general direction of the mind. As well as its emotional state.

The young man lowered his weapon. He exhaled in relief, but his face scrunched up in confusion. His father's door was open.

“...dad?” John said, pushing the door in slightly.

His father was inside the bedroom, sitting on the edge of his bed, face downcast. At the noise, his head shot up. “Hmm? John?”

“Dad,” said John, peeking inside, “what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be at work still?”

The man puffed thoughtfully on his pipe, frowning. He exhaled, a jet of smoke flowing out. “It's...John, why don't you come in and have a seat.”

John blinked, then entered. The room was much as it had been, when John saw it last year. Plain and serviceable.

When Dad patted the end of the bed beside him, John walked over. He shrugged the backpack off, and sat down.

“What's with the hammer, John?” Dad asked quizzically.

“Oh, this?” John said, blushing nervously and holding the hammer up. He slipped it into a cargo pocket. “Sorry, I heard a noise upstairs. You weren't supposed to be home, so I thought it was a burglar, or another wild dog.”

His father smiled sadly, sniggering briefly. “That's my boy.” He turned away. “How was school?”

“Oh...you know,” John said, looking away nervously. “Stressful.”

Dad nodded. He puffed sagely on his pipe. His smile faded. “...John...I have some bad news.”

“Hmm?” John said, looking over. His heart began to race.

The young man could feel the sadness radiating off his father. Sadness and trepidation. “Son...I got laid off from work today.”
John gaped. “You lost your job?!”

“Afraid so,” Dad said, nodding.

“Why?”

“That's the mystery, isn't it?” Dad said. “Recently, the company got bought out by...someone. It's difficult to keep track of such things. And sometimes when a business changes ownership, the new management has different ideas about how to run things. Sometimes that means creating new departments, or folding existing ones together. Sometimes that means closing offices, or opening new ones.” He sighed. “And a lot of times, that means the entire employee roster gets examined, and folks get let go. I was one of the unlucky ones. A whole bunch of us got laid off. It's all too tragic.”

John's stomach sank. “Oh no,” he said, frowning. “Are...are you going to be alright? Are we? Are we going to have to move?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Dad shrugged. Looking over, he raised a hand and clapped it on John's shoulder. “This is a setback, John, but it's not a disaster. We can weather this. I'll find a new job. Just have to pound some pavement, dig in, and put in the work.” He patted his son's shoulder firmly, but affectionately. “If getting a new job means having to move, then that's what we'll do. But we're Egberts. We don't give up in the face of adversity.”

John looked at the floor. Slowly, he raised a hand and pressed it on his shoulder, over his father's.

The warmth in Dad's fingers was nice. It complemented the warm feelings he got from Dad. Stern, fatherly affection, in its purest form.

“You okay, John?”

“...yeah, I'm okay,” John sighed. “Just a little tired.”

Dad nodded. John noticed his black tie was loosened, and his normally perfectly pressed shirt was wrinkled badly. The man examined his pipe. “Money's probably going to be tight for a little while. We have a savings, but...”

John groaned, frowning. He suddenly felt terrible, spending so much money in the last few days on materials for magic. The smoke bombs alone were pretty costly to make, all considered. Certainly, the money wasn't spent without cause. The Technocracy...

The young man paused. “Money.”

“Hmm?” said Dad. “What's that?”

John rose to his feet. “It's nothing.” He hefted the backpack to his shoulders. “Sorry dad...I'm kind of beat. I'm going to turn in early.”

Dad eyed his son – John felt his scrutiny emotionally – but he shrugged. “Alright. I'll leave something in the fridge for you later. Get some rest.”

The young man nodded, moving towards the door.

“And John?”

John stopped. “Yeah?” he said, looking back.
Dad smiled. “I love you.”

He blinked. Frowning, John walked back and hugged his father.

The man returned the hug silently.

Finally, John disengaged, nodding once to his father. He left the room.

He did not, however, head to his own. There was something he needed to do first.

Trudging to the ground floor, John ignored the sandwich. If anything, he needed a clear stomach for what he intended to do. He'd probably need a shower, too. That's how one did ritual purification, right?

What John did grab, instead, was the huge harlequin doll sitting on the couch. Draping it over his shoulder, John climbed the stairs back to his room.

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**Days Ago (But Not Many)**

“Suprabhaat, Madam Chaudhri. It is a pleasure to receive your call.”

Brandon Tallfield bowed before the computer screen, on which was displayed a live feed. The picture displayed the figure of an aging – though no less beautiful – woman of dark complexion and long, black hair. The light from a nearby window bit her face just so, as to obscure the worst of her wrinkles in a layer of shadow.

This woman was Harriet Indira Chaudhri (Tallfield had it on good authority that “Harriet” was appended to her name, as a means of interacting more smoothly with her western business associates). She was a member of the Syndicate...a high ranking member. Only recently, she gained the rank of Vice President of Operations, by virtue of business acumen, broad inter-Convention connections, astounding mastery of Enlightened Economics, and almost two centuries worth of experience. That she looked as good as she did was a testament to the Union's mastery of biology...and her own tireless quest towards physical fitness.

Tallfield privately mused that the woman was a bit of a narcissist. But he would never so much as imply such a thing out loud. He wasn't entirely sure he ought even to think it.

This woman could destroy him. Tallfield could only imagine in how many ways.

“Mister Tallfield...” Chaudhri said, adjusting her wide-rimmed, pink glasses. “I hear on the grapevine, you've been workin' on wrangling us a new recruit.”

It was impressive, to the Syndicate man, just how distant the Indian was in the woman's voice. It was a little confusing, however, how she apparently had all of the civilized world to hone a professional business accent, and she'd apparently settled on...valley girl?

Tallfield coughed. “Yes, that's correct, Madam,” he said, putting on his poker face. “Our prospective new blood is being worked at, as we speak.”

“I also heard,” Chaudhri continued, “that you were doing the interview personal like. And that you've been flapping your jaw about the Consensus being a lie, right to his face.”

A modicum of sweat formed on Tallfield's brow. He ignored it, not missing a beat. “I can assure you, Madam Chaudhri, that I'm merely humoring the target. The boy has been exposed to
superstitionist propaganda. I felt it necessary to work with this misinformation, so as to better undercut their appeal. To impress upon him that, even were such nonsense true, it would only underscore the urgency of joining the Union. Once he's in our care, our friends at the NWO will promptly expunge such worrisome drivel.”

“Boy, don't give me that bull honky.”

Tallfield froze, continuing to smile but saying nothing.

“I know for a fact that mentor of yours, Richards, has been too loose with what he shares.” The woman smiled, wrinkles magnified. “But calm your tits, boy. I don't give a fuck.”

“...really...?” Tallfield said, adjusting his tie. He breathed a shallow sigh of relief.

“Yeah,” said Chaudhri. “Sure, you ain't supposed to know about the Consensus. But that just means you know how to network. Can get stuff from your superiors. I like that initiative you got. Shows balls.” She leaned forward, the slightest shaft of light illuminating her face. The glare hit her glasses, obscuring her eyes. “I just hope you understand you gotta keep that business discreet.”

The young Syndicate man coughed. “Don't worry, Madam Chaudhri,” he said, relaxing. “I have no intention of spreading classified information...where it cannot be contained. Nor do I have any intention of abusing this knowledge, by employing superstitionist methods.”

She smiled broadly. “Good. Just what I want to hear.” She leaned back, letting her face fade into shadow once again. “When can we see this kid shipped to a nice comfy chair in Room 101?”

“I'm working a number of contingencies,” Tallfield said, “and we had a very stimulating conversation over drinks. I'll arrange a meeting soon, to reinforce the benefits of working for the Union. Ideally, I'd love to guide him towards the Syndicate, of course.”

“Mm hmm?”

“If we talk once or twice a week, I know I'll have him on our side inside of a month.”

“I want to see it complete by the end of the week.”

Tallfield blinked. “...I'm sorry?”

“You heard me, boy.” Madam Chaudhri examined her nails. “I want the kid on his way to Room 101 by week's end. Oh, and that's the work week, so get to it.”

“I...why ever the rush, Madam?” Tallfield said. He threw up a nervous smile. “If you don't mind me asking.”

“'Cause I got me a thing happening soon,” the woman said. “I'm getting work done this weekend. Like, Progenitor level work.” She smiled. “I'm getting me my new body.”

“Uh...congratulations, ma'am!” Tallfield said, tilting his head and clapping his hands together. “You've certainly earned it!”

“Thank you. But for real, I'm gonna be under for a while, and then I'm going to spend a while recovering. Getting used to the new 'suit.'” She clenched a fist, scowling at it. “So I want to go into that lab knowing the Syndicate is in good hands, and we ain't got some lingering business to attend to. Feel me?”
“Of course, Madam.”

“Furthermore,” she said, tapping the arm of her chair, “I like to see underlings perform under pressure. Gotta challenge ourselves, or we never grow. So I don't care if you need to drag him out with the boys in black. Room 101. End of the week.”

He gulped. “No problem, Madam!” Tallfield said, raising a hand.

“I love hearing that,” the woman said, grinning. “You pull this off, and I might consider you worth...investing in. Chaudhri out.”

The screen cut to black, the video call message popping up to indicate the ended call.

Tallfield exhaled, fishing out a comb from his pocket. As he fixed his hair, he calculated figures, costs, and time tables. Getting John Egbert into the Union by week's end would be difficult. Their talks hadn't progressed as far as Tallfield wanted. That the kid knew a lot more than he should have complicated matters.

However, the deadline was still within operational limits. It left him a few days. He could work with that. Tallfield would simply need to accelerate plans he'd already had waiting in the wings.

Brandon Tallfield wiped sweat from his brow. He smiled. This wouldn't be any problem at all.

_________________________________________________________

Breathe in. Breathe out.

John sat on the floor of his room. His hair was still slick with water. Beneath him, a new, larger tarp, adorned with a customized set of circles. Jutting from the main circle – in which John sat – there was a second circle. It was adorned with words and symbols of confinement.

Propped up in that circle was the giant harlequin doll.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

The young man's eyes were shut. Against the backdrop of black, John visualized the doll in front of him. Focused on every detail. Every cleft, every patch of fiber, every garish color.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

John began to chant.

“Harlequins in my dreams. I beseech you. If you wish to speak, I am here. I am ready. This Fool requests audience with you. Harlequins in my dreams. I beseech you...”

With each iteration of the chant, John reinforced his vision of the doll.

“...am ready. This Fool requests audience with you. Harlequins in my dreams. I beseech you. If you wish to speak, I am here...”

John imagined himself moving forward. Imagined himself flying at the doll.

Imagined that the doll was growing steadily more giant as he approached. Ten feet tall. Twenty feet tall. Fifty feet tall. The doll towered high in the darkness. John flew towards its face.

He imagined the doll's mouth open, exposing a toothy maw. Imagined himself flying straight into it. He imagined himself being swallowed whole, entering another realm entirely.
John opened his eyes.

He was standing in his room. The walls were thick with the scrawls of a thousand poorly drawn harlequins.

John turned to the door and exited. Across the hall. The portraits of harlequins adorned the walls, mocking him with their smiling, painted faces. The young mage paid them no mind.

Down the stairs. They spiraled a league – a thousand thousand steps – yet he bridged the gap in an instant.

At the foot of the stairs, John stood in the living room.

His Harlequin doll sat on the couch. It looked at him.

“John Egbert,” said the doll, reaching a hand out and beckoning the young man forward. No longer a spineless, flailing thing, the Harlequin sat erect. It was split down the middle, one side black with white highlights, the other white with black highlights. “Come forward. Let us talk of many things. Of Fools and Devils, Hierophants and Kings.”

The young mage stepped forward. Stood before the Harlequin.

“What are you to me?” John said, pointing to the seated figure. “Why exactly do you haunt my dreams?”


“Okay, but...” John said, rubbing his head. “Can we kindly skip the rhyming? I don't know if my imagination is good enough to make poetry that doesn't suck.”

The Harlequin's hat sagged. “Very well...spoil sport.”

John frowned. “Wait, maybe I need to play along,” he said. “Ugh, this is such a pain. You can keep rhyming, if you really want.”

“No time, no time,” said the Harlequin, throwing up its hands, “for we have much to do. Now...”

It passed its hands behind its back. With a flourish, the hands came out, palms upturned. Each held an urn. In its black right hand, it held a black urn. In its white left hand, it held a white urn. They reminded John of the urns on the fireplace mantle.

“...shrug off any doubt, and kindly choose.”

John looked at the two urns, each in turn. “...that's not a whole lot to work with. Can I get an idea of what I'm choosing?”

“Up and down, left and right. Digging down and taking flight. Darkest dawn and brightest night. Choose from these, to solve your plight. Which will help you? Who really knows? Walking down paths, isn't that how it goes?”

He considered his choices. They were both unknowns. The choice was practically arbitrary.

So John shrugged, and chose an arbitrary answer. Because to hell with it.
John picked up both urns.

The Harlequin stared at him. “Heh heh...ha ha...HA HA HA HA!” It slouched against the couch, throwing its head back and laughing. Fitting, since its face was, as always, locked in a broad grin.

John frowned, continuing to hold his urns. “...so...did I fail?”

“Ha ha...heh heh...oh my...” The Harlequin's hand rubbed its face. It sat up, wiping a nonexistent tear from its eye. “...ha...what...what made you take both?”

John considered a moment. “You know that saying? About choosing the road less traveled?”

The Harlequin simply waited.

“...well,” John said, eyebrows furrowed. “I'm a Mage, dammit. Who the hell said I was limited to following only one road or another?”

The Harlequin tilted its head. “That attitude could get you in trouble in the future, lad.”

It rose to its feet. “But not today, for you've shown wisdom. For that, we're glad.” It clapped its hands together.

The urns jerked in John's hands. “Wha-?” he said, watching the urns fly from him.

In the air, the urns twisted. Elongated. They morphed in shape and size. In a flash of black and white, they turned into high pillars, which came to flank the Harlequin on either side. Black pillar on John's left, white pillar on his right.

The Harlequin's hands clapped together again, this time staying connected. They pushed against one another. The dividing line down the center of the figure receded into it, the face and torso folding in on itself. But it didn't lose dimension. Rather, its form deepened at the crease, and two sides of the body faced one another. These two sides then turned to face John, and he beheld that, where once there was a single Harlequin, there were now two.

They pushed against one another, separating and twirling around. The black Harlequin, with trim of white, spun to John's left, settling before the black pillar. The white Harlequin, with trim of black, spun to John's right, settling before the white pillar.

Both facing John, they extended the hands closest to the center. The black Harlequin spread its left hand down. The white Harlequin spread its right hand up.

“Behold us fools, now come untwined...” said the black Harlequin.

“...for the wisdom you have divined,” said the white Harlequin.

“I am Mundus, the material world...”

“...I am Airy, secrets yet unfurled.”

“You'd get nowhere, with other or one...”

“...now you're complete, let's have some fun.”

“Fun?” John said, stroking his chin. “What's that me-?”

Somewhere in the distance, a bell began to chime. It was but a whisper at first, but it grew. Ding.
Ding. Ding. Dong. The toll of bells, great and loud.

“What's that?” John said, looking around him. The room vibrated with every toll.

“Our precious time, now at an end…”

“...we'll catch up later, our new friend.”

The two Harlequins stepped towards each other, until they stood side by side. The spoke in unison.

“Remember well, Heir of Breath, this little golden rule. When Emperors and Devils fall, give the last laugh…”

John's eyes went wide as the two took out twin plates of whipped cream pie.

“...to the Fool!” They whipped the pies in John's face.

John Egbert bolted upright, blinking rapidly. He looked around.

The Harlequin doll had fallen over at some point, and lay on the floor before John. The young man wiped drool from his mouth. He adjusted his glasses, then looked at his window.

Day had given way to night.

Getting to his feet, John rubbed his back. He felt...weird. Oddly refreshed. Confident, even.

Dave had been right. Apparently, going on some kind of weird vision quest was as easy as meditating hard enough. That, or John had a really weird dream, and he just felt refreshed because he'd had a nap.

Whatever. John would look into it lat-

Ding Dong!

The young man scowled. Someone was at the door.

Given the late hour, John had a feeling he knew who.
Ding Dong!

“Hmph?”

Paul Egbert shook himself awake, looking around. He reclined on his bed, lying on top of the covers. By the light of bedside table lamp, he saw that he had fallen asleep in his full professional garments. What a foolish thing to do, he thought. He should be in his plain, serviceable pajamas...

...his memory returned. He sighed, rubbing his brow. Losing his job must have put quite a damper on his spirits, if he fell to slumber fully clothed, with lamp on, and...yes, he was still wearing his plain, serviceable shoes. Thankfully, he fell asleep with his feet hanging off the bed, so his good sheets weren't sullied by mud. Not that he'd venture far into his own home without wiping his feet first.

These thoughts passed through the man's mind, and he took solace in the calm they afforded him. They gave Paul a measure of control, which seemed so distant now. The man regained a little composure. Focusing on the task at hand – getting a new job – would itself help to assuage the fears and uncertainties that plagued him. Couldn't allow himself to fall apart, when impressing employers with his professionalism was all the more paramount-

Ding Dong!

Paul looked up at the ceiling. The door bell?

Casting a glance to his bedroom window, the man discovered that it was quite late. Or early, as the case may be. A look to his plain, serviceable bedside clock confirmed that it was near midnight. Who would come calling their home at such a late hour?

The man sat up on the bed, listening.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Footsteps. Paul sat stock still, listening to footfalls just beyond the wall to his room. The wall shared with the upstairs hallway.

“...John?” Paul whispered, too quietly to really be heard.

His son's footsteps retreated down the stairs.

The man crawled from the mattress, taking to his feet. A singularly odd sensation affected him. A chill, running down his spine. A weight in his gut. Paul stepped towards his door, harboring an unease that he could not place, but did not doubt.

Quietly, Paul turned the doorknob – he kept the knobs and hinges of the house polished and oiled, as a matter of course. Breathing shallow, he crept from the room and walked down the hall.

Below, he heard the front door open. Paul edged close to the wall, approaching the spot that overlooked the living room.

“Hello, Mister Egbert!” came a voice below. Paul did not place it, though he recognized the professional tone. “Sorry for disturbing you at this late ho-”
“What the hell did you do to my dad!?”

Paul froze, then pressed himself against the wall. Just beyond him spanned the overlook.

The man relished the cover the wall gave him. He did not quite understand, on a rational level, why this was. Instead, he just listened.

Brandon Tallfield frowned, tilting his head to the side and cocking an eyebrow.

“Whatever do you mean?” he said.

“Don't play dumb with me, Tallfield,” said John, scowling. He pointed a finger at the Technocrat. “My dad just lost his job. What did you do?”

The Syndicate rep blinked, then smiled, chuckling softly and shaking his head. “...oh, John Egbert,” he said, touching his brow lightly. “Your instincts continue to surprise me. I'm impressed.”


“Ah, youth...” Tallfield said, shaking his head and displaying his hands, palms up. “Alright, let's skip once again to the point.” He looked down into John's eyes, and flashed that predatory smile of his. “To answer your question, I bought your father's company.”

“You...bought it?” John said, one eyebrow raising. “Can you even...ugh, what am I talking about?” He clutched his head with both hands. “Of course you can!”

“That's correct, Mister Egbert,” Tallfield said, nodding. “I purchased the company your father worked for. It was a legitimate investment opportunity, I assure you. I intend to make a profit from the venture, regardless of what happens. But, as is my right as new owner, I can mandate reorganizations to take place. Your father just 'happened' to be lost in the shuffle. A lot of old blood needed to be shaken off, to make for newer, less costly blood.”

“You...you bought an entire company...just for that!?” John clenched his fists. “Why the hell are you doing this? Is this because I refused to join you?”

“Well, again, investment opportunity,” said Tallfield, shrugging. “Buying the company and having my way with it was always the plan. Doing it to put me in a position to have your father's job in my hands...was also always part of the plan.” The man frowned. “But...circumstances outside my control have left me unable to extend our dealings, like I wanted to. The plan was to continue meeting with you, talking about the Union and its benefits, and ultimately win you over with genteel charm and reasoned debate. The schedule I'm running under no longer makes that possible, so I'm moving forward.”

“You are a jackass!” John said, scowling and pointing a finger at the Syndicate rep. “A heartless douchebag!”

The young man pulled a hammer from his pocket, its head emblazoned with an arcane-looking sigil. “Give my dad his job back!”

Tallfield merely snorted, eying the hammer with bemusement. “Please, Mister Egbert,” he said, “let's not devolve into cave men.” He folded his arms casually. “I can give you your father's job back.”
John blinked, though he remained tensed. “You...you can?”

“Naturally.” Tallfield said. He looked beyond the bounds of the doorway, over John's head. “Mind if I come in, so we may discuss? It's getting cold out here.”

The young man eyed the Syndicate man warily. “...fine...” he said, frowning, retreating into the living room.

Brandon Tallfield shut the door on his way in, smiling. His eyes scanned the living room. “Quite a little homestead you have here, Mister Egbert.” He ran fingers lazily over the top of the wide plasma screen. He glanced at the fireplace, noting the portraits and urns of the Egbert family's fallen women. Tallfield noted with mild amusement all the fanciful harlequin figurines. “Anyone would be proud to live here...assuming one can afford such a suburban lifestyle...”

John narrowed his eyes at the Technocrat. His blood boiled. “Just get on with it, Tallfield. What is this about giving my dad his job back?”

“Well, as the owner of the company, I have the power to make everyone below me do what I want,” Tallfield said, shrugging and displaying his hands. “And your father – Paul Egbert – is a professional, hard-working employee. A great asset to any business. It would be trivially easy...especially so early in the company's restructuring...to call him back and offer him a new job. It happens all the time in business. No one would think it strange, and the company already knows his worth.

“In fact...” Tallfield moved his hands behind his back. “...I could even bring him back with a better position than he was before.” He cast a sidelong glance at John.

The young man stared, transfixed. “...you...you could do that?”

“My boy, I'm disappointed at your lack of faith in me.” Tallfield shook his head, then smiled. “But yes. I have the power to not only give your father his old job back, but to promote him to a higher position. Managing his own department, a raise, a corner office, better insurance...” He held a hand in front of his face, palms up. “Quite a reward for his years of service. And a stepping stone to bigger, better things.”

John swallowed. He narrowed his eyes. “...and all you ask is that I join the Technocratic Union, right?”

“That is the idea, yes,” Tallfield said. “We bring you to one of our facilities, get you set up with our friends at the New World Order. If you play nice, I can assure you their touch will be...light. By this time next week, you will be learning all about how to master those gifts of yours, and your father will have a cushy new job.”

“...does it have to be Syndicate?”

“...I would personally prefer if it was,” Tallfield said, nodding. He stared sideways, looking at the fireplace rather than the young man. “And since I'm the one with the purse strings on your father's company...” He looked sidelong at John, winking.

John frowned. This guy was getting greedy. He wanted John for himself, and was willing to not advance John's father if John chose another Convention.

Fucking hell, this guy was smooth. No, not smooth. Slimy. Like John just got a wad of chewing up stuck to his hair. Again. Fifth grade sucked.
The young man looked at the floor. Tallfield had John over a barrel now, holding his dad's job prospects hostage. But...the Syndicate rep also offered a path for advancement for Dad, too. What Tallfield was doing was patently unfair. Devious, sneaky, and deplorable.

A knot formed in John's stomach. He chewed his lower lip. John looked up.

Over his shoulder, John's servitor informed him of as much of the Syndicate man's state of mind as the man was likely to reveal. Apparently, Tallfield either wanted John to sense just that, or he simply didn't expect John to be able to do much to the man's mind. Because John saw most of the man's emotions laid bare. Honesty, with a heavy undercurrent of smugness.

This guy had every intention of upholding his end of the bargain. John was sure of it. This made the young man even more uneasy.

John sighed, scratching his head. What was he supposed to do? What would Dave want him to do? (“Fuck this guy. Run away and call me.”). John felt the weight of his cell phone in his pocket. If he could just get the guy off his case for a few minutes, he could call. But...should he? Was that the right thing to do?

What would Jade want John to do? (“Don't listen to him John! He's evil! Call Dave or me, and we'll come get you! We have the technology!”). John could run away. Jade could apparently teleport – it was how she interacted with the outside world if she needed to do so quickly. Should John ask them to evacuate him to Jade's island? Should he abandon his life and become a hermit? Would he be able to take Dad with him? Could Dad even come? Or, by being a Sleeper, would Dad bring a whole lot of Paradox down on their heads, just witnessing their magi-science?

Would Dad even be happy, evacuating to a remote part of the world? Would he even agree to it?

John clutched his head. His stomach hurt.

...what would his Dad want him to do?

The young man opened his eyes. He wasn't even sure when he clasped them shut. He stared at his shoes.

He sighed. “Mister Tallfield?”

“Yes, Mister Egbert?” said the Syndicate rep, looking up from where he examined his finger nails.

“...what happens to everyone else, if you give my dad a promotion?”

“Hmm?” Tallfield frowned, blinking. “What about who?”

“Dad's fellow...former fellow employees,” John said, looking up. “His coworkers. What happens to them, if I take this deal?”

“...what does it matter?”

“It matters to me.” John stared at the Syndicate rep intensely.

Tallfield blinked. “...a few people might need to be moved around. Some promoted, some demoted...someone might need to be fired.” He leaned forward. “Is this a problem for you? Because I can't give your father a new position...psh...” He threw his hands up. “Hell, I can't necessarily give him his old position, without moving someone out. Business, like nature, abhors a vacuum, Mister Egbert. Your father's position was filled the moment he emptied his desk. We'd
need to tell some new employee that he no longer has that promotion, because we hired the old guy back again. It's a mess, John, and there's no neat way to solve it.”

John frowned.

“Oh come on, John...” Tallfield said. “...Mister Egbert, I mean. You can't have everything. You can only take the deals you are offered, and make due with tending to your own interests. Just like every other man and woman out there has to tend to theirs. That's the way the system works. We must all look out for our own self-interest, because we can't solve everyone's problems. Often, because the solution would require people to change, and we can't expect that. It's unreasonable.”

He leaned forward. “So, will you take the deal? It's a very good deal.”

“No.”

“...I'm sorry, what?” Tallfield said, frowning.

“I said no.” John stood up straight, frowning at the Technocrat. “And not just because other people will be inconvenienced.” He nodded. “I get that sometimes, we can't succeed without someone else failing. I get that. But that's no excuse to...to do the wrong thing deliberately. To be the bad guy.”

John's eyes narrowed.

“Come on, John...”

“Don't call me John!” said the young man, scowling. “You haven't earned that right!”

Tallfield raised his hands up. “Fine, fine. But Mister Egbert, please. You are missing an opportunity to be something...be someone great. If you join the Syndicate, we'll teach you not just how to exploit wealth, but to create it. To find and generate value to the economy. To make businesses better, more profitable, and better for the community as a whole. Your gifts allow you to see the world as it truly is.”

He turned a hand palm-up. “I have the power to create real, tangible worth,” Tallfield said. “Not just in money, but in...something more primal. A Primal Utility, generated from the sum of human endeavor. I can turn a business into an engine for producing the energy of creation itself.”

John's eyes widened. His nose flared, sniffing ozone.

A ball of light appeared in the Syndicate rep's hand. A rainbow cascade, a sphere iridescent. The air rippled around it. The young man could see it, not only on the physical plane. His senses shifted, allowing him to see it in on planes more exotic and immaterial. Colors that John could not name, yet was sure the light flickered in.

It was the most beautiful thing John had ever seen. “...how?” he gasped.

The Technocrat's eyes lit up. He smirked. “The power of Enlightened methods,” he said. His fist closed, smothering the light. When he opened his hand again, the light was gone. “With an understanding of Hyper-economics, the great chain of human endeavor can be made to dance by our tune. Value itself is a resource, one going sorely untapped in the market. We simply don't have enough Inspired individuals to harness it.”

He waved John closer. “Come now, Mister Egbert. You could be so great. Come over to the Green Side.” He smiled, chuckling at his own little joke. “Your father himself is a businessman. Wouldn't you want to make him proud?”

John Egbert looked down at his feet again.
He frowned. "...no."

The young man looked back up. "No. I don't think so."

Tallfield's mouth twisted into a scowl. "What? Why? What is it now?"

"I mean, of course I want to make my dad proud," John said, gesturing vaguely with his hands. "Of course I do. I love my dad. He means the world to me." He scowled in return. "But I don't think joining you would make him proud. I don't think joining an organization that would use such unethical tactics as you do would make my dad proud of me.

"My dad is a businessman, sure." John waved his hand dismissively. "But he's also a good man. He's a professional, and a man of character. I'm proud to be his son. I don't want to bring him shame by becoming a businessman who cares so little for people's livelihoods. Who buys companies and fires employees, just to...emotionally blackmail a kid into joining his club!" John pointed sternly at the Technocrat. "You, sir, and not someone I want to become."

Sweat formed on Brandon Tallfield's brow. He gritted his teeth. "Do you know what you're saying?" He balled a fist. "Do you have any idea what you're throwing away? Do you understand the money you could be making? The power? The connections? You could become a giant on the world stage, secretly controlling the planet. An elite of the elite! And you'd be able to bring your father along for the ride! Do you understand the opportunity at all?"

"I don't care about money!" John said, balling his fists as well. "I'm a kid! Wealth and power don't appeal to me, Mister Tallfield. Doing the right thing does! And I don't think it's the right thing to join the Technocracy, if it means ruling everyone! I don't want to rule anyone! Power isn't important to me! Money isn't important to me!"

Brandon Tallfield...looked stunned. His eyes went wide, and he looked away. Tallfield clapped a hand over his mouth.

John's eyebrow rose in confusion. Was this guy such a stereotype that he got floored by the concept of a person not wanting money? That would be profoundly stupid, as far as John was concerned.

The Technocrat shook his head, breathing hard. Finally, he swallowed. "You're making a big mistake. I'm still holding your father's job at stake, you know. Are you really going to let him stay unemployed?"

"...my dad would understand," John said, standing straight. "Moreover, he's strong. He's adaptable. And he's professional. He'll find another job. It'll be easy.

Tallfield shook his head, wheezing out a laugh and smiling. "John, it's not nearly that simple. I've got connections, and connections to people who have connections." The Technocrat wagged a finger at the young man. "If you think this is all you have to lose, you're wrong. I can spread around word to every business I can. Spread bad rumors. Get him flagged. I can make sure Paul Egbert never gets hired to any company, ever again." He pointed severely. "It would be easy."

John's lip twitched, but he kept standing firm. "Then we'll deal with that."

"Nngh...!" Tallfield gritted his teeth. Hair began to stick to his brow, with how he perspired. "What the hell?" he muttered.

The man turned away, stalking to a shelf behind the plasma screen. From his position, John could hear the man muttering to himself. Finally, Tallfield reached out and grabbed a pipe from among Dad's displays.
Tallfield turned around, smiling. “Your father is a smoker, right?” He sniffed the air, grinning. He breathed hard, brushing his hair to the side. “Yeah...he's an active smoker, I can tell.”

John swallowed. “...what about it?”

“Well, you know...” Tallfield said, tossing the pipe up and down in his hand. “It's just...I wonder how well your father's health is going to hold up.”

“What do you mean?” John said, but his brows rose, and a weight formed in his stomach.

“Smoking is bad for your health, John. Surely you've heard the PSAs enough by now to know that.” The Technocrat smiled that smug, predatory smile. “Smoking...causes cancer. Duh.”

John's heart stopped. He sniffed, scowling. “...you wouldn't...”

“Wouldn't what?” Tallfield asked, shrugging with the pipe. “Give your old man cancer? We could. The Progenitors do great work. And, if I may facetiously paraphrase a certain book series about wizards, not all that is Great is good. It can be terrible, John.” The Technocrat shook his head.

John's body shook all over. “Go...to...hell!” John said, gritting his teeth. “You're gonna give my dad cancer, just to spite me?”

“You were willing to let your father never have a proper job again,” said Tallfield, “just to spite me. And no, I don't know if even I'd go that far. But...you never know...” He chuckled, returning to throwing the pipe up and down.

“Stop it!” John shouted, clutching his hammer.

“John, John, John...” Tallfield said, shaking his head. “I was joking. Maybe. But in all seriousness, your father is in danger of giving himself cancer all on his own. I don't necessarily need to force it. However...” He pointed at John with the stem of the pipe. “I'm back in a deal-making mood. Join the Union now, and I can make sure that your father never dies of cancer.”

John's eyes went wide. “...you can do that?” His eyes were growing moist.

“Of course we can! We're the Technocratic Union!” Tallfield said, grinning. “We're the Science Illuminati, as you so eloquently named us. Not only can we fix your father if he ever got cancer...with the right drug treatments, we can make sure it never happens in the first place.”

The young man trembled. “...you...”

“What's that?” Tallfield asked, leaning forward.

“You had the cure for cancer all along?!?” John shouted, fists clenched until his knuckles were bone white.

“...well yes...”

“AND YOU'VE BEEN KEEPING IT LOCKED AWAY ALL THIS TIME?!”

Tallfield leaned back, swallowing. “Yes.”

John Egbert shook all over, muscles tensed.

Tears began to form in his eyes. “Why?” he gasped, gritting his teeth. “Why would you do that?”
The Technocrat rolled his eyes. “Ugh...you sound just like the Progenitors...” He sighed. “Why don't you let us release our research? Why are you not letting us give the Sleepers a push forward? Do you want to know why, John Egbert? Do you really want to know?”

John stared, barely restraining murderous fury.

“...it's because we can't just release our cancer cures,” Tallfield said. “Every time we've tried, the Paradox Effect fights back. We can't 'cure' cancer for the general public, because the Consensus will not allow it. THEY will not allow it. Humans refuse to believe that cancer can be cured. Believe me, we're trying. Our boys have such high hopes for Immunotherapy these days. Fingers crossed.” Tallfield then crossed his fingers and held them up. “It's not our fault people are so resistant to being helped. That's just the way it is.”

“NO!”

John pointed his finger at the Technocrat. “Don't you dare blame Paradox for why you can't act! For why you won't do the right thing!” The young man stamped the ground. “Paradox is the reason I can't fly. It's the reason things like unicorns and dragons and fairies can't exist in this world. But...but I'm willing to live with that. I don't need to be able to fly.

“But there are people out there,” John said, pointing away, “that don't have the option of living with cancer. They can only DIE with cancer. Or watch their loved ones die. Or go through grueling, hazardous chemotherapy, just for the chance to survive just a little longer. They go through every day, hoping they or their loved ones get better, and dreading that they get worse. And it just goes on and on!”

“We have the ability to change that.” John took a step forward, jabbing a finger at the Technocrat. “But we don't do it by hiding under the covers every time Paradox rears its ugly head! We do it by fighting through it! We grit our teeth, and plow ahead. No matter how it hurts. No matter how many setbacks. Why?

“Because it's the right thing to do. We have courage and fight through the pain, so we can make a better world. Not a safer world. Not a more orderly world. A BETTER world!”

John got right up to Brandon Tallfield. He looked up at him, scowling. Tears rushed down the young man's face.

He pointed at the fireplace. “A world where no parents, or wives, or husbands and children have to be left alone, because of some disease!”

Tallfield looked between the boy and the fireplace. His eyes spied the portraits and the urns. His expression didn't change. He remained neutral.

John breathed heavily. His fingers twitched.

He wanted to start drawing sigils in the air. To use his tech, and his voice, and his hammer to plaster the man against the wall.

It would be easy.

“John!”

The two mages stopped, then looked up.
“...dad?” John said, staring through teary eyes.

Paul Egbert stood on the second floor landing. He looked down on the living room.

He stared with stern, fatherly concern.
“Come on, honey. Let's...let's get you home.”

The married couple of three years slowly descended the steps of the doctor's office. The husband held his wife around the shoulders.

Sarah Egbert dabbed her eyes with tissue paper. “...Paul...”

“Shh...it's...it's going to be alright...” said Paul Egbert, patting her shoulders.

The husband wished he believed that more than he did. Internally, he prayed to God for strength. They needed it now.

As they reached the car, Sarah leaned against the hood. Her hands slid over the plain, serviceable white paint job. She could see the reflection of the dark clouds overhead. “...what are we going to do, Paul?”

The husband squeezed her shoulders. “We could always try chemotherapy.” He held brochures for chemo treatments in his free hand. He held them up.

Sarah gently pushed them away. “Paul...I can't...”

“It's the only way.”

“I know,” she said, drooping her head. “But...I can't go through with it. What'll happen to the baby?”

Paul flinched, his breath catching in his throat. He reached down and patted her stomach. The first bulge of child was emerging. “...I...I don't know...”

“Paul,” Sarah said, “If I get chemo, the baby is done for. Best case scenario, they'll be born...malformed and...weak...worst case, they aren't born at all. I don't want that for the baby.” She brushed tears from her eyes.

The husband choked, frowning. He hugged the woman close to him. “Sarah!” he gasped.

“Shh...I know...” Sarah returned the hug, patting Paul on the back. “We have to be strong. We have to be strong, for the baby.” She swallowed. “I'm...not going to give up. Not going to let this life be wasted. Not my life, and not this life growing inside me. So...” She gasped, pressing herself into his shoulder. “...so you can't give up, either. You hear me?”

Paul nodded. “Yes...” he said, hugging his wife close. “...I'm not going to give up either. I love you.”

“I love you too.”
“Dad!”

Paul Egbert walked slowly down the stairs. His fingers played with the black tie hanging undone from his collar. Without letting his eyes leave the two mages standing in his living room, Dad restored the tie knot around his neck.

John Egbert rubbed his teary eyes. In one respect, he couldn't be more glad to see his father. In another respect, a pit formed in his stomach. The young man had no idea how a confrontation between Dad and a Syndicate rep would play out.

“Dad...” John said, frowning. Was his father even safe? Was his mind safe?

“...Mister Egbert,” said Syndicate rep Brandon Tallfield, sighing and smiling. “So nice to finally meet you.” He extended a hand.

Paul reached the last stair. He removed his mildly crumpled hat, examining it while he brushed his black hair back with his hand. The man tapped his hat, smoothing the crumples as best he could.

Putting the hat on, he glanced briefly at the offered hand. His expression remained stern and unchanging.

He turned away, walking to his son. “John,” Dad said, stooping forward. “Are you alright?”

Sniffing, John shook his head. “I...I'm alright,” John said, wiping away more tears. “Dad...there's something I...I don't...”

He felt the weight of a hand plop on his head. John looked up.

Dad Egbert smiled kindly. “We'll talk later.”

John blinked, swallowing. “...how long were you listening?”

“The whole time.” Paul stretched his neck, letting a joint pop lightly. “Hoo...when I figured out you knew your guest, I trusted you enough to hope you'd be able to hash things out in civil terms.”

John frowned.

“...of course,” Dad said, standing up straight, “I wasn't aware how...complicated this matter was.” He turned to the adult in his house, bothering his son. “And you are?”

Tallfield exhaled, puffing out his cheeks. “Brandon Tallfield,” said the Technocrat. He raised a hand as if to offer it again, but let it drop. “I represent some...very powerful people. A union of businessmen and scientists, aiming to make this world a better place. Your son is very Gifted, Mister Egbert.”

“I've gathered that, Mister Tallfield,” Dad said, keeping his expression neutral. “...I've also gathered that your meaning of 'Gifted' might be different than mine. I saw that...light show from earlier...”

Tallfield swallowed, looking briefly down at his hand. “...I thought I felt someone walking on my grave...”

Dad scratched his head. “Now...I don't claim to understand everything you two talked about. I'm
just a simple businessman. I don't know anything about Unions or 'Paradox'. But I like to think I can grasp the overall current and severity of a conversation. From my son's distress, he takes this matter – whatever it is – very seriously. And from your words, Mister Tallfield, I can guess that you consider it just as serious. Regardless that it apparently deals with dragons and fairies and...cancer cures.

“Is it true that you bought my place of employment?”

“Yes,” Tallfield said. “It is.”

“Is it also true that while you expected to obtain tertiary benefit from the acquisition,” continued Dad, “your primary purpose in buying the company was to have me fired? All to pressure my son into joining your cabal of shadow government types?”

“...this is also true.”

“Then you, sir, are an unpleasant individual,” said Dad, leaning forward, “and should be ashamed of yourself. This is not the conduct of a proper gentleman.” He adjusted his hat. “Not simply because you cost me my job. I can deal with being laid off. But your activity also cost the jobs of several of my coworkers, many of whom are personal friends. Some of them had families of their own. I don't care if you intended to give me my position back, or even promote me. This will be poor consolation to those caught in the crossfire of your activities.”

“...point taken,” Tallfield said. He shrugged. “I've been called worse...and done worse.”

“That brings me to my next point.” Dad stared into the man's eyes. “Is it true that your shadowy cabal has been withholding one or more cures for cancer from public consumption?”

“Yes.” Tallfield began adjusting his tie. “This may seem heartless, but I can assure you that there is a very good rea-

Dad punched Tallfield in the face, sending him falling back to the ground.

“Whoa!” John said, throwing his arms up. He smiled a bit, then frowned. He didn't know how to feel at the moment. This was good, and bad. “Dad! That was...I don't...”

Brandon Tallfield scrambled to his knees. “Ack...what...” he gasped, clutching his nose. His fingers came away, revealing a trail of blood from his nostrils. “...ach...”

Dad flexed his punching hand, wiggling his fingers. He barely noticed the drops of blood on his knuckles. “Mister Tallfield,” the man said, towering over the Syndicate rep, “are you aware my late wife died of cancer?”

Tallfield frowned, wiping drops of blood from his lip. “...ah...of course. It was in your son's file.”

“We'll talk about that later,” Dad said, brows furrowing. “Are you, perhaps, aware that my wife refused chemotherapy? Or why?”

Tallfield stared intensely, but shook his head.

Dad exhaled. “...we discovered that my wife Sarah had cancer,” he said, “some weeks after she became pregnant with John. While the doctors stated that chemotherapy might help her survive...might...she also knew that doing so would poison John in the middle of development. Removing the cancer surgically didn't promise to help, and inundating her body with radiation in the hopes of killing the cancer before it killed her was...out of the question.”
John froze, a chill running up his spine. He frowned. “...Mom...”

“Sarah did what she felt was necessary,” Dad said, lowering his eyes. “She let the cancer have its way with her, in order to ensure John would make it through the nine months. Of course, by the time John was born, the cancer had progressed beyond any chance of treatment. The doctors were amazed she lasted as long as she did.

“I loved me wife, Mister Tallfield,” Dad said, rubbing his eyes. “God took her in His keeping, and I pray nightly to see her again some day.”

Tallfield rolled his eyes, though he looked away when he did it.

“I know Sarah is with God right now,” Dad continued, “because she was a saint. And she did what most of us lowly creatures can never bring ourselves to do: she sacrificed herself so that her child could live. She was, quite literally, Christ-like.” The man nodded to the ceiling. “She was a phenomenal woman, and I was blessed to have loved her.”

The Syndicate man struggled to his feet, keeping a wary eye on the father.

Paul walked back, standing beside John and resting a hand on the young man's shoulder. “John here was faced with the temptation of a lifetime,” he said, flashing a stern fatherly smile to his son. “He stood here, and instead of taking the easy way out, he stuck to his principles. He knew I would never approve of seeking success and power, at the expense of the innocent.”

John's expression softened, looking up at his father. “...Dad...”

Dad looked to the Syndicate man. “So Mister Tallfield, I don't need John to become a great businessman to make me proud.” The man nodded curtly. “He's a man of character and courage. I couldn't be more proud.”

The Syndicate rep rose shakily to his feet. Scowling, he probed his nose with his fingers. “...ech...ah...AH!” he cried, popping his broken nose back into place. “Aaaaah...fuck...” He inhaled through his nose deeply, wiping more blood away.

Paul Egbert narrowed his eyes. “Now you, Mister Tallfield, are different,” he said. “You come into my house, threatening financial ruin and disease, and using your wealth and connections to blackmail a teenage boy into joining your organization. I don't care who you know, what you know, how much money you have, or even how you do what you do. From where I'm standing, all I see...is a bully.”

Tallfield gritted his teeth. “...are...are you serious?”

“Perfectly.” Dad took a step forward. “I see a bully. And my great grandfather Colonial Sassacre had a saying: Real men don't tolerate bullies.”

He pointed a finger to the door. “Now...I'm asking you to leave.”

The Technocrat gawked, breathing heavy. He looked down at his blood splattered fingers, then over to the front door.

“...gah...you...you are both making a huge mistake...” Tallfield said, gritting his teeth. His normally styled hair fell in locks across his face, matted by sweat. “Do you have any idea what I can have done to you? Do you think you are safe if you just tell me to leave?”

“John,” Dad said.
“Yeah?” John said, looking up at his father.

“Call the police.”

“Okay.” John fished out his phone.

“You think...ha ha...you think the police can help you?” Tallfield said, smiling. His face twitched violently, and he wiped his mouth. “We own the police! We own the press and the government! If you won't listen to reason, I can go further! How do your finances getting erased sound?” He gestured wildly with his hands. “We can take you anywhere! I can-”

Paul Egbert punched Brandon Tallfield in the gut.

“...gah...!” Tallfield gasped, staggering back and clutching his belly. His face was contorted in agony.

“Don't you dare threaten my family ever again,” Dad said, pointing at the Syndicate man.

“Wow...” John mouthed, barely remembering the phone poised in his hand. His finger hovered over the touch screen number pad.

Tallfield retreated to a wall, bracing himself on it. “Hah...guh...” He swallowed, lips quivering.

He looked up at the Egberts with absolute, soul-blackening rage. “...alright...if that's h-how you want t-to play...it...” He raised his arm up, so his mouth was mere inches from his lapel. “GET. IN. HERE.”

John's heart stopped. “Oh shit!” He mashed the touch screen.

“Ha ha...ha ha ha...” Tallfield laughed, wincing and clutching his stomach.

Paul Egbert's stern facade slipped slightly. “What did you do?”

“...haaaah...ha-a-ach!” The Syndicate man gasped, swallowing.

Despite his pain, he smiled that predatory smile. “Back...up...”

Suddenly, a Man In Black kicked in the front door.

“Fuck!” John yelped, nearly losing purchase of his phone. He pulled out his hammer.

The MiB ran inside, followed by two more.

Their skin was bone white and pasty. Their heads shaved. Each wore a identical set of black suits, and on their faces identical pairs of sunglasses. The shades were polished to a mirror shine. The slightest hint of light played across their face, cast from the undersides of the shades.

The MiBs all looked exactly alike.

Crash!

“Wha-?” Dad cried, looking briefly over his shoulder. He looked with confusion and alarm, taking in the agents in front of him.

“Never...go anywhere...” said Brandon Tallfield, holding out a hand so an MiB could grab it, “...without backup...pro tip.”
Two additional MiBs stormed into the living room from the kitchen.

One of them grabbed John by the arm, arresting his hammer-laden hand.

“Ah!” John cried. “Get off!”

“John!” Dad yelled. He ran over and punched the MiB holding his son. His knuckles brushed right against the man's face.

The MiB staggered slightly, then looked back. He wiped the barest trickle of blood from his mouth. His expression was stony.

Paul blinked.

The MiB shoved John away, then coiled his hand into a fist. He struck Paul with a left hook, then a right.

“Aah!” John yelled, falling to the floor. Looking up, he saw his Dad in the middle of a fist fight. Then he saw the second kitchen MiB punch Dad from the side. “Dad!” John cried, trying to scramble to his feet. “Get away from my dad! I-”

His head turned to the side, and met the end of an automatic pistol inches from his face.

“Ah...” John gasped, sinking back down.

“Oof!” Paul grunted, falling to the ground. The two MiBs above him reached down and seized the man by his shoulders.

“Dad!” John cried, reaching a hand out to him. He looked up with hate and fear at the NWO agents. “Let him go!”

“Ugh...”

Tallfield walked forward, towering above the fallen Egbert men. He sighed. “John, John, John...” He shook his head, wiping scarlet from his face with a handkerchief. “You're in no position to negotiate. Call this one a hostile takeover.” He looked around to the MiBs at his side, all brandishing pistols. “Eh? Eh? Oh, you don't care. Nevermind.”

He fished into his jacket and removed his own, more expensive-looking pistol. “So...this is how it's going to work. New deal, ya'll.”

Tallfield stood over Paul, who struggled against the men holding him. He froze as the Syndicate man turned his gun on him.

“You submit yourself to the Union immediately,” Tallfield said, leveling the pistol at Paul's face. He was standing with the entrance to the study situated to his right, the two MiBs flanking the father in front of the kitchen door. “No questions, no debate. You will go without resistance to our little re-education room, and let our fellows at the New World Order do whatever the hell they want with your brain. You will loyally serve the Technocratic Union...as a Syndicate representative...” He smiled, winking at his NWO compatriots, who looked on passively. “In return, I don't shoot your father in the fucking face. How does that sound, John?”

John's mouth fell open. Sweat poured down his face. His stomach sank.

He looked over to his father. The man was putting on a brave face, though he, too, was marked
with sweat and new facial bruises.

John's face sank to the floor. Tears threatened to flow out again. “...okay...I'll...”

“Wait.”

John looked up.

Tallfield eyed John warily. “...take his phone. Carefully!”

One of the MiBs motioned with his gun at John. The young man handed the phone over.

The agent held it up, at arm's length.

“Deviant procedures?” Tallfield asked, keeping an eye out on both of the Egberts.

The agent studied the phone. “...clean,” the MiB said flatly. His brow furrowed. “It is in the middle of a call.”

“With who?” Tallfield asked, keeping his pistol level with the father's head.

“...turntechGodhead...”

Tallfield blinked. “...what the hell is a turntech godhead?”

“Yo.”

A sword swung out from the opening to the study, slicing down through Tallfield's gun. The end of the pistol was severed from its handle, as were three of Tallfield's fingers. Raw steel and blood rained down on the floor.

“AaaaaaaaAAAAAGH!” Tallfield screamed, clutching his spurting hand and backpedaling away from the door.

The three unoccupied MiBs pointed their weapons towards the door.

A teenage boy – no more than fourteen – stepped out from the doorway. In his hands was brandished a katana. On his body, a blood-red lounge suit, with a symbol of a broken record affixed to the breast.

His hair was ivory, and upon his face was a pair of ridiculously cool shades.

John gawked in disbelief. “...Dave?!?”

Dave Strider cast John a glance.

The edge of his mouth curled up, ever so slightly. “You rang?”

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Chapter End Notes

You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this part of the story.

...or how much trouble my faulty internet has given me, trying to post this chapter.
Thanks Time Warner.
“Baah!”

Dave Strider jerked awake, sitting up in his desk chair. Adjusting his eschew sunglasses, Dave jiggled the mouse of his computer.

His friend John was pestering him. Scratch that: pestered him. There was only one line printed on the screen.

EB: technocrats help!

“Shit.”

Dave started hashing out a reply.

“It's a piece of cake to bake a pretty cake. If the way is hazy...”

“Shit!” Dave exclaimed. He clawed at his pants, fishing out his smart phone. Thumb unlocking the device, he examined the screen.

John was calling him. He tapped it, banishing the ironic ring tone. Dave held the phone to his ear. “John? What's wrong? Did the Technos come or...?”

The other boy didn't answer. But John apparently had the foresight to switch his call to speakerphone, because Dave could hear speaking in the background.

Somewhere, Dave heard the sound of a door getting kicked in.

“Fuck!” Dave exclaimed, frowning. He took a breath, forcing himself back into a meditative calm. “...John, if you can hear me, answer! Dog, I...oh fuck this.”

He pulled the device down and started swiping. While the call was ongoing, he ran through additional tools. All of his own design, of course.

Dave brought up one of his more common apps. Tapping in data rapidly, the screen flickered for a second. When it cleared, Dave got a full, real-time view of the room the call was made from.

Oh god, there were MiBs everywhere. Shit. Shit!

“Shit!” Dave barked, gritting his teeth. He spotted John, brandishing a hammer and cowering in alarm. Nearby, Dave spotted a figure dressed in plain, serviceable garb. The Virtual Adept remembered John talking about his father, so Dave recognized him instantly.

In the back, an incredibly douchey looking man in an expensive suit, sitting in the corner and looking really pleased with himself.

Dave narrowed his eyes (not that it could be seen behind his shades). He ran out the door.

Despite the darkness in the hallway, the incredibly cool dude stepped with precision. He didn't need the light.
Skidding over to another room, he kicked the door in. “Bro!”

“Huh?” said the man at the computer, who looked over his shoulder and displayed his impossibly cool anime shades. The shades he had, through the power of prognostication, been wearing for years before the anime he was referencing was actually made. Bro Strider had a katana in his hands in an instant. “Oh, so the tables have finally turned?” He pointed the sword at his brother.

“Not now, jackass!” Dave screamed, throwing his hands up. “Emergency!”

“Oh...” said Bro, lowering the sword. “What kind?”

Dave tossed the phone over to his brother, who of course deftly caught it in his fingers and looked it over. The adult's face remained impassive – smooth and cool. “Friend getting attacked by Technos?”

“Yeah.” Dave tried to maintain a cool facade. Only his shaking fingers betrayed his anxiety. “I need a ride.”

The man stared at Dave.

Dave stared back. He frowned. “...well?”

“I'm kind of already in my pajamas, dude.”

Dave looked down. His brother was, indeed, already in a set of ironic pajamas. Pickle patterned pants and a shirt with a bottle of relish on it.

“Okay,” Dave said, “but just...just send me, okay? I can do it myself.”

“What's the magic word?”

“God fucking dammit!” Dave yelled, throwing his hands up and scowling. He forced his calm back on. This was no time to be losing his cool. His best buddy needed him. “...sigh...please...”

“I would also have taken a rap solo, but whatever.” Bro turned to his computer and inserted a cord into a slot on Dave's phone. A window popped up on the screen, surrounded by windows displaying lines of code in Matrix green. Because Hacking. The man typed rapidly on the keyboard in front of him. “You have one minute to get ready, dude. Go.”

Dave lifted his left hand. Pulling down his sleeve, he revealed a smart watch. He tapped the screen.


The air shimmered. Code lines flickered here and there.

Shush!

Dave's regular lounging jeans and shirt disappeared, replaced instantly with a red suit jacket and slacks. The shirt beneath the jacket was black, and a white tie hung untied from his neck. “Sweet Bro: Run bafflejack program 413,” he said, fussing his tie into the only knot he knew, “T minus one minute.”

The watch lit up with a clock, counting down from one minute.

“Sweet Bro: Run teleport program 1111. Weapon: Katana 13.”
He held his left arm out to the side. Dave clamped his hand around a sheathed katana as it shifted in. The sheath was red, matching his suit. The young man grabbed the handle.

Dave closed his eyes. He drowned out all distraction. Allowed the world to fall away around him.

He felt himself fall away. Became nothing. Allowed time and space to become nothing. Allowed being itself to become nothing.

“Fifteen seconds, dude.”

The young man opened his eyes. He pulled the sword out, allowing the sheath to drop to the floor. The blade shined in the halflight of Bro's computer monitors. Dave held it ready, posing.

Bro pointed to a raised platform in the corner.

Dave nodded, jogging over. He nudged a smuppet off the pad, then gave another curt nod to the puppet sitting on the table nearby. “Cal,” he said.

Cal the Puppet just sat there, staring into Dave's eyes. His gaze was haunting. Were Dave a lesser man – and were Cal not outrageously cool, like all of Bro's stuff – he might have lost his nerve. Dave always found it off-putting how Cal would just sit there. And watch.

Bro turned around briefly. He unplugged Dave's phone and tossed it back. “Get ready.”

“Yeah,” Dave said, slotting the phone into his pocket. He held the sword before him, and placed both hands firmly on the grip. He closed his eyes.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

“Three...two...one...” Bro said. “NOW!”

The world fell away, then returned. Dave Strider felt the ground beneath his feet again. He opened his eyes.

He stood in some office. Clown shit...sorry, Harlequin shit was everywhere. Including a mural on the wall. And John said Dave's family had problems.

Dave heard voices from another room. He sensed the figures standing there before he spotted the open doorway.

“...is in the middle of a call.”

“With who?”

Dave walked forward quietly.

“...turntechGodhead...”

Dave saw some douchebag standing in front of the door, holding a gun.

“...what the hell is a turntech godhead?”

Dave raised his blade above his head. “Yo.”
A ghostly presence floated along entropy-blasted streets.

Off in the distance, the Egbert house came into view.

A black panel van sat in front. From the Presence's senses, a half dozen pale auras filed out and rushed to the building. Three assembled at the front door, while two other circled around to the side.

“No!” the Presence whispered. She doubled her pace, floating forward as she saw one of the life signs kick the front door in.

“Aaaah!”

The Syndicate man leaned heavily against the wall. He clutched his bleeding hand, face contorted in shock. He had lost his cool. With masters of the Art of Desire, the Magic was intrinsically linked to the Cool, and vice versa. Lose the cool, lose the magic. The Syndicate rep was basically out of the fight already.

His compatriots were significantly more on the ball. The three with pistols out trained them on Dave.

No one, save the pain-wracked Syndicate rep, moved.

Dave's unseen eyes focused on the young man on the floor. After all, he didn't exactly need to look to know where everyone was, and how they moved.

One of the MiBs to Dave's right – the ones holding onto John's old man – removed a hand from the father's arm. The MiB reached for his gun.

Dave shot him a look. Everyone in the room flinched.

The MiBs eyed the intruder with practiced caution. The guns in their hands didn't waver.

John sat on the ground, shoulders trembling. “...Dave...”

A clock somewhere in the room ticked. The collection of men were paralyzed with the steady advance of time. The air crackled, as if in prelude to a lightning strike.

The man in the overpriced monkey suit composed himself enough to lean taller against the wall. He looked over the room. To the young intruder, to his men. He gritted his teeth.

“...well?” he barked impatiently. “Kill him!”

The words were scarcely out of the man's mouth before the MiBs squeezed their triggers.

The bullets were scarcely ignited when Dave moved. “John get down!” he shouted.

Dave leapt up, planting a foot on the arm of the couch. He jerked his head down, just in time for a bullet to shatter a framed painting against the wall.

“Ah!” John cried, ducking as low to the ground as he could. He clapped hands over his ears, bullets sailing over his head. “Fuck!”

The Virtual Adept ran along the sturdy back of the couch. Dave batted glass shards away with his free arm. The air was filled with the whistle of ballistics, and the acrid smell of gunsmoke.
Jumping, he flipped, allowing another stray bullet fly under him. Dave landed at the foot of the stairs, then turned to face the adversaries.

Two of the MiBs stopped firing, pointing their pistols up. It was easy to understand why. The NWO agents had arrayed themselves in a line, which allowed them to cover most of the room. Where Dave landed, however, left them with their compatriots in their line of sight. No well-trained unit of gunfighters would ever fire into a crowd containing their own allies, which forced the hands of the ones in back.

The MiB in front of Dave lined up his shot, then fired.

But Dave had already sidestepped the bullet, the instant before it cleared the barrel. The young man took a step forward.

In his mind's eye, Dave saw the future paths erupting from the guns. A web of bullet lines appearing before the bullets were fired. The lines grew sharper as the moment of truth approached. Another shot, and Dave juked to the right, letting the projectile fly harmlessly by.

This fact seemed to dawn on the Man in Black, as his eyebrows cleared the top of his shades. His pistol jerked up an inch.

Closing the distance, Dave gripped the katana with both hands. It shuddered in his grip, and he raised it over his head.

He brought the blade down on the pistol, slicing through it. This Technocrat had the foresight – or perhaps just the dumb luck – to release the weapon. It sparked with steel on steel, then fell from the man's grip.

The MiB, jumping back, examined the young man for an instant. Then, he ducked. Behind him, his two armed compatriots leaned left and right, allowing them to fire without each other in their lines of sight. Movements were perfectly in sync. Their bullets sailed over the first MiB easily.

Dave rolled, evading the bullets. He let one arm flop free, then charged forward. Another sidestep – he felt the wind billow through his ivory hair – and he jumped up. His foot planted on the head of the ducking MiB, and Dave took a higher vantage point. His left hand dug into his coat pocket.

The young man spun in mid-air, his blade knocking the gun out of one of the MiB's hands. Dave's left hand pulled out a sharp, metal star. He tossed it.

...across the room, to one of the men holding John's dad. The shuriken sliced at the man's hand, causing him to drop a gun. “Ugh!” the man grunted.

Dave landed, then spun around again. His leg swiped the feet out from under an MiB, who grimaced as in alarm. To the remaining armed Man in Black, Dave cut up with his sword, barely missing the man's gun.

The MiB tried to re-establish his aim after a near miss. He fired, but the young man evaded him again.

Ducking within arm's reach, Dave twisted the blade behind his head, and under the MiB's arm. With one motion, the young man sliced, stepping forward and extending to full height.

The man's hand still held the pistol, as it tumbled through the aim and landed on the ground. The MiB stifled a yell, clutching his arm stump as it sprayed scarlet.
Dave stood up straight, facing towards the wall. The MiBs flinched back when Dave whipped his katana to the side, drops of blood flying off. The young man didn't bother looking back.

No one dared move. The clock on the wall ticked. The stench of gunsmoke mingled with that of fresh blood.

John Egbert blinked from where he lay on the floor. “...whoa!” he gasped, hands clapped over his head.

Dave's head turned. He displayed a tiny smile at the edges of his mouth. “That's nothing...” His mouth returned to a neutral line. From the side, he eyed the Syndicate rep in the corner. Red pupils stared at the Technocrats. “It only gets worse for you guys from here. Get out now.” He pointed to the open door.

The Syndicate rep shuddered, gritting his teeth. With his unmangled hand, he rifled through his pockets. “Fuck you...” he hissed, pulling out a medical patch.

The Virtual Adept sighed. “...fine.”

The MiB missing a hand froze. In one motion, the young man's blade sliced through his throat.

“But you'll have to buy me dinner first,” Dave said.

The MiB staggered on his feet, spurting scarlet from his neck. Finally, he fell over.

“Fuck!” John yelled, cringing back. His face was agape, eyes lit up with horror. “Dude!”

“John!” said Dad Egbert, sitting where the other MiBs held him. “Language!” He looked at the man bleeding out on his nice white carpet. “...but I agree. That seemed harsh.”

“Relax,” Dave said, looking over at the other MiBs and brandishing the sword in their direction.

The men backed off, but their faces betrayed just the slightest bit of emotion: smoldering rage. In the back, one of the MiBs holding John's father clenched the man's shoulder hard.

“Dave!” John said, getting up on one knee. “You just killed a guy! Why should I relax?” He gesticulated wildly with his arms, pointing to the body.

Dave sighed. “Because, John...”

Suddenly, the corpse in the middle of the room shuddered. All eyes turned to the cadaver as it began to smoke and bubble. Acrid vapor rose from the body rapidly, and the flesh liquified into a milky paste. As it boiled, it ate through the black suit, dissolving it. The blood on the floor began to sizzle, red giving way to white. Feet away, the severed hand followed suit, even dissolving the gun like immersed in a puddle of acid.

“Whaaaat?!” John exclaimed, watching the cadaver dissolve in front of him.

Within seconds, entropy reduced the corpse into a milky puddle, before that puddle too evaporated into a cloud of colorless, odorless smoke. Inside a minute, even the vapor disappeared.

“...that happens.” Dave pointed with his free hand at the spot where once there was a man. “These guys aren't natural humans. They were grown in a lab – genetically engineered clones.”

He looked around to the various MiBs. Dave chanced a glance at the Syndicate rep, who had clapped his medical patch on the back of his damaged hand. The finger stumps had stopped
bleeding, and were in fact rapidly sealing up with scabs. Color began to return to the Syndicate man's face. He stared back at the Virtual Adept.

From across the room, Dave saw sweat roll down the face of Dad Egbert. “...Jesus...” he muttered, staring at the floor.

John's mouth was wide open, as were his eyes. “...Christ!”

Dave gestured to the other MiBs, who continued to seethe with barely contained fury. “The Union can't have Awakened agents everywhere. There's too much world to cover. So they grow these dudes in tubes, load them with biological and cybernetic tricks, and condition them towards absolute loyalty to their squad and the Union. They exist for only one purpose...”

“That's right...”

Dave ducked, bullets firing over his head from behind. He turned around.

An MiB stood in the doorway, pointing a smoking pistol.

Another MiB came up behind him, slipping inside and to the side. “...and that purpose is...”

“...killing Reality Deviants like you.” A third new MiB slipped up on the other side.

All three of them brandished guns.

Dave gulped, noting the unarmed but very dangerous agents behind him were stepping forward and looking surly.

The Virtual Adept mentally chastised himself. He assumed the ones inside the house were all there were, and moreover they caught him monologueing. Rookie mistakes. Bro was going to have an earful for him later.

“...steady, dude...”

Oh, that's right. Bro could just hack Dave's shades and whisper shit to his ear right then. Fuck.

“Dave!” John shouted, sweating pouring down his neck.

“Gentlemen...” said the Syndicate man, who was on firmer footing now. Despite his sweat-drenched face, he smiled casually. He tried – with middling success – to adjust his tie while missing digits. “...this one is all yours. 'Do what thou wilt'...heh heh.”

Dave shuddered. The way he felt all the MiBs smile in unison was just...ugh...

He readied his sword.

John cast a glance to his father. They locked eyes.

Paul Egbert saw his son gesture down his with eyes. The young man patted his cargo pants, then dug around in his pocket.

The man nodded, looking up at his captors.

John breathed in. Breathed out.
Standing up straight, he pulled his home-made smoke bombs out. “Please work!” he shouted, raising them over his head. “Ha!” He threw them to the ground.

The room was rapidly filled with gray smoke.

“What the shit?!” the Syndicate rep shouted, shielding his face and coughing.

Paul Egbert hopped up, stomping once on the foot of one of his captors.

“Ah!” the man yelled.

The father used the slack hold on the man to elbow him hard in the gut. Turning to the other side, he grabbed the single hand gripping his other shoulder and wrenched it free. Whipping around, he landed a punch in the other MiB’s gut as well, followed by an uppercut to the face.

When the smoke went off, the three armed MiBs took one look, then fired on the Virtual Adept.

Dave dove out the way, into the cloud of smoke. In a moment, however, the future paths of the bullets made for him again. “Shit!” he grumbled. Bastards must have thermal vision.

Gripping his sword in a low stance, Dave charged for the armed Technocrats.

Paul winced with every discharge of gunfire. Any one of them could be a stray shot aimed for him...or his son...or his son's friend.

A right hook landed on his jaw. He shook his head, putting up his dukes. He focused on the figured in front of him. He could barely see him through the smoke, but Paul was farther into the cloud. He could work with that.

As with everything in Paul's life, one thing at a time. Tackle the problem in front of oneself, and the rest can be addressed in order.

Paul jabbed, his blow being blocked by the agent. They exchanged blows for a bit; block, punch, punch, block. It brought the father back to his high school days. The old boxing matches were often as loud as the current location, though not quite as sharp. Certainly less smokey.

The father had to admire the agent's technique. He didn't know how to take the idea of men being born in tubes – it wasn't natural. But they were apparently given instruction, and from Paul's observation, this included how to fight. And either they had expert teachers, or they were good learners.

Paul took a jab to the collarbone and winced, but he smiled. This was a better workout than he'd gotten in a long time.

Feeling that old rush, Paul stepped forward, putting on the pressure. The MiB backed up, moving slowly into the kitchen.

The father knew he was at a disadvantage. While he'd kept up with the gym all these years, he wasn't exactly a young man anymore. And...land sakes, but this man was good. Paul pressed his offensive, driving the agent further inside.

It broke every instinct Paul had, but he couldn't run this like an official boxing match. These men
came strapped and ready for anything. They wouldn't say “good match” and let Paul off to lick his wounds. Besides, they wanted his son. That couldn't be allowed.

“Ah!” the MiB jabbed, but met air.

Paul ducked, then sped off to the side. He ran to the counter, leaving his back exposed.

Seeing his weakness – and how the man had run into a corner – the agent gave chase.

Paul turned around, and whipped a custard pie into the agent’s face.

“Mmph!” the agent mumbled in alarm, flailing his arms and staggering back.

Much as it pained him, Paul needed to fight dirty. This match was for keeps.

He charged the agent, punching him square in the cream-covered face.

Dave swung his blade, splitting the last of the new trio's offending firearms. Those were getting annoying.

From behind, an MiB on the floor grabbed Dave's leg. “Shit! Why won't you just stay down, asshole?!”

The downed MiB had a leg wound, severed at the knee, bleeding profusely. Nearby, one of his compatriots evaporated on the floor.

The MiB in front of Dave pulled an object from his suit jacket. He flipped open the switchblade, and swiped at the Virtual Adept.

“Get off!” Dave shouted, deflecting a lunge from the front and pulling awkwardly at his leg. He sensed to his side an approaching MiB, staying hidden in the smoke cover. Hidden to everyone but Dave.

In his mind's eye, Dave saw the approach. “Ha!” he cried, slashing at the man. This forced the dude to back off.

Then a figure snuck up behind him and clocked the MiB on the back of the knees with a hammer. A figure roughly as tall as Dave. The MiB sank to the ground, clutching his legs.

The Virtual Adept smiled. “Thanks dude,” he said. Gritting his teeth, Dave swung his sword to create space in front of him. He needed a new tactic. “Sweet Bro!”

His watch lit up. Dave tossed his katana in the air. “Run teleport program 1016,” he said, watching the knife wielding MiB look up in the air in confusion. “Weapon: Tachi 4!”

Dave leaned back, elbowing the MiB on the floor in the face. His other hand he held out to the side.

A Japanese short sword materialized in his grip. Leaning back forward, he sliced the knife MiB on the wrist. The switchblade tumbled from his fingers.

The Virtual Adept got up on one foot and stomped the other MiB in the face. The bastard finally let his leg go – maybe from repeated face injury, maybe from blood loss – and rolled over. Dave spun around, slashing the standing MiB in the abdomen, then spun again to kick the floor MiB in the
The standing MiB – now severely bleeding – gasped in surprise as Dave's katana fell tip-first onto the man's back, impaling him just below the shoulder. “Ack!”

Dave switched the tachi to his off hand, then leapt onto the man's shoulders. He flipped up and over, spinning in mid air. His dominant hand wrenched the blade from the man's flesh, and Dave landed behind him. One last spin, and Dave decapitated the staggering agent. Nearby, the agent who lost his foot started to bubble and sizzle.

The dust was starting to clear. Not that it mattered to Dave, who currently had a full 360 degree map of the room in his head. He ran towards the wall and swung his sword. “Where do you think you're going?”

Brandon Tallfield froze in his tracks, the Virtual Adept's blade stopping just short of his neck. “Gack!” the Syndicate man grunted, holding his hands up. “…s-surely we can come to a deal that will benefit both of us.” He smiled nervously.

“Yeah,” Dave said, leaning his head forward. A hard line was his mouth, his face stone. “You get the fuck off my friend John's ass, and I let you leave alive.”

“This friend John?”

Dave froze. He didn't need to look over his shoulder.

Just because he had 360 degree view doesn't mean he couldn't get tunnel vision.

The smoke cleared. Standing near the couch was an MiB. He held an invisible person in a headlock, with a pistol to his head.

“Drop the cloak,” the MiB ordered to his side. He pressed the muzzle of his pistol to an invisible head.

“Ack! Nngh!” came a voice in the agent's grasp. After invisibly struggling a moment, the person sagged. Slowly, John Egbert came into view.

“John!” yelled Dad Egbert, holding a delirious MiB by the back of his collar. He threw the man into the room, but froze when the other MiB clicked back the hammer on the pistol.

“Dammit!” Dave grunted, wrestling with the idea of turning to face the action. His eyes remained, for the moment, fixed upon the Syndicate rep.

“...gah...” John grunted, grasping at the NWO agent's burly arm. “...how...?”

“Your cloaking field is impressive...” said the agent, nuzzling the pistol's barrel into the young man's hair. “…for a Reality Deviant...”

“However...” An MiB emerged from the smoke, nursing the back of his knee. “...it is a trick the Union is well acquainted with...”

From near the stairs, an agent with a bleeding facial cut stood up, wiping off his coat. “...and, once witnessed, easily countered...”

The MiB at Dad's feet rose, wobbling back and forth and rubbing his head. “…we allowed your trick from days ago to pass by. We could have retrieved you at any time.” He stumbled to the
doorway to the study, giving Paul a view of their hostage.

“Let my son go, you...you monsters!” Paul shouted. But he remained where he was, rooted to the spot. His lower lip quivered, and cold sweat broke out on his body. Blood rushed away from his skin, leaving him deathly pale.

The MiB holding John took one look at the adult Egbert, then looked to Dave. “Stand away from Mr. Tallfield. Now.”

John squirmed, struggling for breath. “...Dave! Don't do it!”

Almost too minutely to be noticed, Dave's body trembled. He kept his eyes on the Syndicate man, and his blade pressed to his throat.

“I will not ask a third time,” said the MiB. “We do not care about this Reality Deviant. We can afford to execute him.”

Tallfield, hands still in the air, smiled smugly. “I think you'd better do as he says. While losing Mister Egbert's talents would be an unfortunate waste, you all are turning out to be more trouble than you're worth.” He swallowed.

Dave gritted his teeth, but kept his face as impassive as he could muster. Lose the cool, lose the magic.

He lowered the sword, stepping away.

Brandon Tallfield rose to his full height, stepping towards the doorway and looking back in. He stared down at Dave, flashing a predatory grin.

Dave gripped his blades tight. Tight enough they hurt.

“Dave...” John gasped, hitting his captor's arm impotently. Somewhere, he’d lost his hammer.

The MiB at the study doorway motioned Paul into the room. Grudgingly – fearfully – Paul complied, walking inside. He absently nursed his knuckles, casting a cold glance at the agent's bruised, bloody, cream-splattered face.

In the middle of the room, the MiB holding John kept his unseen eyes on Dave. “Drop the weapons.”

The Virtual Adept frowned. Blades shook in his hands.

“Drop the weapons now, or I will- AGAH!”

The MiB's head jerked to the side.

The room froze. All of the other MiBs turned their heads towards the hostage taker.

“...drop...the w-wea-...cack!” The agent twitched, sweat forming on his brow. His hold on the young man loosened.

“...uh...” John said, blinking.

Tallfield looked around at his NWO backup. “...can someone tell me what's going...?”

“HEGAGURGUR!” The hostage taker's head jerked every which way, his body shuddering
violently. Finally, his face snapped to attention, looking around.

The severely beaten MiB pushed away from the wall. “No!” He stumbled toward his compatriot.

The hostage taker removed the gun from John's head, and fired into the attacking MiB's gut.

“What?!” Tallfield yelled, clutching his hands to his head. He watched in confusion and alarm as the wounded MiB slumped to his hands and knees. “What the fuck?!?”

“He has been compromised,” barked one of the MiBs.

Another chimed in. “An alien intelligence has invaded his mind.”

The two MiBs started to move towards him, but the traitor pointed the pistol at each of them. They froze.

“An alien intelligence?” Tallfield grunted, stepping farther towards the door. He put the corner of the doorway between him and the action.

Dave cocked an eyebrow. “...is this you?” he whispered.

“Naw,” came the voice of Bro in the Virtual Adept's ear. “Not me.”

John looked up at the agent holding him. The man lowered John to the ground, then patted him on the shoulder...affectionately? “...what's going on?” He thought a moment, then said, “...who are you?”

The NWO agent smiled.

“Hoo Hoo Hoo!”

In the corner by the fireplace, beneath the portraits and urns, Paul Egbert gasped. “Mom?”
Minutes Ago (But Not Many)

A Without-home Veteran smacked the side of his television.

The hobo fiddled with the rabbit ears on top, and pressed the TV's buttons rapidly. The static on the screen shifted. His weary eyes stared into the fuzz.

It was very late. The hobo really ought to be asleep at that hour, but he couldn't sleep. The monorails running next to his squat had changed train schedules recently. As such, he'd spent the last several days in fits of panic. Sudden loud noises – the blare of a rushing locomotive – disturbed him at hours he wasn't accustomed to. They brought him back to the war. To the burst of improvised explosives and gunfire. To the whistle of missiles and the...

He shook his head. The hobo had the revised schedule now, and was working to internalize it. Only then would he be able to keep his emotional defenses up at the right times. As it was, he had to keep them up all the time. For the old, shell-shocked soldier, it was exhausting.

Plus, the Mayor hadn't had time to catch up on all his work. He'd spent plenty of time earlier trying to watch the actual mayor's office, before another panic attack took him out for hours. City Hall would be closed now – even the burners of late night oil gone home for the weekend – so that would have to wait.

The Hobo Mayor needed some distraction. Why not look in on an old friend?

He smacked the side of the TV one last time, and a picture formed on the screen. Smiling, the hobo sat back. He yawned into his hand. Bleary eyes looked at the picture.

They did not like what they saw.

John Egbert and his father were under attack by men in suits. The hobo's heart leapt, and he shivered. The little white boy had somehow gotten the attention of the government!

The Mayor smacked his forehead. It kept happening!

He leaned forward, examining the scene unfolding. A cloud of smoke was dissipating around the floor of the living room. By the family couch, one of the government spooks held the poor lad in a headlock, with a gun to his head. The Mayor frowned, shaking with alarm.

Elsewhere in the room, John's father threw one of the spooks in the room. The hobo Mayor had peeked in on the Egbert household a few times before, and noted the boy's father. He was a strong and disciplined man. But his expression mirrored that of the hobo's. It was a nightmare, seeing one's boys in danger.

In another corner, another young boy held a sword to the neck of a man in a designer business suit. This gave the hobo pause. He couldn't quite see the boy, though he could tell he was roughly the height and age of John. He also may have had a stock of snow white hair, but he was quite blurry.

Was the boy utilizing some kind of Influence to prevent remote viewing? Could this lad be
powerful in his Gifts to render such bafflement? The Mayor stroked his chin. He supposed he could pierce that veil of secrecy, if he really wanted. It wouldn't even be that difficult, from what he could see.

As for whether he ought to, the hobo could only guess. The boy held swords to a man in a business suit. Was this boy in league with the spooks, and harassing one of the Egbert father's business associates? On the other hand, it seemed profoundly silly for the government to employ a mere boy in one of their operations, no matter how skilled in Influence the boy may be.

Could it be that the boy in the...yes, the red suit...could he be allied with the Egbert family? The hobo was confused.

Whatever the case, it looked like the hobo's good buddy was in a fix, along with his family and friend (also family?). The Mayor trembled. He needed to do something, Overt Influence be damned. John could really, seriously die, and there was no one in a position to help hi-

...was that a ghost?

The hobo blinked. Floating around the room was a blurry video artifact.

He knew what those meant. The Mayor leaned closer, and started tapping the volume button. It wouldn't alter the sound coming out of the TV, but rather shift the picture. Expose what was on another layer of reality.

There! After a few clicks, the apparition came into view. It looked like...a ghostly old lady. The hobo blinked. Then he looked to the fireplace, and saw the portraits above the mantlepiece. That of a young woman hanging next to an old woman.

Oh.

The phantom floated behind the man with the gun, then flew into him. The hobo could see the struggle of souls, as one spirit attempted to hijack the other. The possession seemed to work, as the body calmed and the ghost didn't retreat.

For whatever reason, the most wounded spook charged the possessed one, but he got a bullet in the stomach for his trouble.

Oh!

The hobo leaned back in his rusted metal chair. He breathed a sigh of relief. While the fight was not over – enemy combatants still remained – the position of strength had switched. With the timely intervention of a Wraith, the tide had turned.

A selfish part of the Without-home Vagrant was sort of glad not to have to intervene. At least, not ye-

The picture spontaneously shifted, static flaring until a new picture settled in. That of a man in a room, walls covered with...strange posters and hanging puppets. On the shelf in the corner, a most...disturbing dummy stared at him with cold, dead eyes.

The man stared at him too, though it was difficult to tell behind the triangular sunglasses. The man wore a t-shirt with a bottle of relish on it.

“...the hell are you?” the man said, cocking an eyebrow.
The hobo blinked, sweat forming on his dark forehead. He looked from side to side, then pointed at himself.

“Yes, you,” the man said. His face turned to some other part of the screen, though it was difficult to tell where he looked with the glasses. “Who the hell are you?”

The Mayor, swallowing, signed a message with his hands. He utilized Advanced Sign Language.

John's friend...from afar.

“...okay...” the man said after a moment. He tapped something on the keyboard in front of him. “Look, I've got this. Just...don't do anything. We'll talk when this is over.”

The hobo nodded frantically. After a moment he relaxed, seeing the man's face (and his abhorrent dummy) disappear, replaced with the scene of John's living room.

Unfortunately, things seemed to have deteriorated.

John Egbert stared up, agape.

“...Nanna?”

“Hoo hoo hoo!” the agent hooted, in a falsetto voice. “Yes, John.” He patted the young man's shoulder, then moved the gun back and forth between targets. “Everything is going to be alright now.”

Two of the other MiBs stared at their possessed team-mate, gritting their teeth. Another sat on hands and knees, clutching his bleeding stomach.

Near the doorway, Brandon Tallfield opened and closed his mouth rapidly. He shut his eyes. “...Egbert mother...” He shook his head. “A...residual psychic imprint of Jane Egbert.”

“Oh my,” said the possessed agent, a bit of a southern drawl leaking out. “No one has called me that in years.” He smiled a broad, goofy smile. “Just call me Nanna.”

“Mother!” Paul Egbert said, hands reaching out to the agent. “Is it really you?”

“Hello Paul!” the agent said. “You've kept the house quite clean all this time. I mean, it doesn't look that way from the other side...and rather unpleasant view, so to say. But I always knew you'd take care of the house. You were always such a neat boy. I'm glad to see that my faith was well founded.”

“...mom...” Paul said, his eyes going misty.

“Wow,” Dave said quietly, whistling. “I feel totally out of place at this Egbert family reunion.” He looked to one of the agents. “I mean, are you getting this? So awkward.” He held up his tachi and shrugged. “Gonna be weird tonight. Like, dear diary, fought some Technocrats. Then John's dead grandma possessed a dude and shot a guy.”

The agent turned slowly towards the Virtual Adept and scowled.

“...what?” Dave said. “Replicants don't keep diaries?”

Tallfield rubbed his head with both hands. “Okay, this is getting stupid!” He pointed with the only fingers on his mangled hand. “You three! Deal with this before I go fucking insane! Put a stop to
this flagrant Reality Deviance!”

The agents remained silent for a moment. Their eyes flickered around the room. The one with the bullet in the gut rose shakily to his feet.

Finally, the three of them held their hands out towards the others in the room. One faced Dave, another faced Dad Egbert, and the last faced John and the Nanna agent.

All four targets suddenly doubled over, clutching their heads.

“Ah!” Paul yelped, clapping a hand over his hat.

Dave pressed the handles of his blades to his temples. “Nnggh...ffftttt! Shit!”

Nanna agent shuddered, using his free hand to rub his bald head. He/she hissed, gun wavering in his grasp.

At her side, John followed suit. “Aaaah! Argh!” he groaned, breathing heavily. “What the hell is going on?”

Nanna agent staggered, dropping the gun to the floor. “Ah...ah...arargh!”

“Shit, shit, shit!” Dave said, gritting his teeth. “These bastards! Argh! Mental...attack...fuck, this hurts!”

The agents focused exclusively on their targets.

At the periphery of the action, Brandon Tallfield smiled. “Yes...yes, that's good.” He rubbed his hand, hissing as he tried to wiggle his remaining fingers. “These idiots cost me good fingers. Gonna have to ask the Progenitors for replacements.” He shook his head. “Oh well...at this rate, I'll be able to bring two superstitionists back to Room 101. So, it's not a total loss.”

He turned towards the door. Over his shoulder, he shouted back, “When you've got them knocked out, haul them out to the vans. I'll grab reinforcements, and maybe call the Void Engineers to bust this ghost problem.”

“Oh!” John screamed. He looked over to the retreating Syndicate rep. “No...you did NOT just...argh...make a G-ghost Busters joke! That's...fuck...my thing!” He shook his fists at him.

“Don't care!” Tallfield said, waving back without looking. One foot was in the door frame.

“Not...ugh...” Dave stumbled towards the door, the vein on his temple threatening to pop. “...you aren't...shit, shit...getting away...I...agh!” He stumbled to his knees. The swords tumbled from his grasp, and he clutched his head. “AAAAGH! Fuck!”

John stared out towards Tallfield. His head was on fire.

He had to stop it. Had to block it out.

John shut his eyes. Breathe in, breathe out. Focus. Center.

In his mind's eye, he built a brick wall. A wall of brick, a foot thick. Focused on the wall. Just the wall.

He opened his eyes. The stabbing pain in his mind – like a frozen ice pick – abated. He saw the agent devoted to him stare back at him, concerned.
John glared at him.

He looked around. To his father, who held himself up by clinging to the mantle piece. To Dave, who scrambled blindly on the floor, trying to find his swords. To the MiBs, who suddenly had increasingly more interest in John.

To the MiB at his side, housing the soul of his departed grandma. The body that technically wasn't hers.

An idea began to form in John's mind.

June 2009

TT: If we're to talk about magical theory, we should start with the rules of Sympathetic Magic. No discourse on mysticism would be complete without it.
EB: oh man, that sounds daunting. is this different than chaos magic and hermetic magic?
TT: Oh nothing like that, John. We're talking magical theory here, which has everything to do with Chaos Magic and Hermetic magic.
TT: And it's not that complicated. Really. In fact, Sympathetic Magic is as simple to understand as it is universal. Virtually every culture and mystic current subscribes to Sympathetic principles, to one degree or another.
EB: oh. that sounds cool, i guess. what is sympathetic magic?
TT: Sympathy is the principle that states that everything in the universe is connected. As above, so below. That all things carry a sympathy to each other, which the mystic seeks to exploit.
EB: nope. still don't get it.
TT: Think of it this way. Imagine all of creation, from the dirt to the animals and plants, to us humans, all the way up to the stars themselves. Imagine that all of these things are a great spider web.
EB: a spider web?
TT: Exactly. A great web, where everything is connected. And when one vibrates one strand of the web, that vibration carries to other parts of the web. And you, the magician, are a spider on the web, enacting your will upon it.
TT: Sympathetic Magic is the fundamental rules that govern how the world reacts to mystic acts, and how the mystic can exploit those rules.
TT: At least, as far as mystics are concerned. With me so far?
EB: i think so. when you do magic, you vibrate the world wide web?
TT: I don't quite think the internet factors into it.
EB: i don't know. i think dave might disagree with you.
TT: Hmm?
EB: nevermind. it's not important.
EB: what are these rules of sympathy?
TT: There are two of them: The Law of Similarity, and the Law of Contagion.
TT: Similarity is very much the essence of As Above, So Below. Like affects like, and the mystic can do his or her Will by using materials and performing actions that are as their intended effect.
TT: Or more simply, you act out the magic you want to happen.
EB: act it out?
TT: Yes. There are almost unlimited examples. For instance, a tribal warrior might
paint their face like a tiger, wear a tiger skin, and even append the name of Tiger to their own. This in order to endow himself with the tiger's hunting prowess.

TT: Upon reflection, this may also be behind the same sort of thinking that drives modern soldiers to take animals as their mascots and symbols, so as to channel their strength.

TT: Another form of Similarity may be when a person thinks their home has been afflicted with evil, and they use a broom to symbolically sweep the evil influence out the door.

TT: Or when a ritualist draws a ritual circle, or a line at a doorway. They are erecting a symbolic barrier to other forces.

TT: Or when mystics perform this or that casting at midnight, or on the solstice, counting on those times being transition periods. Presumably, the laws of the world are weaker there, and more easily exploited.

TT: Then there's always the classic voodoo doll, an effigy crafted in the image of a person. The mystic performs violent (or, less commonly, beneficial) acts against the effigy, thereby affecting the real person in a corresponding way.

EB: wow. i didn't know there were so many ways to do magic.

TT: Humans have been thinking on the process since humans could think. So it's no surprise.

EB: what if i...i don't know...wore a ghostbusters shirt?

TT: Huh? Please elaborate.

EB: i mean, i wear the image of a ghostbuster on my chest. and because of that, i end up channeling them. so if ghosts came around, they'd know i was bad news and not mess with me.

TT: Interesting. Employing a pop icon anathema to spirits, as aegis against spirits.

EB: ivan reitman...that's the guy who played egon in the movies...once explained that one of the purposes behind ghostbusters was as a means of teaching children not to be afraid of the supernatural.

EB: that it can be beaten, so you shouldn't be afraid of it.

TT: That is even more interesting. Ghostbusters is apparently even more anathema to the unquiet dead than I had imagined.

TT: I think I will leave the exploration into pop culture as a medium for magic to you, the chaote. Is that alright, John? You seem to have a better head for it.

EB: yeah, that's alright. i can work with that.

EB: so...what about the second law? contagion? i gotta say, rose, i don't think i like the sound of that.

TT: It's not as sinister as it sounds, believe me. Or rather, no more sinister than the intent of the magician using it.

TT: The Law of Contagion states simply that any two things that were in contact with one another, remain connected on a mystical level.

TT: And this connection can, therefore, be used to effect change on one thing by using the other.

TT: It's a method of targeting, if you will. In our analogy, just because two sections of web are disconnected in reality doesn't mean the strands of web are cut as well.

EB: how do you use that? and what do you mean by connected?

TT: The strongest and most obvious connections, of course, are between a body and its constituent parts.

TT: This is why many spells from around the world mandate the inclusion of a target's hair, nails, blood, or...other body samples. These things were once part of the body, and hardly anything can truly be more in contact with a person than that which once made them up.

EB: i think i see. like, it gets your dna, and so the spell knows where to go?
TT: Genetics is a new science, but magic has long understood that one's body (especially the blood) carries a signature of one's being.
TT: Going back to the voodoo doll, the effigy is often made incorporating parts of the target's body. To better cement the connection.
TT: But if body samples are not handy, one can also gain a connection using a treasured object of the target. Wedding rings, favorite hats, piece of uniform, wallet.
TT: Material objects that were not a part of the person's body, but which held a significant place in the person's life. They also share a connection.
EB: huh. sounds like being a practicing magician takes a lot of snooping around people's homes.
TT: I would assume so.
EB: it also sounds like i really need to be careful what i do with my nail clippings.
TT: I advise against becoming neurotic about your possessions and body leavings. Magicians aren't likely to be that common anymore, and you can attempt to craft charms of protection if you really feel threatened.
EB: i guess so. i mean, how often am i really going to make the enemy of a wizard?
TT: Indeed. Moreover, I suspect your father would provide a rather significant connection all on his own, which could be used to attack you.
EB: my dad? why?
TT: Well, it's as I said. Blood provides a connection. This can refer both to one's own blood, and one's bloodline. Your father provided you your blood – part of it at least – and so is connected to you mystically.
EB: oh man. so my dad could be used as a contagion against me?
TT: If a magician truly cared to, yes. But I'd worry even less about him, because a businessman is unlikely to attract anyone's attention.
EB: you're probably right. it just gets me paranoid.
TT: I'm told wizards are, in general, paranoid. Although, this also illustrates another point.
TT: If you cared to, you could use someone else's family to get to them. Establishing a connection through the blood of heredity.
EB: hmm...interesting...

September 2010

“Hmm...”

John looked at each MiB in turn. He might be able to get to the wounded one if he booked it. And that one was on his last legs as it was...

Wait, no, the guy noticed John looking at him, and pulled a blood-splattered taser from his jacket. The prongs crackled and buzzed.

The young man sighed. They really weren't giving him a safe alternative. “Nanna?”

Nanna agent shuddered, peeking one squinting eye down at him. “...ack...yes...dear?”

“I'm sorry,” John said. He gritted his teeth and hissed, frowning. “I'm really sorry, but...”

He clapped his left hand over his right fist, winding up. “Egbert...”

John jammed his elbow hard into Nanna agent's gut. “...Multi Elbow!”
Shocked, Nanna agent bent over, clutching his stomach.

This was followed immediately after by all three other MiBs jerking where they stood, and doubling over themselves.

The Egberts and company shuddered, their headaches abating.

Paul Egbert looked over to his son. “John!” he yelled, hands at his head. “What did you do to your...what the...?” He noted the debilitated MiBs. A mere meter from him, the wounded one sank to his hands and knees, and began puking blood. “Jesus!”

At the doorway, a curious Syndicate rep peeked inside. “…what the hell is going on?” he whispered. He saw the MiB throwing his guts up, and broke out into a cold sweat.

“...what...the...fuck?”

Dave rose to his feet, face turned away while he wiped tears from his eyes. “…shit...damn, John,” he said, picking up his blades. “What'd you do to them?”

John clenched his fist. “These guys are all clones, right?” he said. “Well, I figured that between their shared genes and their hive mind, they must have one hell of a Sympathetic bond going on. Enough that it can be exploited.” He frowned, turning to Nanna agent. “Again, I'm really sorry Nanna. Are you okay?”

The possessed MiB stood up, clutching stomach and head both. He gave a faint smile. “Oh, I'm quite alright, John. I'm a ghost. This body is a rental. Hoo...hoo...hoo...” He coughed, then looked around. “Although...I think you might want to try that trick again, John.” Nanna agent pointed to his face.

“Mom,” said Paul, “are you sure?” He looked around, and saw the MiBs fight through their pain, and attempt to raise their hands again. “Oh dear.”

Nanna agent winked at John, nodding.

John shrugged, frowning. “Alright...” He pulled back a raised fist. “Egbert...”

The fist slammed into the agent's face. “...Multi Punch!”

“Oh god dammit!” Tallfield cried from around his corner, watching his flunkies all pitch backwards in unison, blood flying from their faces.

The severely beaten and bleeding MiB fell over on his back and stopped moving. From his mouth gurgled bloody sounds. The others sort of staggered around, clutching their faces.

“Alright, enough of this,” Dave said. Raising his katana, he leapt into the air and slashed at the nearest MiB. The man's head came free from his shoulders cleanly. The corpse started dissolving in seconds.

“...right!” Dad Egbert cried, raising a fist and punching the dazed MiB closest to him. The force of the punch sent him flying into the wide screen TV. As he settled on the ground, the tottering machine pitched forward and landed on top of him.

John helped the possessed agent up, carrying him to the couch. The man collapsed to the cushions, groaning and clutching his face. “Nanna! Are you sure you're alright?”

“...hoo...hoo...hoo...” The man leaned back, blood trailing from his nose. Nanna agent raised a
single thumbs up. “Quite a...strong arm you have...John...”

John nodded, then turned around.

The Syndicate man – eyes wide in horror – yelped, cringing back.

“Tallfield!” John growled, shaking his fist. He pointed at the Technocrat. “I'm going to kick your ass!”

The color rushed from Brandon Tallfield's face, and he bolted to the front yard.

John ran after, standing just on the inside of the doorway. He extended his index finger in front of him, and focused. Breathe in, breathe out.

Scowling, John vibrated, “Tempest...Toss!” He traced an improvised sigil, which ended with his spinning his finger in a spiral pattern.

In front of him, a gust of wind sprang forth, spinning into a horizontal funnel.

“AaaaaaaAGGHGH!” Tallfield screamed, the wind blowing him off his feet. He flew forward, flailing his arms and legs.

He slammed face first into a black panel van. It took him a full second before the wind abated, and he fell hard to the ground. “Uuuugh...”

John smirked. “Serves you right!” he shouted, then closed the front door.

“Can you believe that guy?” John said, walking inside. “What a...jerk...argh!”

The young man clutched his chest. It felt on fire. “Aaagh!”

“John?!” Dad said, rushing over.

In the corner, Dave looked over alarmed (as he could, behind the shades). Covertly, he lifted up the plasma screen TV and quietly stabbed the MiB crushed beneath it in the back. Dave let the TV fall back down, vapor forming underneath, and ran over to John.

Dad clutched his son by the shoulders, helping him stay on his feet. “John! What happened?” Dad said, frowning. “Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

John held a hand to his chest, hissing between his teeth. A stain of red formed on the front of his shirt.

Chapter End Notes

You'd think that the CSS formatting would work with me just a little bit. For this update, I decided to write up all the span tags into the text in my word processor, rather than applying it in the posting window. Because, for the last week or two, my wireless router keeps dropping the connection for reasons I can't fathom, and I have to perform arcane rituals to get it to work again. I figured, why chance it? If I format it beforehand, I can shove the chapter out without risk of the internet crashing and losing all my work.
NOPE! Oh, it keeps *most* of the formatting in the span tags. It's *almost* workable...except for whatever reason, whatever formatting A3O does automatically removes the class inside the parenthesis. It's just gone. All of the framework is still there, but I still have to go through - line by line - and paste the relevant character every time I want to do pester logs.

Is it apropos that I basically have to learn arcane wizardry to get what I want to happen with this site? Because it sure as hell *feels* like it.
Ascension's Right Hand

“John! Hold on!”

Paul Egbert carried his son to the couch, planting him down beside the NWO agent (currently possessed by the ghost of Paul's deceased mother).

Dave Strider came up the other side of Paul, looking at John. “Is he okay?”

“I don't know,” Paul said, staring at the boy's blood-stained shirt. “John, I need to take a look at it.”

John nodded, eyes closed. Slowly, he pulled his shirt up.

Paul and Dave looked close. John's chest wept blood from a crude, arcane sigil. It looked like an upward pointing trident, with a cross at the lower end.

“Huh.” Dave scratched the back of his head. “Guess he wasn't shot or anything. Hey John, did you do this?”

“...ugh...” John groaned, eyes shut, “...what?”

“Did you carve this symbol into your chest, dude?”

“Did he what?” Paul exclaimed, looking back and forth between the boys.


Dave shrugged. “Okay. Just Paradox then. No big deal.”

“What?!” Paul said. He looked back and forth more rapidly, face contorted in confusion. “What is Paradox? What's going on with my son!?”

“Paul.”

The father calmed down, looking up.

The possessed agent waved him down. “Don't get your knickers in a twist, dear. Everything is going to be fine.” He smiled, voice in a high falsetto. “John is going to be fine.”

Paul blinked. “…I don't understand,” he said, rubbing his face. He looked down at the bloody wound in his boy's chest. “I don't understand what's going on at all.”

John frowned. “Dad…”

“Oh Dave,” said Nanna agent, brushing a line of blood from his nose and pointing up.

“Sup?” Dave said, looking remarkably calm, in spite of the situation.

“Be a dear, and run get a clean wash cloth from the kitchen. There should be some in the second bottom cabinet on the left.”

The boy shrugged. “Okay.” He ran off.

“...Mom...” Paul said, taking off his hat. “...is it really you?”
“Yes, Paul, it really is,” said the agent. With some difficulty, he removed his sunglasses, tossing them aside. “You've grown into a fine man, and a wonderful parent. Your father would be proud to see you now.”

Paul nodded. “...I just...I don't understand anything now. Who were those people? Why did they want John? How...” He looked uneasily at his son. “...how did he...and...” He shook his head, sighing.

“I don't have all the answers, Paul,” said the agent, reaching out and patting the man's knee. “I'm just a Wraith, haunting my beloved family's home. I don't really know who those people are, though...being inside this man has illuminated a few things.”

Dave snickered, entering the room. “Ha ha...” He carried a water-soaked towel.

The agent looked confused, then blushed. “Oh my...poor choice of words...” He snickered. “Oh, but really, I do know something. Because I've been watching John, and have seen him grow immensely in the last year. I've seen him converse with his friends. I assume you are one of them?” He looked to Dave.

Strider nodded, handing over the towel.

Paul took the towel and leaned over to John. “Here, John,” he said in a stern, fatherly tone. “Put this to the wound and apply pressure.”

John nodded, applying the towel. He shuddered at the cold.

“I've also,” continued the agent, wincing as he rubbed his aching nose, “been asking around. Talking to other ghosts. I've learned much.” He looked fondly over the young man sitting next to him. “Last year, John became recipient to a wonderful blessing. One that gave him the ability to do great things.” Nanna agent frowned. “That wound, however, is the price of power.”

“That's what we in the business call Paradox, Mister Egbert,” Dave said from across the room. He used his blade to part the blinds on a window. “…Syn dick is out there, crawling around. Yo John! You want I should ice the guy? He's not looking so hot.”

“Ice him?” Paul said, looking over to his son's friend. “I mean...these men weren't good people...but do they need to die?”

“They don't have to,” Dave said, shrugging. “But they operate outside the law. Hell, they operate above it, almost. If we leave that dude alive, he'll cause more problems for John later. For you, too, Mister Egbert.”

Paul looked to the floor, gravely.

Nanna agent's head shot up.

John cringed, sitting up in his seat. “Nanna? What is it?”

The MiB pressed a finger to his ear. Both Egbert men saw a wire running to an earpiece.

“You all need to go,” he said. “Now. They are sending reinforcements…and a helicopter.”

“Dang...it's so dark in here.”

Roxy Lalonde slid her hand over the wall, searching. In a moment, her fingers touched a switch,
and she flipped it.

In front of her, the sizable laboratory lit up.

She blinked at the change in light, rubbing her eyes. “...man...” It didn't help that her head was killing her, even after aspirin. Roxy shook her head, moving further in.

By every wizard in Horizon, she could use a drink.

Roxy slapped her own cheek, pushing the thought away. That phase of her life was over. She was done with drinking.

Now she just had to get her stupid body to understand that. Addiction was a powerful thing. Overcoming a dependence on alcohol was hard. It was hard, and no one understands.

The lab opened up around her as Roxy entered. She had to walk through a quarter mile of tunnel to get there, from the secret passage in the back of Jaspers's mausoleum. Jaspers, of course, being Rose's childhood cat, who had died some years ago under...mysterious circumstances. In a gesture that Roxy thought was sweet – but Rose, as it turns out, came to resent – they'd erected a mausoleum for the feline.

That Roxy had erected it over the secret passage in the yard, so as to better obfuscate the old entrance from potential spies, was one of her more clever maneuvers. A product of her rare, sober moments, back when she drank.

Fuck, she wanted a drink. She shook her head. Booze needed to step the fuck off. The two had gotten a divorce, and that was final.

She looked around. The center of the large room was dominated by four grids of green boxes. A project at creating power sources and wifi network hubs, all in one. Doctor Langley had been holding onto the things, on behalf of a number of forward-thinking Etherites and Virtual Adepts. They probably needed to be updated – the digital architecture was created in the early nineties, so the wireless part was likely almost worthless as it was.

Luckily, they could probably still be used as batteries.

The grids sat in squares, four of them surrounding the center, where a circular Transportalizer pad sat. Langley would use that to pop over to various Tradition Chantries, as well as to Etherite labs. It was still keyed to Jake Harley's lab, over on his island. But Roxy hadn't used that in four years, ever since she attended the old man's funeral.

Roxy frowned. She missed Mister Harley. She needed to ask Rose how Jade was doing.

To the left side of the entrance, there was Langley's extensive set of medical equipment. Test tubes, racks of chemicals, the locked trunk full of biological samples. There was even a hospital bed, though it hadn't been used in years.

On the back wall, there were two regular beds. One of them was quite plain. That was Langley's. Lana would often crash there, as she basically lived in the lab a lot of the time. Nearby, a door led to a small kitchen and bathroom, though they also hadn't been used in years.

The other bed sported plentiful stuffed animals, and a garish pink bedspread. That, obviously, was Roxy's bed when she was a teenager.

Okay, confession time. Roxy still slept in a bed full of pink and stuffed animals. Some things never
Roxy kept to the right, leading to the last side of the lab. Against this wall, she passed a row of esoteric, electronic devices. She traced the edge of a work table, upon which sat machines in various states of assembly. The hand-held Transportalizer sat in its powering station, where Roxy had left it after Jake returned with Lana's body, so many years ago.

The woman tried not to cry. She sniffed.

She walked further, and spotted a particularly interesting set of equipment. Roxy stood before a tall machine that Roxy always thought looked like an arcade cabinet. Standing to the left was a bank of equipment, laden with buttons and screens, and topped with huge glass tubes. To the right, another pad, like the one in the center of the lab, but with a large machine hanging over it. Open pipes were fixed to the base of the pad, leading off to the other machines.

Lana once explained to Roxy that, during her time in the Technocracy, she became fascinated with time. Sorry, Time. There wasn't a lot for a Progenitor to do with temporal mechanics, but Langley tried her best. Made herself plenty chummy with some Void Engineer chrononauts, so she could learn stuff about it. Specifically, Lana sought a way to pierce the passages of time, and harvest genetic material from dead or extinct organisms. To dredge shadows of the past, and save species (or fascinating genetic anomalies) from historical oblivion.

This act of catching and preserving a creature's biological “ghost” inspired Langley's name for it: Ecto-Biology.

Naturally, this kind of fanciful madness would never, ever fly in the Technocratic Union. After Langley gave her proposal to her superiors – and received a flat “no”, a more emphatic “No”, and an exasperated “Fuck No” - she pursued the project in secret. Scientific miracles, however, do not happen without money, which meant either asking someone in the Syndicate to fund her (and opening herself up to whatever whims the Syndicate had), or quietly siphoning funding from her official projects to fund her private one.

The spiral of duplicity, embezzlement of Union funds, and lying to her superiors made Lana a nervous wreck, paranoid of being found out. Then Jake Harley – going under his sobriquet Jake English – showed up to the lab facility Lana shared with her fellow Progenitors, rifle in hand.

Roxy never found out exactly what happened, but the day ended with Jake destroying yet more unethical medical experimentation, and Langley begging him to take her with him. The rest, as they say, was history.

Running a finger on one of the machines, Roxy wiped dust from it. She sighed. Roxy missed Doctor Langley. She missed Jake Harley. She missed Richter. And she especially missed...

Roxy looked down and froze.

On the floor, nestled between two machines, was the distinct shape of a wine bottle.

She dove for the bottle, grabbing it in her hands. It was a white, and it was covered in dust. But...shake, shake...it had wine in it!

Roxy's pulse raced. Her mouth felt dry. When had she left the bottle there? It had to have been her, because Langley never drank, and Rose was a babby. Plus, Roxy's drinking period was replete with finding bottles in various states of fill everywhere. Might she have dropped a bottle in the lab, when she got home from Jake's funeral? Or maybe she wandered into the lab one day, and just
didn't remember. That was also a common occurrence...

Her teeth were around the cork before she realized what she was doing. She pushed it away, holding the bottle at arm's length. “No!” she said, gritting her teeth. “We're going clean! Self, god dammit, we promised Rose!”

She trembled all over. Her fingers shook, and she felt cold. Roxy stared at the bottle, her stomach sinking and throat burning. Sweat formed on her brow.

Could...couldn't she just take...one sip? She'd gone all week without a drink. That was impressive for her. She could afford to treat herself, right? Going cold turkey was a bad idea, in retrospect. Shouldn't she instead work to ween herself off the sauce slowly?

It was just one sip. Just...one...

“...get the hell out of my face!” Roxy screamed, throwing the bottle blindly across the lab with all her might.

It shattered on the ground, spilling clear liquid all over the floor.

Roxy hugged herself, shaking. Tears formed under her eyes. “...f-fuck...fuck you, alcohol!” she sobbed, “I don't n-need you! You can just...just go fuck yourself!” She pointed at the mess in the corner, scowling.

Roxy and Booze were done. The divorce papers were filed, as was the restraining order against Booze, on account of Booze's abusive tendencies.

Once the adrenaline high dissipated, Roxy sank to the floor and buried her face in her hands. “...hic...stupid...so stupid...”

She wiped her eyes, but her fingers wouldn't stop shaking.

Roxy placed a hand on the nearest machine and forced herself up. She hugged herself again, rubbing her arms. The woman felt so cold. Roxy pressed a palm to her eye, rubbing against the pressure working out from inside. Her head throbbed, an ache that built steadily over the last few days and never seemed to leave.

She gasped, clutching her trembling fingers.

Ambling sideways, she stared down at the machine that looked like an arcade cabinet. With great difficulty, she pressed buttons on the panel.

The huge screen lit up. To her left, the other machines roared to life. In front of her, Roxy saw a familiar sight.

Displayed on the dusty screen was a static picture of a black cat. Cuddling up next to him was a little girl with ivory hair. A red targeting reticle was locked over the feline.

“Ugh...” Roxy groaned, looking down at the buttons. “...how do you do this, again? Fuck.” Her eyelid twitched.

Slowly, muscle memory returned. The sequence of button presses that Doc Langley taught her, so many years ago. Roxy left the target lock on, though. She didn't need to mess with it.

She pounded harder than she really needed to on the big, green button.
Looking left, Roxy saw the other machines light up, instruments flashing and beeping. Looking right, she spied the machine hanging over the pad. It blinked. A set of dangling widgets, pointed down, began to glow.

The machine flashed a moment, bright green. When Roxy blinked the dots away, she saw a life-sized statue of a cat, made of jiggly green slime.

After a moment, gravity asserted itself, and the slime cat collapsed into a puddle on the pad.

She heard a loud vacuuming sound, and saw the slime get sucked into pipes attached to the pad. It all disappeared.

Walking left, she studied the bank of equipment. The green slime filled one of the glass tubes.

Studying the blinking panels, Roxy fiddled with buttons and switches. Rubbing her aching head, she thumbed a big button.

The slime filtered down into the machine. Over the course of minutes, a long string of data scrolled on the screens. Another tube slowly filled with a clear, greenish yellow fluid.

Finally, a tiny lump of flesh rose to the middle of the tube.

Roxy stared at the undeveloped life form. The Ecto-biologically created slime clone. Of course it wouldn't be complete or fully grown. Creating a fully grown clone would take a hell of a lot more work...and expertise.

Doc Langley could accelerate things. If she were around, she would know how to apply the correct levels of chemicals, mutagen, and electrical stimulation to make the little guy grow up faster.

But she wasn't there. Lana Langley was dead.

Roxy frowned, but began to input commands. She wasn't a Genius like Langley or Harley – didn't have the Awakened spark. But Langley taught her how to run the machine. Roxy was meant to assist the Doc in her experiments. She had assisted in them. So she knew how to run the devices well enough to do the automated processes. Knew how to bring a clone along to maturity...even if only the slow way.

She wondered if the machine had enough nutrients to work with. She would need to poke around the store room. Either way, it would take a week or two before she could see how the fetus was progressing. For all she knew, it was another non-viable clone. Ecto-Biology was a delicate science. Mutations were common, if not desirable to a certain extent. The most important part ahead of the woman was simply getting the little mutants to be born not dead. It was the frustration of failure, in fact, that drove Roxy to stop experimenting in the first place, and further into the bottle.

Roxy sighed. She had her work cut out for her.

But at least it was distracting. Roxy badly needed distraction. Needed sleep, too, but God only knew when – or if – that would come that night.

She probably also needed to visit an actual rehab facility. But she was still way too paranoid to be visiting any hospital. Not when any of the doctors could be Progenitors, and any administrators could be Syndicate.

To hell with that. Roxy would have to tough it out herself, and hope she didn't have a withdrawal
seizure or something.

Fingers crossed.

“Reinforcements? Helicopters?”

Paul stood up, looking around. “Are you sure?”

“They just broadcast it on their radio,” Nanna agent said. He leaned forward, and grabbed the fallen pistol. He examined it passively. “They will be here in minutes.” The possessed agent looked up. “You cannot stay here.”

Dave swore under his breath. “Bro?” he said, looking away. “You getting any of this?”

“Are...” Paul said, looking at him, “...are you talking to me? John?”

“What?” Dave said, looking over. “No.” He tapped his glasses. “Someone else.” He turned away again. “How soon can you get a way out ready?”

Paul turned back to the couch, frowning. “Is it really that bad? Can't we call the police?”

“Dad...” John said, trying to force himself to his feet. “...they own the police.”

“It seems literally true, Paul,” said the agent, finger pressed to his link. “They are sending men in police cruisers. Not police men. Their men.” He shuddered suddenly.

“Mom?” Paul said.

“We have little time,” Nanna agent said, rubbing his head. “This one is trying to break free. I won't be able to keep him down for long.” He pulled the wire from his ear, tossing it aside. “Listen, Paul. John. I do not think you have the ability to beat this force. This...Technocratic Union. You have to leave.”

“What about you?” Paul said.

“I'll be fine, Paul,” the agent said, smiling. “I'm already deceased. I don't intend to stay here either. I'll depart when you're gone.” He pointed to the mantle piece. “Just remember to take my ashes. Sarah's too. If you have what's left of me, I'll be able to find you and watch over you.”

He threw his arms out wide and pulled the two men into an embrace.

“Mom...”

“...Nanna...” John said, patting the man's back with mild confusion. It was weird.

“I love you both,” the stranger said, “Stay safe.”

Dave nodded to the wall, then turned around. “Okay, we've got an exit.”

When the three near the couch disengaged the hug, John said. “Where are we going? Are we taking the car?”

“Hell no,” Dave said. He pointed the tachi up. “My Bro is giving us a ride. We're escaping our way. The Virtual Adept way.”
“The...what?” Paul said.

“Just pack everything you can't live without,” Dave said. “Only things you can carry. Meet me in John's room in three minutes.”

The Egberts blinked.

Dave waved his swords. “Go!”

Everyone started moving.

“Who the fuck ith thith? How did you get thith number?”

Dirk Strider rolled his eyes, though naturally they were hidden by his outrageously ironic shades. “Smokey 2 Chill.”

“Ha ha,” said the voice on the other end of the line, “Very funny, withe ath.”

“For real, though,” Dirk said, fingers flying over his keyboard, “you Sollux Captor?”

“Maybe. The fuck are you?”

“Dave's bro. Little dude's in the middle of something. Technocrat something. You mind lending a bit of help?”

“Ugh, that athhole,” said Sollux. Dirk could hear him slap his forehead over the line. “And really? Technoth? Why should I thtick my neck out againtht them?”

“You a Virtual Adept?”

“Might be.”

“Awake?”

“...”

“...It's okay if you aren't,” Dirk said.

“Fuck you! That'th none of you fucking bunchineth!”

“I was just wondering if you also happened to like...hacking.”

“What do you think, numbnutth?” said Sollux. “How dare you even intinuate that I like hacking? That I, a member of the Virtual Fucking Adeptth, might thling code every onthe in a while. How...dare you?”

Dirk smiled fractionally. “Much as I love being coy assholes with the younger generation, Dave does need the help. I would do it myself, but my attention is entirely on tunneling a hole through space. Multiple times in a row.”

“Show off,” Solluc said. But behind the line, he laughed. “But theriouthly, you're gonna have to do better than that. What elthe I get outta thith?”

“A challenge.” Dirk tilted his head. “Unless...you don't think you can handle it.”

The voice on the other end choked. “...just tell me what the hell you want, athface.”
“I’m sending you the address to the mainframe of a Technocrat Construct,” Dirk said. “It’s in the same area as Dave is right now. I could use some help wreaking havoc on it. Do whatever sadistic thing you feel like, and cover you tracks. Feel up to it?”

“…”

“…dude?”

“I’ll get my fucking gear,” Sollux said. “You and Dave are lucky I’m in a good mood tonight.”

John rushed up the stairs, into his room. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his father running into his own room, carrying the family photo album and the urns from the fireplace mantle.

The young man slid to a stop, taking stock of his room.

In the corner, he already had both his backpack and suitcase packed. He’d taken Dave's advice to heart, and prepped for flight. Some of his magic stuff – including his Tarot cards and extra smoke bombs – were inside the backpack. While everything in his magic trunk held sentimental value, he’d already stripped out most of what he really needed. He could replace the stuff in there as easily as he'd obtained it in the first place.

He continued pressing the wet cloth to his chest. It still stung, but it didn't hurt like the dickens anymore. John sighed, thankful for small favors.

Going blatantly supernatural three times in a row was a pretty dumb move. Then again, the stinging seemed worth it, after seeing Tallfield fly into a car.

John supposed there were more things in the room he ought to grab. A change of clothes, some of his movies and games, the hard drive off his computer...oh! The bunny Jade sent him! He better not leave without-

John.

John blinked, standing stock still.

He looked around. Then up to the ceiling.

“...hello?”
Jade Harley sat in her garden, surrounded by her precious fruit and vegetable plants. She sat in a corner, a mass of electronics in front of her. A machine lay in her lap, a set of tools at her side. The sun shined down on her, warming her pleasantly.

She held her phone in her hand. “Hellooooo?”

“Sup.”

“Dave!” Jade cried, smiling. “It's so...cool hearing from you! What's going on?”

She could have asked why he was calling rather than pestering her, but she didn't. Because that would be rude.

“Just calling to update status,” Dave said. “Bad news: John's house got attacked by, like, a dozen Technocrats.”

“Oh no!” Jade cried, frowning in horror. “That's horrible! Is John okay?”

“Pretty okay. I hopped over and helped him kick their asses. That's the good news. John's just fine.”

“Oh, good!” Jade said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“I mean, he got tagged on the chest by 'Dox, but he's a little badass. He's walkin' it off.”

“Wait, when did this happen?”

“Just now,” Dave said. “I'm literally standing in his house, right now, over the not-corpses of our enemies. Not corpses, on account they evaporated.”

“ Weird.” Jade's mouth quirked.

“Turns out, the Technos are sending in reinforcements. Now I'm rad in a can, but even I don't feel like pressing my luck against an army of these bastards.”

“Do you need me to come over and help?” Jade said, holding the phone gingerly. She was already mentally accounting for which of her inventions she would pack. That one. That one. Not that one, though, she hadn't tested it enough...

“Naw, we're not stayin',” Dave said. “My Bro's working on getting us out. John and his dad are upstairs, packing their shit. Gonna evac in a minute.”

“Okay...” Jade said, sagging. She was actually kind of disappointed. She never got to go on fun Mage adventures. “What are you doing?”

“Just chillin' down in the living room,” the boy said, ‘keepin' an eye on the front lawn. Watching
this punk-ass Syn dick crawl around on the ground. Oh, and keepin' company with John's grandma.”

Jade's eyes rose in alarm. “Are you evacuating his grandma too-” Her eyebrow quirked. “Wait, I thought she was dead?”

“She is. Her ghost is currently possessing one of the Technocrat goons. It's hilarious. I'm gonna rap about it later.”

“John's nanna is a ghost?”

“Yeah, I was just as surprised as you were…” Dave trailed off. When his voice picked up, it was distant. “…talkin' to Jade...what? You...yeah, that Jade...really? Okay...” His voice picked up. “Hold on. He/She wants to talk to you.”

Jade blinked. “Uhh…”

“...hello?” The voice that came up was obviously that of a man, though one uttered in a falsetto. It was spoken in a southern drawl, thicker than Dave's vague Texan. “Is this Jade?”

“Nanna Egbert?” Jade asked, unsure of how to feel about the moment. “Are...are you John's grandma?”

“Why yes, dear,” Nanna said, laughing. “Jade, I can't tell you how good it is to talk to you.”

“Thanks, I guess…” Jade scratched the side of her head. “Doesn't this mean you're my great aunt? Because you were my grandpa's sister?”

“That's correct,” Nanna said. “I'm Jane Egbert, formerly Jane Harley. I've also been called Crocker, among some of my old friends, because of my baking. Just a little nickname between friends.” The man giggled. It was...mildly disconcerting, but genuine. “How is Jake, anyway?”

Jade frowned. “…

“...he's dead, isn't he?”

“I'm sorry. He died a couple years ago.”

“That's fine, dear,” Nanna said. “I'm not surprised. Frankly, what surprises me is that he lasted as long as he did. I myself lasted over a century, by some miracle.”

“So you haven't…” Jade swallowed, looking to the ground. “…seen him? Around...ghost world, or anything?”

“No, not around the Shadowlands,” Nanna said. “Admittedly, it's a big world, the land of spooky ghosts. But you must know, Jade, not everyone persists as a Wraith.”

“They don't?”

“Heavens no, and for that I'm thankful. The Shadowlands...they are not altogether a pleasant place, dear. There's little to do but dwell on our losses...our mistakes. The company is often intolerable, when it isn't actively trying to rake your soul. And it's all so dark and depressing. Moreover, you're pretty much in limbo. Your grandfather would cast himself into Oblivion if he had to stick around here. I've got it pretty good, on account of being able to watch over my family. But...it's probably for the best that Jake hadn't returned as a ghost at all. That he moved on to his eternal reward.”
“I guess...” Jade said, sighing. “He said he wouldn't mind reincarnation. Maybe he's in his new life now.”

“Or maybe he went to heaven,” Nanna said, “and he's leading an army of angels on a campaign against hell. Who knows?” The man on the other end laughed. “I'm sure whatever he's doing now, he's having a grand old time.!”

Jade giggled.

“...what's that?” Nanna said. “Oh, I'm sorry Jade, but Dave wants his phone back. We've run out of time.”

“That's too bad!” Jade said, frowning. “I never got to talk to you before you died, and now you're already leaving.”

“Sad but true. Alright, take care Jade. And watch over John for me, okay?”

“I will!”

The phone went quiet, then Dave came on the line. “Sorry to cut things short, but I've got to get everybody out of here. Talk to you later.”

“Bye Dave!” Jade yelled into the receiver. “Good luck!”

The call ended. Jade sighed, looking up at the shining blue sea.

She truly hoped John was okay.

It has been a long time, John. Are you holding up well?

John blinked, staring at the ceiling. He cringed, looking down at his wounded chest.

I think so. Who is this? How are you in my head?

I'm a...concerned old soldier. One who has a great deal of Influence. Moreover, we've talked before.

We have?

Last year, when you battled that hostile Imp. I provided you with tactical advice.

Oh yeah!

John's eyes lit up.

I'm glad to see your own awareness has improved. We can communicate more easily.

Huh. I guess you have a point. I have been working on improving my mental ability.

Not to be pushy, John, but aren't you supposed to be preparing for evac?

Oh no! You're right!

John looked frantically left and right, then started running around the room. Looking down at his t-shirt, he figured he should start with a change. He rifled through his closet, and pulled out one of the shirts he hadn't packed.
So John. How are you holding up?

Well, my chest hurts. So there's that.

The young man felt just a bit uncomfortable about changing while someone was apparently watching. But after a moment, he decided it was probably okay if it was just his shirt. He weaseled out of his top, and pulled the new one on. Then John began to think about whether he ought to leave the bloody shirt behind. Could the Technocrats track him using the DNA from his shirt? At last, he stowed it in a plastic shopping bag he had lying around.

No, John. I mean, are you feeling okay emotionally? You were just in a heated engagement, with multiple casualties.

John stopped in his tracks, then started picking through a stack of DVDs and game boxes.

Wow...I guess I never thought about it that way. Now that you mention it...holy shit!

I know the feeling. If you have any lingering trauma about tonight, you really should talk about it with someone. If not with me, than with your father, or your friends.

You think so?

I know so. I...I know from personal experience that it doesn't help, bottling the feelings away. The wounds will only heal incorrectly. I know it's hard, soldier...but there are people who will listen. Don't...don't make the same mistakes I did, John.

Dropping the stuff in the bag with his bloody shirt, John frowned. He looked to the ceiling.

Are you...are you okay? Sorry, I don't even know who you are. But...

It's alright, John. I've dealt with it long enough, on my own. A tactical retreat for you is what's important right now.

John nodded. Running over to his desk, he turned his PC's tower around and yanked the paneling off. He grabbed a flashlight off his desk, and started checking the machine's guts.

Wish I knew what hard drives look like. Do you happen to know?

John, I've been living on the streets for twenty years. Computers aren't exactly my forte.

The young man pulled out a thing that he guessed was the hard drive? It had a disk embedded in it, which he vaguely understood to be related to memory. Whatever, he'd get Dave to help him figure it out later. It, too, went into the shopping bag.

So, how long were you watching me?

About from when that spook first took you hostage.

Spook?

The men from the government. The agents in black sunglasses.

The government? You mean the guys from the Technocracy?

The Technocracy? What's that, John?
John grabbed the stuffed rabbit from the high shelf he displayed it on. Into the bag it went. Feeling he’d gotten everything he could think of, John tied the bag up, so nothing would spill out. He began stuffing whatever random crap on his desk into his pockets.

You don't know what the Technocracy is? They were the guys trying to capture me. I think they've got people infiltrating the government, but they're mostly above governments.

An extra-governmental conspiracy?

I guess?

This is a disturbing revelation. I will need to investigate this matter further. And here I thought the Parasites were the only ones with their tendrils infecting government.

Parasites?

Vampires.

Oh, those...yeah, I know about those. I try not to think about it too hard, really.

In the distance, a noise began to grow. John looked over to his window. It sounded like...

John, there is a helicopter approaching your house. I cannot be sure, but I think police cars are also inbound.

Oh man. We really don't have a lot of time.

Indeed. I should let you go. And John?

Yeah?

If you are ever in Skaia City...try to meet with me. Ask around on the streets for The Mayor.

I should look up Skaia City's mayor?

No. I'm not an elected official, much as the idea appeals. I'm the Mayor on the streets. The common people will know to whom you refer.

Okay! I'll do that, if I'm ever in the neighborhood!

And John?

Yeah?

You are a brave and valiant soldier. You make this old commander proud...you can't see, but I'm saluting you.

Oh!

John nervously threw out a salute. He didn't know how to do it, though, so he was pretty sure he wasn't doing it right.

“What are you doing, John?”

John jumped. “Wha-!”

Dave stood in the doorway, holding his swords. “You ready?”
Seconds Ago (But Not Many)

Jane Egbert waved the man's hand up at Dave. The boy nodded curtly, retreating father into the second floor.

She guided the agent's body around the room. The man struggled against her with every movement. Jane was getting to the end of her rope with him.

To the kitchen they walked, and Jane took it in. Such a clean place. Cozy, too. Her son had kept many of the old knick knacks from her breathing days. What a good son.

The cookie jar was right where she left it, so many years ago. Lifting the lid, she saw that Paul kept it well stocked. She forced the agent's mouth into a smile. It felt weird, as if the man didn't smile overmuch. What a sad idea. She fished a chocolate chip cookie from the jar and nibbled on it. Delicious.

It occurred to Jane that the man might suffer an allergy to chocolate, or something. But she felt sort of selfish, and ate the cookie anyway. Moreover, it wasn't like it would matter anyway in a minute.

She wandered back to the living room. Finishing her cookie, Jane licked the chocolate from the man's fingers. It had been so long since she'd been able to enjoy earthly pleasures, even vicariously. How did the old Commendatore say it, in Don Giovanni? “He who dines on Heavenly food has no need for the food of mortals”?

Ah, but the food of mortals seems heavenly to one who dines on ash and sorrow.

Somewhere above, her family spoke in hushed tones. And somewhere near, she could begin to hear the sounds of spinning helicopter blades. She diverted her vessel to the window, peeking through the blinds. The otherwise dark streets were painted in alternating blue and red, an effect that drew closer by the moment.

She forced a sigh from the agent's lips. Jane drove her charge to the middle of the room. They stood there, the living man's soul pulsing and wiggling, trying to break free.

Jane frowned. Her fingers played with the pistol, hanging in her right hand. She drew it up and examined it. Flipping through his memory, she let habit take over. His large, pale, hairless hands pulling out the clip (sorry – the man's unconscious mind corrected her – the Magazine), counted the rounds. Stuck it back inside, then pulled back the slide. A bullet sat in the chamber.

She let the slide snap closed.

Eight men. Seven bodies hitting the floor, then disappearing. Jane's son, grandson, and grandson's friend wouldn't be safe, while these “Technocrats” remained around. Even as she held the gun, the owner of the body sought to reassert control. The boys wouldn't be expecting it. Her current vessel was...simply too dangerous.

Jane pressed the muzzle to the agent's temple. His fingers shook violently.

A shudder ran through Jane. A shudder both of flesh, and of soul. Something deep inside pressed up against her. Not the agent's soul...assuming the manufactured man had a soul, which Jane thought he did. Pressing up against Jane was something far darker, and far more familiar. It was a presence she knew very well. Her constant companion.
Kill him.

Jane forced the man to swallow. It seemed so natural.

You said it yourself. He has to die. Come on... he's not even really a person. He's a thing.

Her spirit trembled. Jane pressed the muzzle harder until it dug into the man's bare skin.

dO iT! Blow this fool's brains out, all over the nice white carpet!

She gritted the man's teeth, shutting his eyes.

KiLL HiM! ShRug OfF hIs MoRtAl CoIl! CaSt hiS WrRetChEd SoUl InTo ThE pItS oF oBliVioN! dO iT!

Jane shook the man's head. “...stop...I...I can't...” she said, through his lips.

...fInE. yOu DoN't HaVe ThE sToMaCh To Do WhAt NeEds tO bE dOnE tO sAvE yOuR fAmIlY...

The Wraith's grip on the pistol loosened. Jane's beleaguered soul wavered. A tear ran down the agent's face.

i GuEsS tHeRe'S nOtHiNg FoR iT, jAnE. lEt Me Do iT. SuRrEnDeR cOnTrOl To Me, AnD i PrOmIsE i'lL dO wHaT yOu Ca~

“AAAAGH!”

Jane Egbert's soul fled the man's body, never looking back.

Three-Of-Eight gasped, wrenching the pistol from his head. He doubled over, breathing heavily. His nose hurt, but he ignored it.

It was quiet.

He examined the weapon, disconcerted by the tangible proximity of his own mortality.

The agent stood up, looking around. What happened? A brief mental impulse to his brain implant told him he lost several minutes. He brushed his face, realizing he'd also lost his shades somewhere. Looking around, he found them on the floor, next to the couch.

It was so quiet.

As he retrieved his shades, he heard the noise of movement and talking upstairs. His recent memory returned. The mission was still ongoing, but had managed to go south somewhere. He shook his head. Memory of the last few minutes was hazy.

It was intolerably quiet.

Three-Of-Eight checked his pistol. Counted rounds of ammunition. Almost full. The agent recalled he hadn't fired any shots before the blackout. Couldn't recall any. Standard procedure – drilled into the squad since they were commissioned and produced – was to count shots. Always know how many they had. How many they fired. Account for every round in the magazines, and in the
He'd fired a round. When had he fired it, and why?  

The voices upstairs grew more urgent. Three-Of-Eight readied his weapon. He thought to radio in, but noticed his ear piece was missing. He was marching towards the stairs, when he stopped.  

It was too quiet.  

Three-Of-Eight reached out to his brothers. To the group mind. He tried to reestablish connection.  

No one answered.  

The agent froze, looking around. He was sweating. Three-Of-Eight wiped his pasty skin.  

He called out to his brothers. They weren't in sync. He'd been out of the loop too long. He needed...  

No one answered.  


He screamed mentally for his brothers. For the ones bonded to him since “birth”. Why did they not answer? Was it interference? Impossible. The Union's technology was the greatest in the world. Had they excluded him somehow? Quarantined him? Why? No, they would never do such a thing. It was unthinkable. They...  

Three-Of-Eight sniffed the air. His cerebral implant ran through the subtle chemical data his feeble human cognition could never process. Analyzed data no mere human could process. Smelled the odorless.  

He gasped. The air was filled with the nigh undetectable stench of fallen clones.  

The gun fell from his hands.  

They were gone. All of his brothers were dead. Terminated. And their bodies evaporated, to prevent any trace from falling into the hands of the uninformed public. One, Two, Four, Five, Six, Seven, and Eight would not answer him, because they were all deceased. Gone. As if they never existed.  

It was terribly, horribly quiet. His mind reached out, and nothing answered.  

Three-Of-Eight sank to his knees, staring into space. He buried his face in his hands, and stooped forward. And the hardened NWO agent began to sob quietly.  

He was alone.  

For the first time in his life, Three-Of-Eight was completely, utterly alone.  

Paul Egbert finally managed to zip his second suitcase closed. His bags were stuffed with as many shirts, slacks, undergarments, socks, shoes, ties, and shaving supplies that they could contain. He supposed, regardless of where they were going, he'd have opportunities to replenish his supplies. They'd have to be out in the middle of nowhere, not to have at least one Dadly Depot. But he surely
couldn't take that risk.

The man almost attempted to cram as many pipes and cans of pipe tobacco as he could. He could have filled a duffel bag with it, if he needed to. But...

...something about all that talk of cancer earlier. It got him thinking. Thinking maybe it was time to finally quit. Not stuffing his pockets with pipes was one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

After watching his wife die, of course. And burying her. And burying his own mother. And...okay, maybe quitting smoking wasn't that big a deal. But addiction is a powerful thing.

He sighed, hazarding a look out the window.

The street was filling with police patrol cars. In the half-light of the moonlit sky, he saw one might have been an approaching helicopter.

Paul gulped, then grabbed his suitcases. He ran down the hall, topping at the door of his son's room. “Are you sure we can't talk to the police?” Paul said. “This all seems a bit extreme.”

“Yeah,” Dave said, looking over his shoulder. He'd stowed his short blade somewhere, and was instead carrying a shopping bag. “Worst...no, Best case scenario is we've got it wrong, they really are police, and you can come back in a few days and have a laugh about...”

The young man turned fully towards Paul. “...what's with the towering pillar of hats?”

Paul blinked, then looked to his head. Several plain, serviceable hats were stacked on top of one another. “Sorry,” he said, “there was no other way to safely transport them. It seemed the most efficient solution.”

“...'kay...” Dave said, shrugging. “Not judging. You do what you gotta do to maintain the brand.” He looked over his shoulder. “You ready, John?”

“Yeah!” John said, hauling a suitcase in one hand and a backpack slung over his shoulders. He grimaced.

“Are you going to be alright moving, John?” his father said.

“Yeah,” John said, nodding. “I'll be fine. It's not that bad.”

“Don't worry,” Dave said. “We'll get you patched up once we reach safety.”

“That brings up my next point,” Paul said, cocking an eyebrow. “How are we effecting our escape? There are too many police cars outside for him to arrive in his car...”

“Good, cause my Bro doesn't own one,” Dave said.

“...and I don't think we're in any condition to run out the back,” Paul continued, “least of all with John injured. We have no idea if they haven't already surrounded the-”

Dave held up the index finger of his bag-laden hand. Looking away, he listened. “We good to go? Sweet. Which wall?”

“Which...wall?” Paul said. He looked around the young man, flashing a questioning look to his son.

John shrugged, looking only slightly less baffled.
Dave looked to the wall to the right of the door. “Got it,” he mumbled. He looked to Paul. “Move in and over here.” He gestured to beside John's bed.

Confused, Paul edged his way inside and stood by his son.

The young man in the red suit nodded, then turned to the wall. “Okay,” he said, “our exit should be appearing right...about...”

He pointed the sword at the wall. “Now!”

Nothing happened.

“...right...now!”

The wall continued to do nothing.

John coughed.

“Uh...” Paul said, looking around. “Is there supposed to be a punch line? Because if this was all an intricate prank...” He shrugged. Paul couldn't fathom how one would go about arranging everything up until now. Getting fired from his job, the several men, the apparent death and evaporation of said men, the police cars and chopper...

Assuming they somehow did fake all that, Paul would have to surrender the Prankster's Gambit to his son, from now until the End Times.

Dave stared at the wall. He leaned over and turned away, whispering, “...come on, dude. Don't be a jackass. We're on a schedule here.”

Just as the words were out of Dave's mouth, an eerie, unearthly glow appeared on the wall. In seconds, the glow formed lines, which drew into a square beginning just above the floor and just below the ceiling.

Then, bit by bit, the wall fell away inside the boundary of the lines. Squares broke away, revealing empty space and a bright, golden light.

Paul and John covered their eyes, blinking away the shine. When they looked again, they saw the wall given way to a window. A hole in space.

A perfectly normal, day lit room lay on the other side. Sunlight poured in from an open window on the other end.

Dave – face cast in a warm shine that reflected off his pale skin and ivory hair – turned to face them. He smiled ever so slightly. “...Ta da!”

“Amazing!” John yelled, smiling in awe.

“How?” Paul said, staring in shock.

“Magic,” said Dave.

“What?!”

“Magic.” Dave pointed to the portal. “Keep up, Mister Egbert. Keep up, and get in.”
“Get off me!”

Brandon Tallfield pulled his arm back, putting distance between himself and the men in police jackets. The Syndicate man wobbled on his feet, groaning. He rubbed his hip. Another problem needing a fix. Great.

The false policemen merely nodded. One of them stepped forward and offered a radio. “Base has a report, sir.”

Tallfield nodded, taking the radio. “Talk to me.”

As the woman on the other end gave a status update, he looked to the sky. The helicopter – black and unmarked, though few people would notice the difference – descended towards the street. It landed in a spot left out for it.

He started towards the chopper, talking. “...I think maybe one or two may still be alive, but I can't be sure. They may all be dead.” Tallfield wiped his brow with his jacket sleeve. “How's everything on your...what?”

Approaching the chopper, the vehicle's door opened. A couple Technocrats in police disguise jumped out, nodding to their superior. Tallfield knew hardly any of them would be Enlightened personnel – they were merely Extraordinary Citizens. But at the very least, they were better than nothing.

If the night kept going like it had been, Nothing was exactly what he would be going home with.

Tallfield scowled, shaking his head. He raised his voice over the roar of the helicopter blades. “...what do you mean the servers are filling up with pornography?”

He planted an expensive shoe on the lip of the chopper floor, hanging off the top of the doorway with one hand. He practically screamed, “...what do you MEAN we're being hacked from four locations at once, five hours ago?!”

Elsewhere, a perfectly unEnlightened – but very skilled – hacker laughed at his desk. He popped open a can of soda, watching the data feed crawl down his computer monitor.

It was, quite simply, a work of art. Fantastic. Sublime.

He didn't even really need to hack the servers himself. That was the genius part, and what would keep his ass out of the fire. All he needed to do was find some porn bots and viruses, upgrade them with the ability to hack, and then point them in the direction of the Union Construct. The rest would do itself.

At the very least, it would give a bunch of Technocrat admins a huge headache.

“Ha ha ha!” Sollux Captor chortled. “Fuckin' nobgobblerth!”
“Come on, dad!”

John Egbert, looking excitedly at the portal opened in his room, ran towards it. It was, at the very least, good to see the little guy in higher spirits. Especially given his injury.

“John, wait!” said Paul Egbert, but his son was already on the other side. After a moment's hesitation, he started muttering under his breath. “...though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death...” he said, turning his head down and walking forward, “...I will fear no evil; for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they have...”

He jumped through the window, landing with a yelp. “Ah! ...they have comforted me...”

Dave Strider indulged a small smile. Suddenly, he looked over his shoulder, reacting to the sound of helicopter blades touching down, then beginning to rise.

The young man set down his friend's bag and crept to the window. From his vantage, Dave could see an unmarked black chopper rise into the air.

The side door was wide open. The Virtual Adept could see that Syn Dick standing on the edge, faced away and hanging from the doorframe. Tallfield spoke into a black radio receiver.

“Oh hell no,” Dave muttered. “You're not getting away that easy.”

He forced the window open. Fishing through his pockets, he withdrew a shuriken. In one motion, he chucked the thing out.

Dave saw the throwing star strike the Syndicate rep in the leg.

“Agh!” the man cried, crumbling. He lost purchase of the door, and fell backwards. He plummeted down, disappearing beneath the window frame. “AAAAA-”

Thud! Snap!

“Dave!” cried John, from the other side of the gate. “What's the hold up? We gotta go!”

Dave smiled, shutting the window. “Sorry!” he called back. On the way, he grabbed the bag again with his free hand. “Just attending to some last minute biznasty.”

He broke into a run, then dove through the portal, sliding to a stop on his knees.

“Close it, close it, close it,” he mumbled.

“Ask, and ye shall receive,” Bro said, in his ear. Dave heard the portal snap closed.

“Alright, everybody,” Dave said, rising to his feet. “Thank you for flying Air Strider.”

Rose Lalonde yawned.

She rubbed her eyes, stalking the darkened halls of the Lalonde family home. Windows yawned wide, displaying nothing but darkness.

Rose stretched her arm. She'd spent the better part of the day hitting the books. Specifically, her school books. As per their arrangement, Rose agreed to make up everything she'd missed. Nothing but the most cursory of meditative rituals was allowed until she got caught up. Mom insisted.
The young lady looked around. *Where was Mom?* Quitting booze cold turkey hadn't made it very fun for the woman, from what Rose could tell. And it logically wouldn't: alcohol withdrawal symptoms were, from brief research, easily the harshest and most dangerous. Kicking any drug habit carried risk and discomfort, but alcohol was one of the worst.

Which, naturally, made Rose nervous. Her mother was treading a fine line, and Rose didn't have time to mind her. Mom wouldn't allow Rose to take more time for it. If anything, Mom seemed less concerned about the danger she was in than Rose. So much so that the woman tolerated no talk of a hospital. In retrospect, Mom's lifetime of paranoia directed at a global techno-fascist conspiracy, with its hands even in the medical field, would explain *a lot* of Rose's memories growing up.

She kept the numbers for both the hospital and a rehab clinic in her contacts list, just to be safe.

“Mom?” Rose called into the darkness. She yawned, rubbing her head. The young lady hoped she wouldn't find her mother curled in a ball around a bottle of gin she'd somehow procured. Or twitching on the ground, having a seizure. It ran a chill up her spine and put a vice on her heart, imagining her mother not only having had a seizure, but having bit her tongue and bled out from it.

In fact, imagining caused the color to fade from her skin. “Mom!” Rose yelled.

She walked around the house, checking all the rooms. Mom's bedroom, the bathrooms, the kitchen, the foyer, the library, the secret library. Each room was empty. No Moms to be found. With every failure, Rose's steps grew faster. Her heartbeat, more frantic.

“Mom!” Rose shouted, standing in the middle of the foyer. She was sweating now. “Mom, where are you?”

The young woman collapsed to the couch, hugging herself. “Mom...” she mumbled, “where did you go? I finally got you back and...don't leave me now...” The little hermetic fought back tears.

She forced herself to breathe. Had to go back to basics. Rose remembered her training. Centered herself. Standing up, she imagined herself as a pillar, and visualized energy coming from the sky to the East. It trickled down from her head, to her heart, to her waist, and finally to her toes. Then, slowly, she drew the energy back up and out again.

Rose opened her eyes. She was calmer now, though she felt a twinge of fear remain. She would have to work around it.

“Come on,” she muttered to herself. “Think. Where would Mom go?”

Her heart nearly burst, considering whether Mom might take the car and drive to town. Rose hadn't allowed Mom to do that all week. Made the woman give Rose her keys, just to be safe. The young lady feared Mom might, in a moment of weakness, flee to a gas station and load up on wine. End up regressing...or worse, try driving back drunk and slam her car into a tree.

Rose ran to the door and headed to the garage.

She sighed with relief. The car was still there. Rose wasn't sure how the woman would manage to take the keys from where Rose hid them. Then again, she wasn't entirely sure Mom couldn't just hot wire the vehicle. Mom was a scientist, after all.

Making her way back to the foyer, Rose paced the floor. Where else could Mom have gone? Could she have tried to *walk* all the way back to town? While this could still pose difficulties – falling into a ravine, getting hopelessly lost, becoming victim to an attack by local wildlife – it would at least take drunk driving accidents off the table.
But Rose needed to eliminate all possibilities, before she started a hike through the woods.

She stopped, then looked up.

A single object dominated the front foyer of the house. It was a huge, twenty foot tall granite statue of a wizard. The wizard was Zazzerpan the Learned, a character plucked from one of Rose's creative writing projects, some years back.

Rose had not-so-fond memories of the statue's commission. She had, in the folly of her youth, gushed about her ideas to her mother at one point. In a gesture that Rose formerly took to be a part of a passive aggressive campaign of abuse directed towards her – and, more recently, Rose took as the misguided but affectionate (and possibly ironic) gesture that it probably was all along – Mom had the statue built. Rose still suspected this was the result of Mom's inebriation, though the young lady was trying to remind herself that Mom meant well. Unfortunately, the extravagant gift needed to be craned in from the roof.

The young hermetic used to despise the statue. It still made her gorge rise a little, but given recent revelations (and her current concern), Rose quietly packed it back down.

Looking into Zazzerpan's bearded, vaguely bewildered face, Rose felt like laughing. Upon further reflection, the entire matter was very silly. The result of a girl seeing conspiracies, malice, and madness where there were none. Was this what growing up entailed? Realizing everything one's parents did was either a well-meant attempt at bonding or a result of their own, very human flaws?

The more she examined the statue, however, the more Rose considered her mother's history. Of wizards and her association with them. And then, back further, about Mom's history as a Consor.

Like a bolt of lightning, Rose was struck with an idea. Not even pausing, she ran out the front door.

“Where are we?”

John edged to the window, looking out. His eyes watered, and he shielded them against the sudden light. “How is it daytime?”

Dave cocked an eyebrow. “Dude,” he said, “the earth is round. Obviously we're on the other side of the planet.” The Virtual Adept reacted to a sound the others couldn't hear, then continued, “India. Kolkata.”

Paul Egbert tapped the wall, retracting his hand quickly. When his fingers came away unmolested, he tapped it experimentally again. “...Calcutta?”

Dave turned to him, cocking his head in what passes for bemusement. “Used to be,” he said. “They renamed it, apparently. I guess to be less English or something? I don't know.” He raised his sword up and shrugged.

John's father considered this a moment, staring into the faded, flowery wallpaper. He looked around the mostly empty room, blinking. Noted the thin mattress stacked on a rusty metal bed frame. Saw the wooden end table, painted in faded baby blue and topped with an old, dusty lamp.

He crossed the room, still clutching his bags tightly in both arms. Paul motioned to John, who kindly stepped aside. Bracing against the golden light, looked out the window.

It looked out on a busy city street. Absolutely packed with people, in various states of dress, going about their business. A sea of new and old fashions, colorful and utilitarian, wrapped around frames
of milk chocolate and bronze. The street seemed urban, but he could look up and see the sun shining down from the tops of the buildings.

The were signs and posters everywhere. Everything written in...some kind of Indian language, he supposed. Close to the window, he could hear a din rising from the road. A ceaseless, discordant chatter in a tongue he couldn't grasp. For all he knew, there wasn't even one tongue being spoken. For the first time, Paul Egbert reflected soberly upon the story of the Tower of Babel.

He frowned. “...not possible,” he mumbled, shaking his head. “I'm having a bad dream.”

“Naw, it's possible,” Dave said, checking his phone. “Also, I'm going to need you to check that disbelief at the door, Mister Egbert. It's only going to make my Bro's job harder.”

“How...” Paul said, turning back inside. With a moment to stand in the sun, the man was struck by just how warm it suddenly was. “...how is this possible?”

“Magic,” Dave said, returning the phone to his pocket. “I thought we were just over this.”

Sighing, Paul looked down at the floor. He shut his eyes, shaking his head. “God have mercy...”

John stepped over and patted his father's arm. “It's okay, Dad.”

“Yeah, but only if we keep moving,” Dave said, motioning towards the door.

“Where are we going now?” Paul said, unable to keep a certain color of exasperation tinge his voice.

“One jump isn't enough,” Dave said, stalking towards the door. “We need to make a few more. Otherwise, the Technos will track us back home. Gotta do enough to get them off our trail. That means multiple jumps, and a lot of walking in between.”

He stopped with his hand on the doorknob. “Oh, by the way,” Dave said, turning around. “Give me your phones.”

Looking slightly confused to each other, Paul and John sat their bags down and fished out their phones. John, with his blue smart phone, and Dad with his plain and serviceable model. They handed them over.

“Cool.” Dave nodded, holding both in one hand. “Uh...sorry about this.”

He tossed them in the air and swung his katana, slicing both in half with one blow.

“Dude!” John yelled, scowling.

Paul just looked stunned. His face turned to an expression of stern, fatherly disapproval.

“Even the government can track a phone,” Dave said, turning around. “Even when it's off. They all have chips in them. You don't think the Technocratic Union can do the same?” He stalked to the door again. “We'll get you new phones later. Right now, we can't leave them an avenue to trace us.”

John slapped his forehead, groaning. Paul just sighed, patting his son's shoulder.

“Come on, guys!” Dave said, going out the door.

When the two Egberts followed him, they discovered that the hallway – in addition to having seen
better days – looked like some kind of apartment or cheap hotel. The hall was tight, requiring John’s father to walk sideways with his bags. As they passed each room, they heard the sounds of conversation, and smelled the pungent odor of Indian cooking. Paul suppressed the urge to cough, his eyes watering for the thick spice in the air.

Thankfully, the hallway was empty.

They ducked inside an open doorway, ascending a rickety set of wooden stairs. The floorboards squeaked under their load. On the next floor, Dave led them to a room on the far end of the hall.

“Here,” he said, “this one is empty.” He set the shopping bag in his free hand on the ground, lifting his arm. Dave whispered into his wrist. “Sweet Bro: Run teleport program 1516. Key gun number 2.”

He jammed his hand into his jacket pocket, while the smart watch on his wrist lit up. After a moment, he removed a gun-shaped device, with some pointy bits on the end. Dave jammed said pointy bits into the lock on the door, and pulled the trigger. The device whirred and clicked, and the tumblers on the lock audibly jumbled. With one final click of the doorknob, Dave turned it, then pushed it. The door opened with minimal effort.

Placing the machine back in his pocket, Dave picked up the bag and motioned the Egberts inside.

Whoosh!

A current of air entering the room informed them of the portal opening up inside before they saw it. Heading in, the Egberts took in the room. It was devoid of people like the last one, but the bags and toiletries sitting around informed them that this was only a temporary state. Against one wall, another portal shimmered to life.

Beyond the threshold was what appeared to be the inside of a woodshed.

Dave locked the door behind them, then motioned with his sword to go through.

John, again, was the first to jump inside. Tentatively, his father followed suit, though with less trepidation than last time. He was careful to step over the lower edge of the portal. He wasn’t entirely sure what would happen if he touched the dividing line between vastly different locations.

When Dave crossed the threshold last, the portal winked out, plunging the trio into darkness. The Virtual Adept stepped past them to the front, and slotted his katana between the doors. He swiped down hard, setting off sparks as the air rang with a clang of metal on metal. He gently pushed the doors, and they swung out.

Paul noted the damaged padlock hanging impotently on the doors when he and John were ushered outside.

The sky overhead was overcast, and tinged with the warm colors of fading twilight. Far in the distance was a frankly beautiful sunset. It cast the surrounding neighborhood – a heavily wooded suburb – in silhouette.

The trio stood in a very large back yard. Dave motioned them to follow, and they did so. They stepped lightly and slowly, eventually snuggling right up against the house the yard belonged to. A single large window looked out over the turf, so the three bent down and crouch-walked under it. Not that it was entirely necessary, as the blinds were down over the window.

Dave led them through a wooden gate and out to an alley. The place was dark, but very vacant.
They traveled the length of several properties.

“...huh...huh...” John huffed and puffed. He whispered, “Dave...where are we?”


“Ruff ruff! Ruff ruff ruff ruff ruff!”

At their side, a dog began barking. He slammed against the fence, growling.

John's heart nearly stopped.

Dave motioned them to just keep moving. The dog kept yapping away, but the sound faded when they put a house between them. After a frantic minute of barking, the dog seemed to lose steam.

Paul allowed himself a small smile. That dog must have felt pretty proud of himself, scaring away intruders on his family's land.

In time, they turned a corner in the alley, and went another two house lengths. Finally, Dave ushered them up a driveway and through a gate. They traipsed around a swimming pool, which sported its own stone waterfall. The lights were all out in the house windows.

Nestled in a far corner was a smaller fenced area, with its own gate. Dave led them inside.

Erected against one wall of fence was an open portal. The Egberts needed no prompting, and stepped inside.

“Hello, Jaspers.”

Rose nodded to the child-sized coffin, set on the stone slab. The mausoleum was smaller than she remembered, having been built when she was much younger. Younger and less likely to ascribe sinister intent to her mother having built it. In retrospect, it was still excessive, creating an entire small building to house a dead cat's remains. As opposed to burying Jaspers in the yard and plonking a simple grave stone on it.

But Rose had, over the course of a few days, been made to accept the decision, foolish though it may have been. She'd been made to accept a lot of things.

She had a theory, though, about the mausoleum. Rose stepped to the back and studied the cat angel statue set in the wall.

Over the years, Rose had chance to notice her mother occasionally wander into the Mausoleum and not come out for several hours. It didn't happen terribly often these days, but that only served to enhance its oddity. Before, Rose chalked the behavior up to her mother simply being off her gourd. Now, the little hermetic had been forced to reexamine Mom's every action. True, Mom could have simply wandered inside, in a fit of grief (she had, as it turns out, a supply of grief matching in plenty to her supply of alcohol, at least before she flushed it all). And then simply passed out for hours. But this seemed an unsatisfying answer, now, and Rose recalled instances where her mother would come out just as sober as she entered.

Admittedly, that likely wasn't terribly much, but it bore mention.

Taking out her phone, Rose lit up the statue. Staring intently at the eyes of the angel cat, Rose touched them with his fingers. Experimentally, she pushed on them.
The eyes gave in, sliding back into the statue.

“Meow!” came a scratchy recorded tone of a cat, somewhere from the statue. No doubt the thing had a speaker installed.

Quite suddenly, the slab on which Jaspers's coffin lay shifted to the side, great gears straining to move the weight.

Rose looked down with a mix of surprise and awe at a set of stairs leading down.

She smiled. “I knew it.”

Dave opened the door, leading the Egberts down three flights of stairs.

“Where are we now?” John whispered.

“Africa,” Dave said, examining the dusty walls. “Not sure where. Probably just a random city.”

Suddenly, the muffled sound of rapid gunfire rang out from somewhere outside.

“Ah!” John gasped, squatting down. “Are we under attack?” he whispered, looking around.

“Dave,” Paul whispered, keeping his own head low. Somewhere distant, he heard more gunfire, as well as what might have been an explosion. “Are we safe here?”

“Course we're safe,” Dave said, “the building is empty.” He turned away, whispering, “Dude, you didn't tell me this was a war zone! ...I don't care if it's easier to cover our tracks. Get us out now!”

He raised his sword, halting the party. They crouched in darkness, hearing the sounds of battle all around them.

Dave looked down, motioning them to move. “Basement. Hurry.”

They descended two more flights of stairs. Spying a metal door, Dave ran over and raised his blade. He breathed in, breathed out. Ready his katana with both hands, he cut twice, shearing through sheet metal around the door knob. Slotting the tip of his katana into the cuts, he crowbarred the door open.

The three ran inside.

Leading them around an empty room, the Virtual Adept opened another door (thankfully not locked). Inside was the shining portal. The Egberts filed inside and through, with Dave bringing up the rear.

He was so glad to be away from this war zone. Dave honestly did not want to think about it any more than he had to.

“Tholluxth! Tholluxth!”

The Virtual Adept sighed, getting up from his chair and opening the bedroom door.

“What ith it, Mituna?” he said, scowling.

Mituna Captor stood at the door, rubbing his eyes. He stood at least a head taller than Sollux, and
wore an oversized yellow night shirt that hung lopsided on his bony shoulders. His face could barely be seen beneath a mop of messy black hair. He sniffed. “...Solluxth...” he sobbed, wiping tears away. “...I had...hic...a bad dream. And now...hic...my head hurtth...”

Sollux groaned, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Tho?”

“...can...can I come in?” Mituna said, whining. “I need...you know...”

Unfortunately, Sollux did know. Ever since the accident, his brother's headaches could only be soothed by head rubs, and his anxiety attacks only assuaged by love and care.

It was complete bullshit. “Ugh...can't you rub your own head?” the young man groaned. “Or go call Latula to do it. Thhe'd come over in a heartbeat. I'm buthy.”

“But...but it'th tho late...” Mituna said, frowning. Fresh tears ran down his face. “I don't wanna dithturb her in the middle...hic...of the night...”

Sollux looked over at his bedside clock. Wow, was it really that late already? Time sure flies when you're hacking conspiracies and loading their servers with pornography. The young man briefly considered plastering that on a t-shirt.

He sighed, burying his face in his hands. “...fine...” Sollux motioned his brother inside. “But jutht until you feel better. I've got shit to do tonight.”

Mituna nodded, entering. Looking around, he was mildly dismayed by the bright display on Sollux's twin computer screens. It didn't help that much of the room was packed with computer equipment.

Finally, he just settled on sitting on the floor next to Sollux's chair.

Sighing, Sollux took his place, using a mouse in one hand and rubbing Mituna's head with the other.

“...hic...thankth, Thollux...” the older boy sobbed, dabbing at his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sollux said, nodding. His fingers rubbed deep into his brother's scalp. His heart hitched a little, tracing the groove of the nasty scars Mituna sported. Sollux bit his lower lip, imagining the pain that had to accompany such a wound.

For a minute, they were silent. Only the click, click, click of the mouse broke the silence.

Eventually, Mituna's quiet sobs stopped, and he patted his brother's hand. “Thankth, bro...” He looked up towards the screens, blocking some of the glare with his hand. “What are you doing?”

“Hacking noobth, mothly,” Sollux said, shrugging. “I figured out how to modify thpam botth and virutheth to automatically hack remote, protected therverth.” He grinned evilly. “They are currently torturing thome athhole adminth with a bucket-load of porn.”

“Ha ha!” Mitnua laughed, grinning like a doofus. “Tholluxth, you're really thmart!”

“Heh heh...yeah...” Sollux's smile faded, considering the statement. It filled him with a profound sadness.

It wasn't that long ago that Sollux was the one saying that to Mituna. Or, more accurately since becoming a teenager, actively avoiding saying that, when he really, really meant it. The irony of
Sollux swallowed and wondered, not for the first time, when he'd get his old brother back.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Fourth Of July!

On a less dating note, I'm wondering how I'm going to handle the continuation of this series. What I'm thinking of right now is, by chapter 30 (when I'll have resolved the current events), I'll mark this story as "Complete". Then I'll rename it "Magestuck: The Ascension Book 1" or something, and start a Book 2 once I get around to the next "Plot" part of the Series. That will be after a couple short and limited stories, devoted more to character business.

If you have any suggestions, please leave a comment. It's always appreciated.
“Oof!”

John Egbert leaned against a car. Clutching his stinging chest, he looked around.

The last portal had taken them to a mechanics shop, from what he could see. Racks of tools everywhere, plenty of space for several vehicles, even huge winches for raising the cars up. Only the one car sat in the garage at the moment, and a quick look to the window showed it was night. Not pitch black, though. A faint orange sheen showed against the dusty glass.

His dad set the bags down on the floor and strode towards him. “How are you holding up, John?” he said, patting the young man's shoulder.

John flashed a pained smile. “I'm okay,” he said, squeezing Dad's hand. He frowned, though, when he noticed his hand came away bloodied. John looked to his chest, and saw some scarlet leaking through.

“The wound is opening up again,” Dad said, stooping down to examine it. With a look for confirmation, he lifted John's shirt. The arcane symbol on his chest was, indeed, bleeding a little. “All this activity is aggravating it.”

Dave stepped through the portal, looking back as it closed behind him. “John okay?” he asked.

“He's been better,” Dad said, lowering the shirt. “We can't keep doing this forever, young man.”

“Good thing we won't have to,” Dave said, setting the bag in his left hand down. “That was the last jump. We're here.”

“This is where we're hiding?” Dad said, raising an eyebrow. He looked around, nervously.

“Naw, we're not staying,” Dave pointed his sword to a door. Probably to the front desk. “After we catch our breath, we'll still need to travel a couple blocks. Then we'll be safe. Hopefully.”

The father crossed his arms, frowning.

Dave sighed. “Look, Mister Egbert, it's like I said. The Technocracy can track where spatial disturbances have been, and where they go. My Bro can – and has been – obfuscate the trail, but that takes even more work. And time. We needed to get as much space between us and them as possible, and make it as hard as possible to find the trail again. Hopefully with that war zone, it'll take them a while to check that last stop out.”

Paul Egbert scratched his head, then shrugged. He wandered over to the car and examined the open hood.

John wandered over to a desk and sat on a stool. He breathed heavily, sweat pouring on his neck. “So...what's this place...we're going to?”

“I shouldn't talk about it here,” Dave said, looking out a window. “They could find this spot and look backwards in time. We should have it covered, but...” The young man adjusted his glasses, tapping the rim. Looking away, he muttered, “We do have this covered, right?” He paused, then frowned. “Whoa, dude, are you okay? Is it that...shit, sounds nasty...naw, I got this here. Be back in a few...”
Dave looked back to the Egberts. “We'll move out in a couple minutes.”

“Mom? Are you...whoa...”

Rose Lalonde entered the huge laboratory, eyes darting every which way.

“...she really was a mad scientist...” Rose mumbled, staring at the rows of green cubes surrounding a circular pad in the center of the room. At the machine that looked like an arcade cabinet, lights blinking off it and from the surrounding machine array. “...Mom?”

It wasn’t very well illuminated, the overhead lights flickering every few seconds.

In the left hand side, Rose saw a patch of floor covered in green bits of broken glass. Approaching, her nose was alight with the smell of wine. “...oh no...” she mumbled, but her face screwed up. She looked on with a perplexed expression, seeing a trail of liquid disappearing down a nearby drain, and a broom and dustpan set leaning haphazardly against the wall.

When she looked around the full length and breadth of the room, she saw that there were three beds stationed at various ends of the lab. Rose spotted a sedate form resting on one of them, across the room. “Mom!”

Rose dashed through the center of the lab, only pausing to walk around the circular pad. She came to a stop at a bizarre bed, covered in stuffed animals, a garish pink bedspread, and her mother. “Mom,” Rose said, leaning over and shaking the woman's shoulders, “Mom, are you okay?”

Mom groaned, head shaking. “Whas...buh?” She sat up, grimacing and rubbing her head. “...ugh...Rose? What are you doing here?”

The young lady grabbed her mother's shoulders. “I came to find you,” Rose said, feeling exhausted. “You weren't anywhere in the house, and I feared something happened to you.”

“Oh...okay...” Rose's mother patted her daughter's shoulder. Her forehead was creased heavily. “I'm sorry, Rose. I couldn't sleep...haven't been able to sleep all week.” She rubbed her nose.

“...how'd you find this place?”

Rose's shoulders sagged, and she breathed a heavy sigh. Tension flooded from her chest. Rose smiled. “I guessed there might be a tunnel connected to Jaspers's mausoleum.” Overcome with feelings, Rose leaned forward and embraced her mother. “Mom!”

“Oh!” Mom said, at which point she hugged back. “That's my girl...”

“Mom...I saw that broken wine bottle...”

“Shh...shh...” Mom said, patting Rose's ivory hair. “Not so loud. Mommy's got a killer headache.” She looked over Rose's shoulder. “I found it on the floor somewhere. Threw it away, so I wouldn't...oh, you know...”

Rose nodded, sniffing. “I'm proud of you, Mom.”

“Thanks, sweetie.” Mom yawned, rubbing her head. “Damn, I'm tired.”

“Shouldn't we go back to the house, then?” Rose said, disengaging the hug. “I'll feel a lot better, knowing you're in the house, where I can help you if you have a seizure or something.”

“Well, I would, Rosie...” the woman said, looking down and towards the door. “...but...”
“But?”

“...Rose...” Mom said, cocking and eyebrow nervously. “...are there snakes all over the floor?”

Rose blinked. “...no, there are not...” She shook her head, then actually looked. “...no, Mom, there are no snakes on the floor. The lab is snake free.”

“Oh, good,” Mom said, smiling, muscles relaxing fractionally. “That's good. It just means my head is playing tricks on me...” She yawned, rubbing her eyes. Mom crawled farther onto the bed, batting at invisible serpents. “Move over, snakes, you're fake. I need to lie down.” Her head fell onto the pillows, and she rolled over to face Rose. “Since I've got a bed right here, I'll just make due. Goodnight Rose...”

The young lady blinked, then sighed. She smiled. “...yeah...”

She looked over at the door, then rubbed her own eyes. “...fuck it...”

Rose climbed onto the bed and lay down, next to her mother. She grabbed the bedspread from the side and pull it over them both. “Goodnight, Mom.”

Mom, sensing the girl's presence, extended her arms and wrapped them around Rose. She yawned. “...goodnight, baby...”

“Uhh...Dave...”

John eyed a gang of men, standing on the street twenty meters away. Eyed them from the side, too afraid to look directly at them.

John Egbert was made stunningly aware of just how much of a suburban white boy he was, and how suburban white boys had no business in the middle of a city at night.

“Just ignore them, John,” Dave said, keeping his eyes forward. “They won't bother you if you don't bother them.” The young man hefted the katana lightly in his hand. “Plus, I got your back. Just be cool.”

Nodding, John hurried to keep pace with Dave. Behind him, his father kept the rear, casting furtive glances here and there.

The streets were dark and unseasonably warm. The trio had been walking for three blocks. Clutching his chest with a free hand, John took deep, raspy breaths. “Sorry, but how much further?”

Dave stopped in front of a door. He turned, inclining his head. “Not far. We're already here.”

Dad looked up at the concrete building. “An apartment complex?” he said.

The Virtual Adept nodded. “Come on, this last part is easy.” He opened the door, motioning them inside.

The elevator door opened, allowing the three to step out.

“Top floor, hackers and cool kids,” Dave said.
“Is...is this where you live, Dave?” John asked, stepping inside. The room was small, with only one door marked as a stairwell, and another with an apartment number.

“That's right,” Dave said, walking up to the door. He handed the shopping bag to John, then fished around his pockets. “…dammit...” he muttered, frowning. Dave extended a fist and knocked on the door. “Took everything else, and left my keys. Typical.”

The three didn't even hear footsteps approaching before a muffled voice spoke from the other side. “Password?”

“Swordfish,” Dave said, scowling. “It's always fucking swordfish. Open up, dude, we got company.”

“I don't know,” came the voice, a baritone. “What makes me sure you aren't a clone or some shit?”

“I don't have to take this,” Dave said, mouth flat. “I'll take my homies and bounce elsewhere.”

Clicks and clacks sounded from the door. It opened, revealing a tall, cool dude in pickle-themed pajamas. His triangular shades were drawn up, as he dabbed a cloth against his eyes. “Come on in,” Bro Strider said, motioning blindly through the entryway. “Welcome to...fuck...” He rubbed his eyes. The cloth came away stained orange. “…welcome to Casa de Strider.”

“Come to mama...”

Vriska Serket fished the cobalt blue, eight-sided die from the brown cardboard package.

Holding it to the desk lamp, she smiled.

Her left hand leafed through the worn, yellowed parchment before her, finding the page she needed. The journal's illustrations were detailed and clear. Matched the die in her hand exactly.

One die, of a set of eight dice. And cobalt blue. Like it and the aged tome were custom made for Vriska.

She leaned back in her chair, tossing and catching the die in the air. The girl of fourteen grinned. It still astounded her, that the die would be exactly where the book said it would, despite the text being over four hundred years old. How insane it was, that she only had to spin a yarn about visiting that museum in Belgrade (which she never had), and having dropped the eight-sider accidentally in that dead dude's desk. And the curator not only bought it, but personally paid the postage to send it to Vriska!

Admittedly, who ever heard of bright blue gaming dice of that specific variety being crafted in the Renaissance? Even Vriska was skeptical, until they actually found it.

Maybe there was something to that bit in the journal, about the dice wanting to come together.

And if Vriska had her way, the one who would do it would be her. Of course, the other dice couldn't possibly as easy to track down. She'd need to go out looking for them. That meant having money to travel.

Vriska frowned. That would take time. Playing it safe, she'd need to wait until she could get a job. Traveling alone would be problematic, too, young as she was. A veritable pain in the ass, really. Sure, her mom had plenty of cash, but...
Somewhere below, she heard rapid thumping. And then a yelp.

Sitting up, Vriska trained her ears. Her house was terribly old and, honestly, pretty confusingly laid out. Some batty ancestor apparently got their Winchester House on, and modified the mansion into a maze. Which suited Vriska just fine – it meant she had no trouble hiding from her mom.

Thump. Thump thump thump. Crash.

“Shit,” Vriska said, hopping to her feet.

From her bedroom, the young lady exited into the hallway.

“Ah! Ah!”

A man rounded a corner to her left, and promptly tripped on a set of sudden steps. “Agh!” he cried, falling face first to the ground.

Vriska stood in the middle of the hall, watching him.

“Shit...” the man said, pushing himself up. Blood trailed from his nose, where he'd struck the floor, as well as from a cut on his shoulder.

Man, mom must be losing her touch, to let the guy get this far.

He looked to Vriska, face contorted in fear. “...h...help me!” he stammered, crawling forward a step. “She's fucking crazy! H-help me!”

The young lady backed up a step, raising her hands defensively. She eyed him with apprehension.

...was...was she supposed to do something? This had never happened before.

“...help me!” the man insisted, trying to rise to his feet. “She-

Crack!

A baseball bat slammed down on the man's head, sending him falling cold to the floor.

Vriska felt droplets of something warm strike her face. She froze.

A tall woman stood behind the unconscious man. Her ebony hair was done up in a bun, and showed signs of gray.

Vriska's mom exhaled sharply, hefting the bat in her hands. She wiped a bead of sweat from her face with a handkerchief, staring down at the man. “...phew...good thing he took a right instead of a left. Might have reached an exit, otherwise.” She looked to her daughter. “Vriska, dear, you've got a little...” She pointed to the girl's face.

Vriska blinked, then touched her face blankly. The fingers came away, and she saw the blood on them.

She shuddered, a pit forming in her stomach.

The older woman crinked her neck, then set the bat on the floor. “Alright, you...” she said to the man, “come on.” She grabbed him by the ankles and began pulling. “Ugh...” she grunted, rubbing her back. “Vriska, give your old mum a hand.”
Vriska's hands closed into fists. She clasped her eyes shut tight. When she opened them, she growled, “Do it yourself! They're your victims! Leave me out of it!”

Without a word, Vriska stormed back into her room, slamming the door behind her.

Paul Egbert took up the rear, letting Dave's brother lock up behind him.

“Dave, you take your friend into the bathroom,” Bro Strider said, pointing blindly into the room. “Get him patched up. I'd do it myself, but...” He shrugged.

Dave nodded. “Sure. This way, man.” He gestured to John, and the two headed further inside.

As the father crept further in, he heard his son gasp in wonderment...and then disgust.

Paul cocked his head, then turned to the elder Strider. “Sorry about all this, Mister Strider,” he said, putting down a suitcase and extending a hand. “Sorry for imposing...”

Dave's Bro took the hand. It occurred to Paul a second later, as he felt the man's firm grip, that Bro really ought not be able to see what he was doing. Not behind the soiled cloth he wiped at his eyes constantly. Yet his coordination was in no way hampered.

The man shrugged. “Can't say I particularly enjoyed all the action tonight,” he said, “but I've had more strenuous missions. Not like I had anything better planned.” He leaned down and grabbed the free suitcase, hefting it over his shoulder.

“Are...are you alright, sir?” Paul said, watching the man head deeper into the apartment. “Your eyes...”

“Just a minor case of 'Dox,” Bro said, navigating the hallway into his apartment as if still sighted. He paused a moment. “You know what Paradox is, Mister Egbert?”

“Honestly, I'm still confused about that,” Paul said, following. The two adults entered the apartment proper. The father was stunned.

Garbage and packing peanuts on the floor, black electrical wires running every which way, stacks of cardboard boxes, strange-shaped swords leaning against walls. The walls themselves were plastered with posters of a nature the elder Egbert couldn't comprehend. He thought he recognized some sort of nostalgic media from the eighties and nineties, though Paul couldn't be sure. There were trunks and mixing equipment here and there, and every surface had some sort of plush doll on it.

Was...was that a plush doll of a shirtless Mister T, handcuffed to a pants-less plush doll of Chuck Norris?

A shudder ran up Paul Egbert's spine. He couldn't even. He just couldn't.

“Mister Egbert?”

“What?” Paul said, snapping to attention. “Oh, sorry. I uh...what was that you were saying about Paradox?”

Bro shrugged, plopping down on a futon in the middle of the room, facing a plasma screen TV. “Paradox is the price we pay for miracles, Mister Egbert,” he said. “Every time you try to ply your hand at magic – be that mystical, religious, or technological – it has a chance to call down weird
shit.” He frowned, wiping at his face. “I've been doing the impossible all night, so it was going to come bite me in the ass sooner or later.”

“Like how my son suddenly got injured?” Paul said, setting his suitcase down where Dave’s brother had left the other one.

“Yep.” Bro leaned his head back, pinching his nose. “Mind grabbing me a beer from the fridge? Help yourself if you want.”

“Of course,” Paul said, nodding. Opposite the living area was a small kitchen, its appliances chrome metal and plastered with obscure comics. Paul decided not to think too hard about them, and just opened the fridge door.

An incredibly shitty sword fell out, clattering loudly to the floor.

“Shit,” Bro said, “I thought we cleaned all the shitty swords out of the fridge.”

“Mmmmrgh...”

Vriska leaned against her bedroom door and slid down to the floor. She curled her knees in, collapsing into a ball of smoldering emotion. Then, pressing her face into her knees, she sat there.

She sat there until the sound of dragging faded away into the labyrinth that was the Serket mansion. Then she sat there for a while more.

Eventually, her phone pinged, bringing her out of her stupor. With shaky hands, she unlocked the phone. It was a text message from her best friend, Terezi.

“H3Y. C4NT SL33P. WH4T 4R3 YOU DO1NG?”

The young woman stared at the screen, biting her lip, until it faded to black. Unlocking again, she hammered out – and subsequently erased – a reply five times, before just not responding. She let her phone hand drop. “Mmmrgh!” she groaned, face planting down onto her knees again.

It's not like she could explain to Terezi what was wrong. Vriska couldn't just reply, “Oh, you know, my mom's a serial killer, and she just beat a dude over the head in front of me. Now she's going to carve him up in our basement. You know, the usual.”

It was stupid. It was stupid that Vriska felt so much...unidentified but intolerable emotion. She didn't know that guy. He was just another rich tourist or something, lured in by her mother’s wiles, like a spider in its web. Vriska had seen it before, ever since she could remember. Why did she feel stir crazy now? Why did she care now?

She wiped her hand across her face, then examined it. More blood came away. The scarlet reminder of what happened, and proof that it wasn't happening in the abstract. There was a man being murdered downstairs, and Vriska did nothing. He had pleaded for aid right in front of her, and she did nothing.

Gritting her teeth, Vriska slapped her forehead, smothering a growl in her throat.

Vriska shuddered, growing more and more discontent. It wasn't supposed to feel this way. She wasn't supposed to feel this way. She wasn't a good person by most measures – could she expect anything less, the daughter of a relentless killer? Having a crisis of conscious just...it didn't seem like an idea that was real. That anyone could go on as long as she could, tolerating such evil, and
just decide to change.

What a naïve notion, was what Vriska always thought. Why, then, did it hurt so much?

She shifted where she sat, and felt something poking her thigh through her jeans. “Hgh...” she grunted, straightening the offending leg out so she could root through the pocket.

The cobalt blue die was clutched in the palm of her hand when she removed it.

For a minute, Vriska regarded the die. It felt heavy in her hand. Looking up, she spotted the venerable tome sitting on the desk, illuminated as if by spotlight under the lamp’s shine.

She frowned. Gritting her teeth, she growled, “Rrrgh...fine!”

Vriska pulled her phone up. She dialed 101.

“Hello!” came the operator on the other end of the line. “Police Department for-”

“Stop.” Vriska sniffed. “Let me get to the point, so listen.”

“...yes, ma'am?”

“I am currently running on a big rush of 'fuck it' right now, so listen carefully and don't interrupt.” Vriska clenched her fist. “My name is Vriska Serket, and my mother, Agatha Serket, is a serial killer. Has been for as long as I can remember.

“She convinces men with money to come back to our house, and then murders them. I've been hearing the screams and the power tools for years. Men come to the house, and don't leave. Just minutes ago, she bashed one over the head with a baseball bat, so she could drag him to the basement. I can't be sure, but she's probably killing him now, if he's lucky. She buries the bodies in the cemetery out back.”

“...is this a prank, young lad-”

“Don't. You. Dare!” Vriska barked, gritting her teeth. “I am dead fucking serious!” She slumped back against the wall, catching her breath. Her voice cracked, and she gasped. “...I'm calling to make a formal tip about past crimes, and crimes currently in progress. Come over now, and maybe the bastard will still be in salvageable condition.” Vriska sighed. “I'm done. I'm just fucking done. I don't want any more of it. Good bye.”

She slammed the disconnect icon on the phone, and held her head.

Finally, Vriska rose to her feet. In the back of her mind, she realized she never gave them an address. Frankly, she didn't care. She gave them her name (stupid, stupid, stupid!), so they'll be able to track the address easily enough. It was no longer her problem.

She'd done her good deed for the night. The tension in her chest was dissipating already.

What mattered now was that she'd given herself a time limit. Running to her closet, Vriska pulled a suitcase out and began stuffing clothes and assorted nonsense in. In her backpack, she stuffed all the essentials: her laptop, a notebook and writing utensils, her RPG and LARP books. And, carefully as she could, she packed the journal of Marquise Spinneret Mindfang.

The load would be heavy as hell, but there was no compromise. The journal and the dice were the entire point of the expedition. That, and dodging foster care when the cops came to bust her mom.
When she'd stuffed as much irreplaceable crap as she could on her person, Vriska paused briefly to check her phone.

She still hadn't answered Terezi. Carefully, she composed a response.

“Terezi, I'm gonna go away for a bit. If all goes according to plan, you might hear about my mom getting busted by the cops. Whatever they say she did, she did worse. I don't know if they'll ever find all the bodies. Like hell I'm letting the st8 raise my ass, so I'm taking to the streets. Besides, I've got shit to do. I have my computer, so I'll message you later, when I have time.

“Contact you soon. ::::)

An hour later, several patrol cars surrounded the Serket mansion. An ambulance carted away what was left of the man, who was somehow still alive. The aging woman inside was dragged, struggling and blood-splattered, into a car, bound in handcuffs.

Inside, inspectors noted curiously the family safe, its door wide open, contents plundered. Only a single cell phone remained inside, its back adorned with a spiderweb design.

Elsewhere, a fourteen year old girl, carrying a bulging backpack and dragging a suitcase, boarded a bus. In her pocket was a pre-paid cell phone, a map of the national bus routes, and a single blue die.
As Mage: The Ascension is inherently about philosophy and belief, there's going to be a lot of talk about religion in this chapter. It's inevitable, and I'll try to present the ideas as best I can without preaching. Don't know if that's possible, but I'll give it my best shot. Just know that the rest of this Series will variably touch on other ideas as they become relevant, from other schools of thought. Viewer discretion is advised.

“I woke up today, and suddenly I don't understand anything.”

Paul Egbert plopped hard down into the futon. In one hand, he gripped a can of orange soda – the Strider household didn't seem to have a coffee machine. In the other, he held a can of beer, which he passed off.

“Thanks,” Dirk Strider said, opening the can blindly and slurping it down. “And yeah, I've had plenty of moments like that, over the years I've been doing this.”

“This?”

“The whole...magick thing...”

“Ah...” Paul nodded. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “...I don't know how I feel about that word. Magic.” He sipped thoughtfully, loosening his tie. “Up until today, magic was just sleight of hand and theater. Now...now I'm forced to watch people – including my own son – perform what I can only call Sorcery.”

“Yeah.”

“What does the Good Book say?” Paul asked, staring into space. “Suffer not a witch to live?”

“I've heard tell that's a mistranslation of the Hebrew word for 'Poisoner','” Dirk said, shrugging. “Would you really kill your son...?”

“God no!” Paul said, shutting his eyes. He sighed. “I just...everything I've taken for granted is failing me. What...what IS it? Magic, that is? What lets John...and you two do what you do?”

Dirk turned towards Paul and raised his can. “That, Mister Egbert, is the million dollar question.”

He held it up towards the father. “Here's to the off chance we might find out some day.”

Paul nodded, then struck Dirk's can with his own. “So...you really don't know?”

“Not for sure,” Dirk said, knocking back a swig. “And that's the problem. There are a whole bunch of folks who can do what your son can do. Who can do what Dave and I can. We've gone by a million names since time immemorial, from magi to mad scientist to miracle worker. We've got organizations centuries – even millennia – old, with hundreds of folks pursuing these great questions.

“Every single one of them has their own theory – their own worldview – and none of them is worth
much, on account of no ability to get an objective answer. Mostly, because the...Blessing, I guess you could call it, seems to react to – and reinforce – the user's expectations. It's complete bullshit.”

“...so, what do you think it is?” Paul sipped the soda thoughtfully.

“Reality hacking,” Dirk said. “What we call Mages have been handed administrative access to the world around us. It's up to us to use that privilege in a responsible – and Cool – manner. Cool in multiple senses of the word. Not, for instance, how the Technocracy uses it. Screwing with people's minds and taking away the common man's agency just isn't cool, you know?”

The father removed his tower of hats, dislodging the bottommost hat. “I suppose that's true,” Paul said, planting the dislodged hat on his head and setting aside the others. It was simply too warm for so many hats at once. “...I don't know, it seems like treading on the toes of God.”

“Well, it's not like Mages are without their limitations,” Dirk said. “We're still not all powerful. Even the greatest of us, those who outgrow the need for tools and are capable of effecting great, cataclysmic change, are still small in the face of the wider worlds. And we're still vulnerable to consequence, of one form or another. We're still, fundamentally, Human, with all the non-godliness that implies.”

“For a person who claims not to understand the nature of these...miracles,” Paul said, “you seem to have a very developed philosophical sense of things.”

“Eh, I've just been around long enough to hear a lot of other people muse and philosophize. Folks who were wiser than my ass ever was, and probably ever will be.” Dirk sipped his beer. “For instance, you seem like a religious kind of guy.”

“I go to church whenever possible,” Paul nodded, “though not as much as I probably ought.”

“That's fine,” Dirk said, “some of the nicest – and most self-sacrificing – folks I've met were members of what we call the Celestial Chorus.” He turned and gestured with his orange-soiled rag. “See, working in opposition to the Technocratic Union is...an alliance, I suppose, of mystical and techno-mystical groups, called the Tradition Council. More a marriage of necessity, since we've got a lot of differences and friction between theoretically allied groups.

“The Celestial Chorus is a Tradition devoted to Big Time Religion, so to speak. A lot of the older Traditions have faith elements to some degree, but the Chorus is where you'll get most of your miracle workers who call themselves that. Folks who say that their power comes from God – whatever 'God' is – and channel their power through devotion and shit.

“Course, the problem of having marriages of necessity is that a whole bunch of Mages who subscribe to different religions – Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Mithraism – get lumped into one group, and be expected to play nice.” Dirk shook his head. “For every syncretic and omni-theist, there's twelve more folks who just want to practice their own beliefs in peace. And I won't say anything more about which is better, because that kind of thing tends to start fights.”

“I can imagine,” Paul said, contemplating the headache of accommodating so many competing, contradictory views in one organization. Let alone doing it while opposing a monolithic conspiracy. “What do they say about...the Gift? If you don't mind me asking.”

“Not at all, though truth be told it's all over the map,” Dirk said. “Just like their beliefs about theology. Some say everyone's got a shard of god inside them, others say Mages are individually blessed.” Dirk swished the beer in his can around, dabbing a bit of orange from his eyes. “I think one of the most interesting ideas I ever heard came from a guy from a particular faction of the
“Chorus: the Alexandrians.”

“Who are they?”

“They're the guys who want to reconcile the idea of science with the idea of God,” Dirk said. “A lot of Traditionalists have a poor view of Science as a whole – excluding those Traditions like mine who are arguably all about it – because it's the weapon of the enemy. But the Alexandrians are fully of the mind that a rationalistic, ordered version of the universe is not incompatible with divinity. Nor are miracles, as they are merely the Watchmaker opening things up and changing stuff as desired. The Alexandrians want to reconcile Science and Religion, so that the Technocracy isn't necessary anymore. They're one of a number of technomantic factions spread out through the various Traditions, and for that I respect them.”

Paul sipped his orange soda. “...sounds like a rational model to me. I'd hate to see all the good things created by science and technology demonized, simply because this...Technocratic Union champions it.” He tapped his hat. “I wouldn't have access to plain, serviceable clothing, for one. Nor easy-to-make cake mixes.” He smiled.

“Righteous,” Dirk said, throwing up his index and pinkie fingers. “But anyway, this Alexandrian had his own theory. He was half a religious biologist, and half a spiritual alchemist. That being, he tried to use piety and Christian esoterism to refine his soul.” The elder Strider adjusted his hat. “His particular theory was something he sort of took off of C.S. Lewis, if you can believe it. About something the guy said about the primeval man, before the Fall.”

“The Paradisal Man,” Paul said, raising a finger. “Lewis discussed it at length in 'The Problem of Pain'.”

“Oh, so you know it?” Dirk said, cocking an eyebrow. “You probably understand it better than I do. It's been a few years since the dude explained it.”

“A meeting between a naturalistic view of early man and a theological one,” Paul began, crossing his legs, “Lewis sought to present a likely scenario for the Fall, and Man's nature before and after. He posited that when God created humanity, it was as a creature whose nature was in line with the worship of God. And that Paradisal Man had full control over his body. A rational actor with a perfectly rational form, unburdened by suffering or want, allowing him to focus fully towards loving God. A savage, as Lewis called them, but only by want of experience.

“When the fundamental act of Disobedience came, however, it marked the point where humanity asserted their sense of Self, as independent from God. Since the miracle of full bodily control was an extension of God's blessing, and man was now in rebellion against God, they lost that control. Becoming creatures with the rationality and free will they were meant to have, but subject to the needs, urges, and pains of lower animals. Man's nature changed, shifting from a being who could love God foremost through no effort, to one who struggles painfully to do so. All nobility struggling inside a cage of their own body, and the circumstances around them.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Dirk said, nodding. “Yeah, it's coming back to me. Basically, what this Alexandrian theorized was that these Paradisal People – this Golden Race or Wyck or whatever you want to call 'em – didn't just have control of their own bodies, but of the world around them. That they were made caretakers of the world, and had the ability to edit it according to their need, and to what God wanted them to do. The ability to serve, without the effort of working with their mere bodies, and to whatever was asked of them. The perfect caretakers for the Garden of Eden.

“But when they did their original sin, they proved themselves unworthy...or untrustworthy, with
the power they wielded. They were serving themselves, and their own stupid whims, rather than
God's.” Dirk took another swig of beer. “Not sure I agree that service to God is paramount,
personally. But regardless, God locked all those fancy measures of conscious control that humanity
enjoyed until then inside a kind of spiritual black box, making them subject to natural laws and
biological limitations and urges. This included taking away their ability to effortlessly modify their
surrounding environment. They had to work harder for that shit, leading to toil and pain.

“Now, this is where this dude's theory gets interesting,” Dirk continued. He shrugged. “To me at
least. Borrowing from my own experience, God curtailed humanity's admin privileges. But, every
so often, those locks start to...loosen up. This is what we call the Awakening, us Mages. Maybe it's
through inspiration, trauma, great need, or simply because God wanted the person so enabled, for
whatever purpose. The person's locks are disengaged...not all at once, of course. We needed to
prove ourselves disciplined, capable, and wise enough to warrant the power we're given back. But
when we do, we get to do slightly more badass shit. And if we become excellent enough – not an
easy thing by any measure – we transcend this world entirely, and presumably get whisked off to
Heaven or some shit. I don't know.”

“Does that happen often?”

“No way,” Dirk said, shaking his head. “Ascension is a theoretical prospect amongst most Mages.
While everybody has different ideas about what it means or how you get there, the end result is
mostly the same from the outside: the Mage disappears, never to be seen again. Again, this is rare
as hell, to the point where folks don't know for certain if it ever happens. If anyone has Ascended,
they don't come back to tell us. Probably couldn't, if what happens to them is radical beyond even
an Awakened mind's ability to comprehend. Maybe they become too pure for this world and go to
Heaven to hang with God. Maybe they merge with God, as some long attempt to reclaim every lost
shard of divinity. Maybe they go beyond the universe as we know it, and explore some kind of
Super Cosmos, that makes regular space or Umbral space look positively pedestrian. Who fucking
knows?”

“Hmm...” Paul looked away, contemplating.

“Ugh...Dave, can't you just magic me healed?”

“Would if I could,” Dave said, sliding the needle into John's auto-lacerated flesh. “But I can't.
Healing isn't my field.” He drew the needle back, tightening the thread and closing the cut slightly
more. “Which is weird, since Bro and I spend so much time on the roof, sparring with fully
sharpened swords. Then again, any time I got injured, Bro just took care of it.”

“Why...ah!” John said, grimacing from the continued discomfort. His eyes wandered around the
bathroom, pointedly trying not to look at the creepy rapper puppet hanging from the showerhead.
“...why didn't you get your Bro to teach you? Could save us a lot of hassle, dude.”

Dave shrugged, continuing the patch job. “Never got around to it. I guess part of growing up is
knowing when it's time to learn practical things, like how to heal your 'Dox-blasted ass.” The
Virtual Adept sighed, leaning in close to check his handiwork. “Least I learned first aid, right?”

“I guess...” John said, flinching under the needle's ministrations. “You know, we could have
waited to do this until your Bro's Paradox wore off.”

Beneath his shades, Dave blinked. “God dammit,” he muttered, frowning. He kept applying first
aid, though. It was probably some kind of psychological thing, he figured, that wouldn't let him
leave a project incomplete.
The two young men stayed quiet for a while.

John yawned, then strained his ears. He could hear the muffled talking in the living room. “...what do you think they're talking about?” Blinking, John sat up. “Wait, what am I talking about?” He started to paint a sigil in the air.

“Dude, don't.” Dave raised his hand. “The Strider household is a Sanctum. Only my or Bro's magic is allowed. You'll bring more Dox on your ass if you do that in here.”

“What, really?” John said. “How does that work?”

“Bro has been doing magic here so long, he's carved out a niche for himself,” Dave said, pausing his sewing. “Reality obeys his Paradigm, at least in the bounds of this apartment. And he taught me magic, so I fall under that protection. In short, our magic is coincidental here...and everyone else's is vulgar. Including yours.”

“Oh,” John said, rubbing his chin. “Shit. Thanks for warning me.” He frowned. “...so...what are they talking about out there?”

“Hang on.” Dave grew very quiet, shutting his eyes. Breathe in. Breathe out.

He tilted his head. “Religion.”

“What? Seriously?”

“Yeah dude,” Dave said, cocking an eyebrow. He returned to sewing. “They're talking about God, miracles, and the original sin. Oh, and how it might factor into the nature of magic.”

John frowned through the continued patchwork. “Hmm...funny,” he said, scratching his cheek, “your Bro didn't strike me as the type who would have much to talk about with my dad.”

“Why? Cause he's...you know?” Dave said.

“Partly that, yes,” John said. “Not that there's anything wrong with that. Don't know how well my dad would agree. Not that he'd let on if he did. My dad's really polite.”

Dave nodded. “Well, thing about my bro is,” he said, “he knows how to read people. He probably pegged your dad as a religious type, and has been tailoring his explanation of magic to fit the audience. Tell it in a way that he'll understand. Break this shit to him gently.”

“He doesn't think my dad could take it?”

“He doesn't think it would be pretty, trying to lean on the idea of reality being mutable and shit,” Dave said, taking up a piece of white gauze. “Once in a while, Bro would explain his experiences during the war. And the way he told it, newly Awakened kids have a tendency to react badly to having their worldview rocked too hard. It's like teenagers from religious families, who end up exposed to other ideas and violently rejecting their previous beliefs. They end up being challenged by the idea that their worldview might not necessarily be true, and end up going way too far in the other direction.”

“Not following,” John said, letting the other young man apply bandages to his chest.

“Maybe it's easier to say...” Dave said, tilting his head to one side, “...that it's like an optimist seeing the world's negative aspects for the first time. That youthful innocence is gone. But instead of accepting the bullshit of the world as flaws to an otherwise positive existence, they become
cynical, and reject positive aspects of life entirely. It's a too great backlash against a crisis of faith.

“See, there's the Traditions and the Conventions, right?” Dave asked.

“Right,” John nodded.

“But in addition to them, there are all of these little groups, with no allegiance,” Dave said, “just sort of standing to the side and doing their own thing. Not wanting to get involved in the Ascension War.”

“Right...”

“One of these is the Hollow Ones. They're a real piece of work.” Dave shook his head, loading up the first aid kit. “Imagine all the goth witch stereotypes you can. That's the Hollow Ones. Wear black eyeliner, smoke cigarettes, listen to emo bands, and generally do their magic as dark and broody as possible. Kind of like what Rose could have been, if she didn't start reading all those books her dad left her, you know?”

“I guess?” John said. “What does this have to do with your brother and religion?”

“Basically, the way my Bro talked about it, these Hollow Ones were a lot of kids who Awakened, took one look at the clusterfuck that was the Ascension War, and lost all faith in...anything, really. They took the path of shallowness and nihilism, and abandoned trying to establish a positive world they would create with their magic.” Dave raised a finger. “See, my Bro has a saying: it's better to believe in something – even a dumb or arrogant something – than to not believe in anything. Because once you get to not believing in anything, you're one step away from believing in Nothing. And that way badness lies.”

“Nephandi?”

“Exactly,” Dave nodded, shutting the first aid kit. “You have no idea how many times Bro saw Hollow Ones get seduced by vampires, vengeful ghosts, or, yes, the Fallen. And that shit's no good.”

“What of this...Paradox?”

Dirk cocked an eyebrow. “Now, that's something I can explain a bit better, though not by much. Basically, any time a Mage performs magic – or miracles, or exemplary science – that's overtly supernatural, something keeps track of it. Maybe it's karma, God, or some abstract vision of fate. If such showy, impossible displays happen too frequently because of a Mage's will, weird shit happens.”

“Perhaps it's God, punishing hubris,” Paul mused, though he looked at Dirk and frowned. “No offense.”

“Some taken,” Dirk said, shrugging. “I joke, but that's what most Mages thought as well, when the effect first showed up in earnest. Used to be, Mages could do whatever they wanted, and only had to deal with the direct consequences of their actions. Bringing rain causing droughts elsewhere, shifting probability turning against you later, mind control leaving victims or bystanders angry when the enchantment was over. No act of sorcery or divine intervention happened in a vacuum, and hubris was punished through the natural order of cause and effect.”

“As it should be,” Paul said, nodding. “The mighty need to be reminded of their mortality.”
“Right,” Dirk said. “But I guess at some point, this stopped being enough. Some say it's because a malleable reality became more rigid, or it could be that the Powers That Be – whatever it or they are – got fed up with so much hubris. So Reality's response to overtly impossible acts was made just as overt. They used to call it the Scourge, back in the day. And that Scourge – which struck Vain acts of magic or miracle or science – would strike positively or negatively. Just like the vagaries of fate, you could never tell whether reality would reward you or punish you, though there was a trend towards karmic response. Nothing you could set your watch to, but 'Good' generally got rewarded and 'Evil' punished.” Dirk liberally used air quotes.

He polished off the rest of his can of beer, crushing it slightly in his hand. “But that was centuries ago. Maybe the Scourge wasn't enough to get us to take a hint. Or maybe something is badly wrong with reality.” Dirk frowned, finger tracing the distorted rim of the can. “Whatever the case, the Scourge turned into Paradox, and it stopped rewarding people.

“Now it's all bad, or at least inconvenient. The best you can hope for is a little weirdness, like crying orange or clocks running backwards. Often, like your son, you'll get burned. Or your reflection will start berating you from the other side of the mirror. Or you'll get dragged from the world entirely, and cast into some nightmare plane. Sent to wander through a realm of eternal winter, desperately searching for a way home that may not exist...”

It was Paul's turn to cock an eyebrow. “Mister Strider?”

“I don't want to talk about it,” Dirk said, frowning. “It's a sore subject.”

The father nodded, looking away.

The two didn't say anything for long minutes. They just drained their drinks, then played nervously with the cans.

Paul looked to the hall where John and his friend went. “...this power...the one so many groups fight over...” The man looked to Dirk. “...is it permanent?”

Dirk breathed. “You mean, can it be taken away?” The man crossed his leg. His fingers played with the soiled cloth, which saw less and less use as the minutes wore on. “Are you wondering if you just did something, John wouldn't have the Gift anymore, so he'd be off the table? And then everything would go back to normal?”

The father nodded. “Is such a thing possible? Or...am I barking up the wrong tree?”

“It shows a misunderstanding of what the Awakening is, yeah,” Dirk said, tossing his empty can up and down in his hand. “Your son's eyes have been opened to the true face of the world. Would you ask that a boy who spent his whole life blind, and then gained new sight, be blinded again?”

“...I...” Paul mumbled, looking guiltily at the hands he held in his lap. “...I suppose it is out of line. I'm sorry.”

“S'okay,” Dirk said, shrugging. “You worry for your little man. I've raised Dave ever since our folks passed, so I can grok that feel, dude.”

He looked up at the ceiling. Dirk's eyes must have cleared, because he really seemed to be looking. “…that said...there is one way to take a Mage's magic away.”

“Really?” Paul said, sitting up.

“Don't get too excited, Mister Egbert,” Dirk said. He turned and faced the father. Despite the
shades, Paul could tell Dirk was staring hard at him. “We call it the Rite of Gilgul. And it is the single worst thing you can ever do to another person. Bar none.”

“...Saint Thomas, hear my prayers...”

The young woman – no older than sixteen – kneeled before the golden altar. She was clad in a blue and green sari, which was folded over her long, black hair.

The Nasrani’s hands were clasped around a cross pendent, her eyes shut. Her lips issued forth a furtive prayer in Syriac.

“You saw the risen Christ – God’s only son, Yeshu – and believed,” she said. “Intercede on my behalf, Thomas, that the Lord may bless me with the strength to believe, though I have not seen. Embolden my faith, so that I may spread the light of God with everything I do...”

Her purse vibrated. She failed to notice, her heart beating fast and her face flush. Such a heady rush, Devotion. Her chest ached, she implored so.

She found herself praying for many minutes before, with crushing sadness, further words escaped her. The young woman had poured out everything, and had no more prayers to give.

“...Glory be to God, in the highest. The Lord of Lord, and King of Kings. Amen.”

Touching her forehead to the steps of the altar, she rose slowly to her feet. She bowed once at the waist, then shuffled out.

Outside, her hand brushed aside the end of the sari, bathing her brown face in precious sunlight. She fished a smart phone from her purse. The back was adorned with stickers of cuttlefish.

Feferi Peixes gasped. “Eeeeee!” she beamed, smiling broadly.

Her friend Aradia was pestering her! So exciting!

-- apocalypseArisen [AA] began pestering cuttlefishCuller [CC] --

AA: good afternoon feferi!
AA: are you enjoying your trip?
AA: get back to me when you can
CC: )(i Aradia! 3:D
CC: Sorry, I was in +he middle of prayer, so I couldn'+ ge+ back +o you. 3:(
AA: no worries i understand
AA: where are you right now?
CC: O)( my goodness, you'll never guess!
CC: I'm over in C)(ennai! I'm s+anding in fron+ of the San +(ome Basilica!
AA: wait
AA: that's where he's buried isn't it?
AA: the oft mentioned thomas the apostle?
CC: I know! I'M JUS+ SO EXCI+ED!
AA: whoa calm down girlfriend
AA: didn't you just say you got done praying?
CC: I know, i+'s jus+...blu)(! I can'+ con+ain my fervor!
CC: Aradia, you need to see +(is place! I+'s beau+iful!
AA: well don't keep me in suspense feferi
AA: send me pics or it didn't happen
CC: Okay, )old on!

-- cuttlefishCuller [CC] is sending file “san_thome_basilica.jpg” --

AA: oh my various gods you weren't kidding 0_0
CC: I +old you, bu+ your )(ea+) (en be)(ind didn'+ believe me. Lol!
AA: its gorgeous
AA: funny though for a tomb to a ancient guy
AA: it looks remarkably modern
AA: and not indian
CC: +(a+'s because i+ obviously wasn'+ buil+ in +he firs+ cen+ury. +he Por+uguese Ca+) olics plopped +)(e firs+ basilica )(ere cen+uries ago. +(a+ was unfor+una+ely wrecked, so +)(e Bri+is)( buil+ +(is one.
AA: i should have realized given how white the building is
AA: you can't see but my eyebrows are wiggling 0_- 
CC: (a )(a!
AA: so feferi now that youve fulfilled one of your life goals
AA: visiting the tomb of the guy your church is named for
AA: when am i gonna see my favorite nasrani come up here?
AA: its been forever since weve seen each other
CC: I'd love +o come visi+, Aradia! I +(ink I'll be free to visi+ during Navra+ri.
AA: ugh no i have to work during navratri >_
AA: and nusshera and diwali and durga puja and gurupurab
AA: sometimes i think we have too many festivals in this country damn
CC: Isn'+ Gurupurab a Sik)( fes+ival?
AA: yeah but the food stalls wont staff themselves
AA: if anything its easier for a hindu like me to get work during gurupurab
AA: because all the local sikh kids take the festival off
CC: Wow. You're really pu++ing in +he )ours +his year.
AA: gotta save up for university somehow
AA: not everyone has ridiculous wads of cash lying around >_>
CC: My family isn'+ +(a+ ric)(...
AA: you literally took a week off to travel to the other side of the country
AA: also you have bodyguards
AA: okay talk to me again soon!
CC: I will! 3:D

-- apocalypseArisen [AA] ceased pestering cuttlefishCuller [CC] --

Feferi Peixes put her phone down and sighed, looking up.

In reality, her bodyguards hadn't “gone” anywhere. They'd been standing there the whole time. One of them had stood at the door to the Basilica, while the other had stayed outside and watched pedestrians. Feferi often felt that the two took their jobs a bit too seriously.

Mr. Kaalee – a dusky man of occasional good humor (when he felt that Feferi wasn't in immediate danger from every direction) – watched the street, his dark jacket open to reveal the sweat-slick black t-shirt underneath.

Ms. Saphed – a pale woman of professional demeanor and a penchant towards unwinding with a bottle of wine (as soon as Feferi was safely ensconced in a defensible position for the night) – held
a phone to her ear. “She's ready, ma'am,” she said, face neutral behind her thick sunglasses. Saphed brushed a lock of hair from her face, which had somehow come loose from her hair bun.

She held the white phone out to Feferi. “Your great grandmother, Miss Peixes.”
“Every Mage has a kind of shadow soul,” Dirk said. “A part of themselves that is directly involved with making the magic happen. Technically, all mortals have them, even you Mister Egbert. But in the unAwakened, this...helper works mostly behind the scenes. They only really get involved in a person's life if they Awaken, and even then to different degrees depending on the individual.

“They have many names, and most groups have their own ideas about what they are. For the Hermetics and Neo-Platonists, it's the godhead or godform. For animists and shamans, it might be a totem or ancestor spirit. For the new ager, it's their spirit animal. For the Chorister, it's a Guardian Angel or fragment of God.” Dirk smirked. “Even the Technocrats, when they acknowledge it, will call it a symbolic representation of a person's subconscious. But there's nothing mystical about it, they swear!”

Paul nodded, smiling a bit.

“As a means of comparing notes, we in the Traditions have adopted a general purpose word,” Dirk continued. “We call it the Mage's Avatar. And whatever it is, it's the key to a Mage's ability to edit reality. With me so far?”

“I think so,” Paul said, tapping his empty soda can. “A guardian angel. Like a direct line to God...” he mused softly.

“Maybe,” Dirk said. “Point is, the Avatar is a fundamental part of every person, not just the Awakened.” His face set itself gravely. “What Gilgul does is isolate that part of the Mage's soul...and destroys it.”

“Destroys it?”

“Obliterates it. Excises it. Cuts it out with a rusty knife. Some say the Avatar isn't destroyed, but no one around is believed when they claim to have an Avatar that was destroyed by Gilgul. Maybe, like the name suggests, it's a Transmigration. The Avatar ascending to wherever Avatars go, to be reborn later. As far as we know, though, Gilgul just destroys it.”

Dirk crumpled the car further in his hands. “If my tone and word choice didn't imply it, Gilgul is not a fun time. It's horrible. It's a mercy of immense proportions that it's as rare and protected as it is. Only a few Mages in the world know how to do it, and they don't do it lightly. Because, like I said, you are literally destroying part of the person's soul.”

He raised his hands and gestured with them. “It doesn't just take magic away. It doesn't make the person – the victim – as they were before the Awakening. It makes them less. It is a blinding, maiming, and lobotomy all in one, and affects the person in a spiritual level.” He grimaced. “It is
standard procedure in the Traditions, when Gilgul is used, to execute the victim after the rite is complete. This is a mercy, because the poor bastard will already have been deprived of part of what makes them human. They will likely never know wonder again, and it can never be reversed.”

Paul Egbert swallowed. He removed his hat, then turned away. Fingering the rim of his headware, he muttered, “I see. I’m sorry for bringing it up.”

Dirk merely nodded, facing forward.

“...why do it, then?” Paul said. He looked sidelong at the Virtual Adept. “Perform the rite, I mean? If it is as horrible as you say, why retain the knowledge? Why ever perform such an act?”

The man with spiky, ivory hair sighed. “...there's the rub, isn't it? Unfortunately, there's one very damn good reason to do it.” He gestured vaguely with his hand. “It's for when there's a threat so terrible, so blasphemous, that not even killing them is enough. Their Magely essence needs to be unmade.”

“...what could be so terrible?” Paul asked, though he felt a great unease.

“There are a few crimes awful enough, but chief amongst them are two that are related,” Dirk said, holding up two fingers. “The first is Infernalism. That is, consorting with demons from Actual Hell. Granted, it's hard to know what spirits are truly infernal and which are just...you know, regular spirits. There's a lot of spiritual entities floating around, inhabiting various spirit realms. Ghosts, nature spirits, spirits of ideas...angels, gods (or, at least, spirits that look and act like mythological gods)...and yes, even demons.

“A good rule of thumb is that any spirit that is actively trying to corrupt or destroy humanity or the world, is probably not good. Not from our point of view. Doubly so, if they try to barter for your soul. They come in different flavors, but they're mostly what you expect.” Dirk shakes his head. “Some people exorcise them, some fight them, some cut deals with them, some even worship them. Basically, it's what you expect.”

Paul nodded, swallowing. “Okay. This I understand.” The father didn't make a habit of wearing a cross necklace. Suddenly, he found himself making a mental note to obtain one and never take it off. He shuddered.

“Naturally, while what constitutes true demonic involvement varies, Infernalism is defined well enough that the Tradition Council can recognize it when they see it. And since we're talking about demons, I don't need to tell you that the Council sees it as bad, and has codified laws against it. Some factions in every Tradition are devoted to fighting demons and other hostile spirits, and are ever vigilant for signs of Infernalism within. Technically, any old person could summon and barter with a demon, if they know what they're doing, but the Awakened are accustomed to the temptations of power. And when demons and other spirits don't suffer from Paradox for whatever reason, the temptation is all the greater. Still a bad idea.

“So, long story short, dealing with hell is bad, and particularly hard core Faustian shit is a Gilgul worthy offense. Not just because of the personal corruption or the damage the Mage can do in their master's names, but also because that shit spreads like wildfire.” Dirk scowled. “One of these days, you'll probably want to have a talk with John about that. Although I suspect saying 'don't take candy from strangers or summon the devil' will be more than sufficient.”

“Right...” Paul said, nodding. “What of the second crime?”

“Oh boy...” Dirk said, rubbing his face. “Well first, understand that there are four main factions in
this huge Ascension War we got going on. The first is the Technocracy, the second is the Tradition Council...” He counted them off with his fingers, starting with his thumb. “That covers the biggest sides and the most obvious fronts of the war. The third side are the Marauders. They are what happens when a Mage goes insane. I mean, we're all crazy in our own way – we deliberately reject reality to substitute our own. But we still engage in the baseline reality around us, and acknowledge it, even if only to refute it.

“Marauders are Mages who have completely lost touch with any worldview outside their own,” Dirk continued. “And Mages shift reality around them according to their beliefs. So when a Mage becomes that detached, they basically walk around in bubbles of altered reality. And that can get really fucking weird. Most of them are delusional in some way, and you're lucky to encounter one whose delusions are minor. These bastards are scary as hell sometimes, because you can't predict them, their plans and motives only make sense to themselves...and Paradox seems to slide off them like water on a duck's back.”

“Really?” Paul said.

“Yeah. It sucks, because apparently karma or whatever needs a scapegoat when it can't punish the Marauder.” Dirk shakes his head. “Which often means attacking the nearest 'sane' Mage, regardless of what they did.” He sighed. “Imagine if Charles Manson or Willy Wonka could alter reality at will, and you've got these bastards. They shouldn't even be a faction, really, so much as a collection of unrelated lunatics. Or forces of nature and chaos, really. But...sometimes they collaborate, and their collective efforts give everyone headaches.”

Paul whistled. “So does that make them targets of Gilgul? Because I can see why it would.”

“Funnily enough, no,” Dirk said, scratching his head. “The Traditions have varying opinions on Marauders, but most consider them a nuisance to them. Not all of them are dangerous, per se, at least not all the time. Some are just...sick. Moreover, they seem to have it out for the Technocracy. Something about Order versus Chaos, I don't know. Every Marauder is their own man or woman...or thing...but there seems to be a collective urge to kick Technocrat faces in whenever they find them, in whatever way suits the loony in question. So honestly, many Traditionalists just leave them be, stay out of their way, and point them towards Technocrats when they can.

“No, it's the last faction that's the real problem.” Dirk held up four fingers, and frowned. “The fourth faction is the Nephandi. Just being a Nephandus is grounds for Gilgul.”

“Ah!” Feferi Peixes gasped, taking the phone her bodyguard offered her gingerly. She frowned. “Good afternoon, beloved grandmother Meenah! I'm sorry for taking so long.”

The voice on the other end took a while in answering. Somewhere in the background, an elderly woman barked at some apologetic persons.

“Grandmother Meenah?” Feferi said, head sinking.

“...sorry, dear,” said the elderly woman, voice switching from a (very odd) English to Feferi's native Malayalam. “You have no idea what I've been going through today.” The woman on the phone sighed. “Also, it's the middle of the night where I am.”

“My apologies, grandmother,” Feferi said, bowing her head until she realized she didn't need to. “And I'm sorry to hear of your troubles. Is it out of line to ask what's wrong?”

“A great deal of trouble,” Grandmother Meenah said. “For one thing, one of my...subordinates, I
suppose you could say, just got his dumb ass killed. How do you even accomplish that? You have one job...”

“Uh...” Feferi said, frowning. “I'm sorry to hear about the loss, Grandmother. What was the man's name, that I might pray for his soul?”

“Nevermind that, dear,” Meenah said, groaning. “What about you? What has my dear descendent been doing with her time as of late? I hope less stressful than my week.”

Feferi smiled broadly. “Well,” she said, “I'm currently visiting Mylapore, on break from my studies.” The young woman absolutely beamed. “I'm in Chennai now, right in front of the San Thome Basilica!”

“The...San Thome...?” the elderly woman said, with confusion in her voice.

“It's the cathedral built over the tomb of Saint Thomas!” Feferi said, voice climbing to a fever pitch. “I just got done praying, and...and this place is so wonderful! EEEEEE!”

“Ugh...” groaned Grandmother Meenah. “Please, gurl, don't do that. It hurts your poor grandma's ears.” The word “gurl” was spoken in English, and slurred for effect. She sighed. “...you do love your praying, don't you dear?”

“Do I!” Feferi said, arms shaking excitedly.

“Right...” Meenah said. “Well anyway, I wanted to call because your great grandmother has some news. I'm going into surgery tomorrow.”

“Oh dear!” Feferi gasped, covering her mouth. “Is everything alright, grandmother?”

“Let's be honest, child,” said the elderly woman. “I'm old. Being old is a bitch. Gonna get me something for that, make me feel...less old.” She chuckled. “Get me?”

“I'm...not sure I do...” Feferi said, pressing a finger to her lips, contemplatively.

“Just know that I'm going under soon,” Meenah said, “and...despite getting the best docs money can buy – and I do mean THE BEST – there's always the chance I don't make it. You're a big girl, Feferi. Almost a full woman. So I wanted you to know.”

“Oh no!” Feferi said, frowning. Her brows knit together in resolve. “I'll pray for your safe recovery!”

“Yeah, you do that...” said the elder. “One last thing: are your escorts doing a good job?”

“Of course!” Feferi said, smiling. “Ms. Saphed and Mr. Kaalee are wonderful!” She beamed at the bodyguards. Feferi looked away before she could spot the two look up in surprise, then sigh in relief.

“Bitchin',” Meenah said, in English. “Well, I gotta get my beauty sleep before the trip to the O.R. Hugs and kisses!” She made an exaggerated smooching sound to the receiver.

“Love you, Grandmother!” Feferi said, hearing the line disconnect.

She sighed happily, sitting on the curb, the Basilica rising up behind her.

Contemplating it, Feferi still wasn't sure what the deal was with Great Grandmother Meenah. She knew for a fact that the elderly matriarch wasn't actually her great grandmother. Feferi had peeked
at her family tree, and could account for all her ancestors that far back. Indeed, Feferi hadn't had a chance to find Meenah's place in the tree before her father caught her snooping through his desk and issued her a sharp reprimand. In retrospect, it was a terrible invasion of his privacy, and likely counted as a failure to honor her father. Feferi still felt the guilt, and knew that, in the eyes of almighty and eternal God, the passage of time didn't really lessen the severity of that sin.

It was a good thing Christ redeemed her. In fact, it was the best thing. So it made Feferi feel a little better.

Still, the mystery surrounding her “great grandmother” nagged at Feferi. Were she as old as her name implied, she'd be positively ancient. Yet she was still working in an organization, and ordering people around? Feferi supposed Meenah could be the head of a company.

Come to think of it, Feferi had on very few occasions actually met Meenah, in person. She certainly looked old to Feferi, but how old? Was she a younger aunt or something, and for whatever reason liked to make everyone call her a great grandmother? But the woman was pretty vain (which of course Feferi forgave her for), so why would she want to be seen as older? In fact, she always told Feferi to call her just “grandmother” or “Meenah”. What was...

Feferi groaned, rubbing her head. This matter made her brain hurt. Nor was it appropriate to wonder about such things. Her beloved (?) ancestor was gearing up for medical work of...some variety. She needed all the help she could get.

The young woman strained her neck back, looking up. The peak of the bone white Basilica rose upside down into view. A cross sat at the top of the tallest spire, shining bright in the afternoon sun. It filled her heart with warmth.

Feferi smiled. Getting up, she waved to her bodyguards. “Sorry, sorry!” she said, grinning brightly. “But I just figured out something to pray for! Be right back!” With that, she dashed back inside the cathedral, raising the end of her sari to cover her head.

The bodyguards blinked, then sighed.

Babysitting Madam Chaudhri's descendents was chore enough, when they weren't dithering on such superstitionist nonsense. And then stopping to do it some more!

What they had to put up with, to get ahead in the Syndicate...

“It's difficult to figure out what's right and wrong, even in everyday life. Well, that goes double for Mages.” Dirk dabbed at his eye with a now thoroughly stained rag. “In the Traditions especially, we have folks who subscribe to all sorts of cultural beliefs and philosophical schools. It's a mess, and makes things complicated.

“For example, we have an entire Tradition – the Euthanatos – who believe that not only is Death a natural part of the world, but that it should be dealt out when needed. They have all sorts of rules about who can be killed and why, and how many hoops one of their number needs to go through before giving the ‘Good Death’ is the correct course.” Dirk shrugged. “Usually it's reserved for the irredeemably wicked, or those suffering with no hope of recovery. All to keep the cycle of Life and Death running smoothly and as painlessly as possible. On the flip side, I've met Wheel-turners whose entire jam is redeeming the irredeemable, healing the unhealable, and consoling the inconsolable.” Dirk cocked an eyebrow. “Like I said, morally complex. With me on this?”

“Yes...” Paul said, nodding. “I suppose I can understand the point.”
“So, when I say that one group in particular is Evil, understand that I do not make that claim lightly.” Dirk inclined his head forward, for emphasis. “The Technocracy is a bag of dicks...but as much as I hate to admit it, they have a point about humanity's safety and the dangers of magic and the spirit world. It's just a shame their noble goals are wrapped up in the aforementioned bag of dickery. Short story, I don't like 'em. I've lost too many friends to ever like them.

“The Marauders are lunatics, categorically. It's their defining characteristic. They sow chaos, bring 'Dox down on the heads of Mages minding their own business, and count among their number actual psychopaths. That being said, they are *mentally ill*. It's kind of hard to pass moral judgment on a person who doesn't understand what they're doing. In that respect, many of them are just tragic, and best left alone.

“Even the Traditions are deeply flawed. The Hermetics are arrogant pricks, the Dreamspeakers are myopically focused on their own issues to the exclusion of everything else, the Etherites have a tendency to get their mad scientist on at the worst times, the Cult of Ecstasy barely know what's going on, and my own Virtual Adepts spent most of the 90s flooded with punk kids obsessed with 'leet haxxor' cred. Yet I've seen them shine when they really needed to, and seen them all grow as groups.” Dirk adjusted his sunglasses. “They made me proud to call them allies.

“The Nephandi, though? Evil.” Dirk clenched his fists. “Just. Evil. They are destruction, corruption, and oblivion made manifest, and given dark wizard powers. They are the ones that the Technocracy, the Traditions, and even the Marauders will drop everything and team up to fight.”

“Are they really that bad?” Paul asked, fidgeting with his empty soda can.

“They are the worst,” Dirk said, frowning. “Remember when I told you about Avatars? Well, these bastards aren't regular Mages, with regular Avatars. They've had their Avatars ripped apart, and sewn back together inside out. Their Avatars have been inverted. Instead of compelling their Mages towards Ascension, Nephandi Avatars push them towards Descent. Their nature has been changed to that of absolute anti-life. They will corrupt, torture, rape, distort, ruin, dismantle, and destroy anything and everything they can, and do it for the sheer thrill of it all. They are compelled to it, and will take any route to do it.

“Not all Nephandi are Infernalists – and vice versa – but a Nephandus is willing to sponsor Infernalist cults, use Infernalist pawns, and even team up with demons, simply in pursuit of darkness and oblivion. They don't care. Not whether it's right or wrong, nor who it is they are acting against, nor even whether they live or die. Really, destroying the entire world is their long-term goal.”

Dirk crushed his empty beer can with his fist. “If an Avatar is a Guardian Angel, theirs are Fallen Angels. And they are very good at what they do. Frighteningly good.”

Paul shuddered. “That sounds awful.”

“It is. They're basically the worst. Godwin be damned, each Nephandus is basically five Hitlers in one, mixed with Jack the Ripper and a used car salesman.” Dirk looked away. “The worst part is, they can get away with being stupidly, suicidally evil. Have I told you Avatars reincarnate?”

“No,” Paul said, frowning. He rubbed his hands uncomfortably. “I...don't know how to feel about that...”

“I can't tell you whether the whole soul does, or if it's just the Avatar,” Dirk said. “But we know for a fact that Avatars reoccur over and over, with the Mages sometimes remembering things from the former incarnation. If an Avatar is a Guardian Angel, it could be that the soul moves on, while
the guardian gets reassigned. And starts whispering things to their charge, about what the angel has seen. Why not?"

“Oh, okay...” Paul said, feeling a little bit better.

“Unfortunately, Nephandi Avatars come back too,” Dirk said. “Over, and over, and over again. The main reason the Traditions – and to a certain extent the Technocracy, I think – perform Gilgul at all is specifically for Nephandi. Each one captured and annihilated is one less abomination inflicting itself on the world, for all eternity.”

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**Hours Ago (But Not Many)**

The man in the white pants and green shirt looked over his victim.

Precious scarlet flowed along channels carved in the stone altar, directed along paths forming a grand sigil of a suitably blasphemous nature. Until finally, the liquid poured down a gutter and pooled inside an earthenware jar. This, too, was adorned with blasphemous script, written in an elegant symbolic transcription of the Black Speech.

This would help inure the Vitae against the depredations of time, keeping it fresh and warm. It would not do to provide his guest with anything less than the best drink to quench the thirst.

That is, the other guest. The guest on the altar was quite dead. Obviously. The ritualist regretted how quickly their screams died away. Such music to his ears. However, he'd done his duty, and provided what he could to even the sacrifice. Informed them exactly what would happen to them, so they would have no misunderstandings or false hope. And, naturally, the man had spoken in an even, genteel tone.

He was an excellent host.

The exceedingly pale man put down his sacrificial dagger, and washed his bone-white hands. Rooting around in his pants pocket, he noted the time on a polished silver pocket watch. Through the medium of the time piece, he knew that the sun was just cresting the horizon, plunging the city into darkness. Or as much darkness as could be expected in an urban, metropolitan area.

From a rack by the door, the man retrieved and donned his white suit jacket. Quite conveniently, the last drops of blood drained into the jar when he wandered over to retrieve it. He carried it in his arms, for the moment anyway.

With but a glance, the overhead lights shut off. He stood at the door, looking in. He could still see the cooling body on the altar. A lump, cast in deep shadow.

He would return and mutilate the corpse later. Business before pleasure, after all.

“Doc? You wanted to see us?"

The man smiled, looking at the two subordinates arrive. They approached from a hallway filled with clocks (not that there were any rooms or halls in the house not filled with clocks).

Doc Scratch nodded his bald, wrinkled head. “As always, gentlemen, you are exceedingly late,” he said, in a precise Southern drawl. “Which is ta say, right on time. Carry this for me, will you?” He handed over the jar.

The two men – not the strongest of their number but more than adequate for the job – looked into
the open container, one with the scrutiny of a responsible middle manager (which quickly devolved into nervous disgust), the other with a bewildered countenance that comprised his normal mode of expression.

“Ugh...” said the man called Crowbar, taking one of the handles on the jar. His face grew pale, but he doffed his maroon hat professionally and took the load.

The man called Die simply took the other handle and remained vaguely bewildered. In his belt was tucked a pin-riddled doll, and he smelled vaguely of chickens. Only Scratch knew what the man did with so many chickens.

The Doc smiled. What Die did was obscene. Repulsive. As such, Scratch approved.

“Follow me, gentlemen,” said Doc Scratch, motioning them forward.

They wandered through a circuitous series of hallways, passing an endless stream of clocks along the way. The devices stood and hung in various styles. Every single one was slightly off from those around it. Ticks and tocks went off in a confusing din, and one could never quite be sure of the time at any given moment.

Naturally, this chaos worked to Scratch’s advantage. He strolled slowly, letting his piercing green eyes pass over the various clock faces, and filling his ears with the clamor of ticking. While his many associates and subordinates found the sensory overload maddening and chaotic, it soothed Scratch. Because unlike the base (but useful) idiots beneath him, the Doc could make sense of the stimulus, and find patterns.

Patterns in time and space. Every clock in the house was planted by Scratch, and maintained by Scratch. No permission granted to anyone else to tamper with the machines. The Doc couldn’t hardly predict the future otherwise. The order in the chaos was revelatory, an ecstatic experience that provided great insight. Out of discord, clarity. Arranging the time pieces as they were was the only way to engineer that particular feeling.

That, and the Doc was a sick fuck, and enjoyed the gang's suffering.

Head awash with visions of future events, Scratch stowed the information away for later, as they arrived at a huge iron vault.

The man waved his hand, and a complex set of clock-based tumblers on the vault's door shuddered and clinked. With a loud creak, the door opened. Scratch motioned his aids inside. He noted (and relished) their trepidation, as well as Crowbar's barely concealed but unrequited longing.

Inside a large, square vault of steel plating, they stood before a sarcophagus. A gaudy little number, it's face was molded from steel, shaped like a skull. A mocking parody of the resting places of Egyptian kings. For the added effect, the entire edifice was painted in green, and a sickening array of accenting colors. It was gaudy. It was tasteless.

It was Perfect.

“Put it down there,” Scratch drawled, pointing to a table set to one side. When the goons had performed this task, the Doc faced the elaborate coffin. “Now...leave us.”

Die left almost as soon as the words were spoken, hurrying away. Crowbar, however, lingered. He breathed with anticipation, mouth dry. “...can't I just...you know...” He mumbled, removing his
maroon hat and playing with it nervously. “The boss might need to...”

“I said...” The Doc looked over his shoulder, the thick wrinkles on his face creased gravely. “...leave us.”

“Yes, of course,” Crowbar said, cringing back. He backed out, frowning in fear and pain.

Scratch looked forward again, grinning.

Of course the Boss would want a meeting with his subordinates. And as the number three man in this organization, Crowbar had a right to be there first thing in the evening. He could better organize the stupider rabble, if he could attend the boss now.

But Scratch had his own matters to speak with the boss about, which didn't concern Crowbar. Moreover, the Doc knew how...in thrall Crowbar was to the boss. Understood how much he longed for him. To see him. To taste him.

Pathetic. It gave Scratch a giddy pleasure, to deny Crowbar. The little slave would have his meeting with his master soon enough. Let him whinge and squirm and feel the shakes a while.

“My mastah...” said Doc Scratch, “...rise.”

The lid of the sarcophagus slid back.

A short, immature figure lay in the box. It opened its eyes, and sat up.

“Doc...” breathed the figure, eying the man from a patch of shadow. It obscured his face.

“I have taken the liberty of procuring your breakfast, mastah,” Scratch said, waving a hand towards the end table. “You will find it as fresh and as warm as if from the living vein.”

Abandoning subtlety, the figure jumped from the coffin and pounced on the jar. He tipped the container over, chugging precious scarlet wildly. Gurgling and smacking, the figure dipped a hand into the red slurry and batted the liquid in faster.

In between gulps, the vampire said, “Glamf...Hmm...where'd you get this?” He didn't bother taking his eyes off the prize. “Old lady?”

“Child, actually,” Scratch said, hands poised lazily behind his back.

The undead grunted neutrally, then continued feeding.

Doc Scratch stood by and watched. Truly, he was an excellent host, and his boss an excellent master. For the moment.

The Nephandus smiled.
“Okay, I gotta ask. Are those really Ben Stiller's shades?”

Dave Strider looked over. “These?”

“Yeah,” John Egbert said, looking up from his suitcase. He rooted around for a clean shirt, his own quite bloodied. “I know you said you have mad connections in the entertainment industry. But are they really the glasses Stiller wore in Starsky & Hutch?”

“Naw.”

“No?” John said, quizzically.

“Nope,” Dave said, nodding. He pointed a thumb at his face. “These aren't Ben Stiller's shades, as worn during his role in Starsky & Hutch.”

“Oh.” John blinked.

“It is an exact replica of the shades Ben Stiller wore on his kinda gaunt face,” Dave said, tilting his head, “3D printed into a molecular level perfect copy, and filled with sophisticated Virtual Adept technology.” As if on cue, his face lit up around the eyes. “I keep the actual pair in my room, safely contained in a glass box, on a full-sized bust of Ben Stiller.”

“...oh.” John said, eyes growing wide. He looked down, then began fiddling with his clothes. “Well, that's a different thing entirely. And also really cool, I guess?”

“Damn straight.” Dave's eyebrows turned in slightly.

“I guess I should change into this shirt,” John said, rising to his feet. A white t-shirt hung from his hands.

“Sure,” Dave said, standing back and leaning against the bathroom wall. His head jerked up, and he began fiddling with his pocket. “Hold on...I forgot to update Jade on the situation.” His thumbs played over the screen of his smart phone.

TG: got john to safety dudes alright
TG: its late as hell where we are so were turning in
TG: talk to you tomorrow

-- turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering gardenGnostic [GG] --

Jade Harley sighed.

Sure, it was good to know John was safe. It was more than the girl could hope, considering the situation.

Didn't stop her from feeling anxious. As if only hearing John speak would alleviate her fears. Only then would it seem real. She didn't even know what shape John was in, or how bad his injury was. Moreover, she could only wait – for hours – until either one saw fit to call or message properly.

The young woman slumped in her seat, watching the late afternoon sun draw slowly towards the great blue horizon.
Waiting.

“Ugh!” Jade groaned, throwing her hands up. She rose and stomped around the greenhouse, vegetables and machine parts vibrating with each footfall. “Stupid boys...stupid Technocracy...”

She looked to the glass roof, fists clenched. “Stupid time zones!”

By the time Dave or John woke up, the day would already be over.

The irate Etherite grumbled to herself, walking in circles. Finally, she forced herself to stop and sit down. “...con sarnit...” he spat, pulling out one of Grandpa's old standbys.

Thinking time. If she had any intention of catching the boys when they woke up...

...she'd need to go to sleep immediately.

“Hmm...” Jade said, playing with her long, ebony hair. “...I guess...”

Rising to her feet, she padded over to the Transportalizer. The world fell away, as she landed a few stories down. She walked down the hall, entering her bedroom.

It's not as though Jade Harley was unused to the prospect of napping at all hours of the day. She lived in the middle of Nowhere, Pacific Ocean. The only ones sharing her time schedule were Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, and some scattered Polynesian islands. And while she was vaguely aware that all of them had Mages, Jade wasn't friends with any of them. All her friends – Mage or otherwise – lived clear on the other side of the world.

Given that there wasn't a whole heck of a lot to do on her own island except tinker and play fetch with Bec, Jade felt little grief at spending half her time nocturnal.

Speaking of Becquerel, Jade projected a feeling outward along that now-familiar line. “Bec,” she muttered, “come here boy.”

Jubilation fed back to her, brightening Jade's sour mood. A second later, the snow white wolf hound shifted into the room beside her.

“Woof!” Bec barked, tongue lolling and tail wagging. He padded the floor with his paw.

Jade felt the doggie's exuberance, and smiled, returning the sentiment. “Come here, Bec,” she said, walking to her bed and patting it. “Time for bed!”

The dog tilted his head to the side. Confusion?

“I know, I know,” Jade giggled, walking to her wardrobe and changing into her pajamas. “I want to catch John and Dave later tonight, when they'll be awake.” As she fiddled with her cotton shirt adorned with a blue pumpkin design, she projected the image of her cousin and friend.

This seemed to mollify Bec, who trotted happily forward and jumped on the bed.

“He he!” Jade said, drawing the bedspread back and climbing in. “Besides...ooof!” Bec crawled up and stepped on her torso, so she scratched behind his ear. “...besides, I want to get some good dreaming done.”

Leaning to the side, Jade grabbed a headband from a side table. The “table” was actually a rather bulky contraption of her own design. The metal headband was studded with electrodes, and attached to the machine by lengths of curly wires. Snapping it on her head like a crown, Jade
leaned down and fiddled with switches.

The machine began to hum, little displays showing number readouts that only a sufficiently Progressive Scientist could hope to decipher. If Jade were in an explaining mood, she would describe what the machine did as stimulating special glands in her brain, by way of focused harmonic resonance. This would, in turn, magnify and direct the naturally occurring tendency of her brainwaves towards chronological synchronicity.

“To the baffled layman skimming these august pages,” she had appended to her submission to the June issue of Paradigma, after the lengthy technical explanation, “it means, simply, that the device forces my subconscious to show me a vision of the past or future. As I continue my study of the machine, I hope one day to isolate the singular mechanism within my own brain that renders such visions possible in the first place, so that it may be replicated in other users.”

When she received the issue and saw her article printed within, Jade had physically shown Grandpa's stuffed cadaver her accomplishment. Much gushing and exuberance ensued. Jade was fairly certain Grandpa would be proud.

The young woman curled down in the mattress, burying her head in the pillow. The white noise of the machine at her side soothed her aching nerves. Becquerel nuzzled into the girl's neck, letting her pet him affectionately.

She did this for many minutes, until they both drifted into sleep.

Hopefully, between when Jade entered and exited sleep, she would learn something new. Something useful.

“Dad! We're done!”

Paul Egbert looked over, seeing his son and his friend Dave wander into the living room. The father felt relief, but also a little nervous tension. John looked so drained. He swayed on his feet, and dark bags formed under his eyes. And when he moved his arms, John winced a little.

Still, his boy smiled, just a little. It made Paul feel that, if nothing else, they'd come out of this night battered, but intact. That they might weather this after all...despite the new and frightening world they'd stumbled into.

The father rose to his feet and walked forward, hugging his son. “How's it feel?” Paul said, patting John's shoulder lightly. “Are you okay?”

John nodded. “I'm alright now,” John mumbled. “Stings a bit.”

“Did Dave give you any painkillers?” Bro said from his spot on the futon.

“Yeah,” John said. He yawned. “I...ah...geez, I'm tired...”

“It's been a long night for all of us,” Paul said, ruffling the young man's hair. “Why don't you...” The man frowned, then looked back over his shoulder. “Mister Strider...is it alright if we stay here for the night? I don't mean to impose.”

“One night's fine,” Bro said. “Hey dude!” he called to Dave. “You alright with sharing a bed?”

Dave frowned.
The elder Strider smirked.

“...no homo, alright?” Dave said to John. “Not that there's anything wrong with it, obviously, but...”

“Don't you have a sleeping bag or something?” John asked, waving Dave down. “I'd be alright with that.”

“Are you sure, John?” Dad said. “With your injury...”

“I'll be fine, Dad,” John said, patting his father's arm. “It's not that bad.” He yawned. “...besides...ugh...I think I'll pass out any minute now anyway.”

“You know,” Dave said, stroking his chin, “I think I do have a sleeping bag. From that one time Bro took me camping on the roof of the apartment building.”

Bro tipped his head back, the corners of his mouth turning up. “Doesn't that bring me back...alright, you two scamper to the sack.”

The boys nodded, then wandered down the hall.

Bro rose to his feet, yawning and stretching. “...ugh...you can crash here for the night if you want, Mister Egbert.” His eyebrows wiggled. “Unless...you'd rather share my bed tonight.”

Paul's face flushed to the hue of a ripe tomato. “Uh...uh...”

“Heh,” Bro said, waving his hand. “Just kidding.” He adjusted his glasses, then brought his rag up to dab at his eye. “You aren't my type anyway. I mean, you're handsome and all...ripped as hell, from what I can tell...”

“Uh...” Paul said, looking to the side and frowning. “Thank you?” He added being flirted at by another man to the list of new experiences he never anticipated having today.

“But seriously, there is something we got to talk about,” Bro said. “Mister Egbert, among us Mages, there's a few tried and true methods of dodging Paradox. Keeping our Arts and/or Sciences subtle, taking it to another realm, changing public opinion on what is and is not possible...and creating a Sanctum.”

“A Sanctum?” Paul asked.

Bro gestured around the room. “It's a place where my rules are law. My and Dave's particular brand of miracle works just fine here, in much the same way a Chorister Priest's miracles work well in a purified chapel. So long as my wicked science stays within the bounds of this apartment, shit like this won't happen.” Dirk pointed at his eyes, and waved the soiled rag around. “But, magic being reactive to human belief as it is, it only remains so if it plays host to a single Paradigm. The longer you Egberts stay, the more it will erode its sanctity, if you will.”

“Oh!” Paul said, looking around. “I'm sorry, we've imposed on you more than I thought.” He frowned.

“Eh...one night won't hurt it,” Dirk said, shrugging. “But, yeah, you're going to have to leave sooner rather than later.”

Paul nodded. “I'll have a talk with John, and we'll leave in the morning.” He looked to the floor, gravely. “Where are we going to go, though?”
“Don't worry about that, man,” Dirk said, folding his arms. “I've got a few ideas. At least two, in fact. And, once my face stops leaking OJ, I can shuffle you off to one of them. But we'll talk about that in the...afternoon.” Bro shrugged.

“Thank you,” Paul said. “You have no idea how much this means to me.” He stepped forward and extended a hand.

Bro nodded, taking the hand and shaking firmly. “You get some rest, okay? And don't be confused if I sleep in forever.” He walked to a nearby door and waved over his shoulder. “Bed bugs and all that.”

“Goodnight to you too,” Paul said, nodding. With a sigh, he found the light switch for the kitchen and living room, and wandered to the futon.

Removing his shoes, Paul folded the futon down into its “bed” position. As he lay down to sleep – too tired to dig around his suitcase and change into pajamas – Paul considered the whirlwind of bizarre, daunting, and terrifying information he'd amassed over the last several hours.

Magic and miracles. Global, extra-governmental conspiracies. Cloning, and mind control. Phantoms and portals. Madmen, maniacs, and murder-happy satanists. Sent shivers up Paul's spine, just thinking about it. He was just a businessman, yet he'd walked into a web of conflicts centuries old, with forces he could scarcely conceive. Indeed, Paul was still just a businessman...he still no business walking in such a world. Like treading on the footsteps of giants.

But...his own son had a blessing of his own. And if the proceeding hours taught the man anything, John had the character necessary to use that blessing responsibly. The young man had the makings of a hero, not a monster.

And if he should stumble, John had many friends watching out for him. Dauntless warriors, good friends. Even family, like Jade...or his Nanna.

And he had his father. Paul had little to offer – he was just a man. But he was a man who'd give everything for his son. Just like Sarah had. He owed her – and John – that much.

So as Paul drifted to sleep, he did so with a smile. He uttered a silent prayer to God, content in knowing that the Almighty already arrayed so many blessings in John's favor. It was more than most could hope for.

In his sleep, Paul dreamed of Sarah.

The Grand Elder found the Precious Child in the library.

Casting a shadow from on high, the tall cultist leaned over the table. He regarded the young man fondly.

Karkat Vantas was slumped over in his seat, peaceful face buried in an open medical textbook. With a little craning of his neck, the Grand Elder noted it was the library's copy of Gray's Anatomy. He saw the detailed diagram of the brain. Those illustrations always impressed the giant of a man, ever since he learned of its impending publication, back in 1918.

Grand Elder chuckled, imagining that Karkat chose the book because he recognized the title from the television show.

There were more books settled around Karkat. A volume on the nature and treatment of cancer. A
Quite a diverse selection of research material. The Grand Elder would need to instruct the young man on the value of focusing on one subject at a time. Still, the old man's chest fluttered, swelling with pride. He would make sure the librarian – Tome Keeper – allowed Karkat to borrow them...despite all being either one of a kind or first editions.

In the meantime, it wouldn't do for the Messiah to sleep at a desk. It was bad for the back.

Stooping forward, the Grand Elder softly leaned the young man back and supported his head. Gently, he took Karkat into his arms, and carried him away.

He shushed robed figures as he passed them in the halls, bidding them quiet. Compliance followed immediately, of course. None would dare to disturb the Night of the World, Comforter of the Weeping, Healer of the Dying.

Indeed, despite some reservation, the Grand Elder didn't try to stop the recent addition to Karkat's true name. News traveled far too quickly in the tunnels. By the time it came to a vote among the Elders, the Sufferer's followers had virtually adopted the moniker universally anyway. If nothing else, it would bolster the fellowship's morale. No, the true objective at the moment, for the Grand Elder, was emphasizing the miraculous – and therefore unreliable – nature of the miracle, and the need to allow Karkat to grow into his powers.

He couldn't have Karkat being swamped by followers, asking for healing for every little boo boo. Or, heaven forbid, followers taking suicidal risks, thinking the Sufferer Reborn would restore them to life if anything happened. The Grand Elder was very firm on the point of Karkat's inexperience, and the *mounting* nature of his power. The *potential* for true greatness, given *time*.

It was never easy, keeping an international, underground religious movement from spiraling out of control. It was hard. It was hard, and no one understood.

Regardless, Karkat would need a good rest before any of that could happen. A rest and a return to normalcy, if only to ground him. Grand Elder resolved to have Kepiting Pak take Karkat as soon as possible. With a selection of reading material. In the meantime, it was back to the luxurious bed laid out for Karkat, in the Hall of Tranquil Repose.

Karkat Vantas dreamed.

A verdant forest spread out in all directions. The young Mage looked around, feeling oddly at home in the tropical jungle. He was almost sure this was Indonesia, though he'd only visited the birthplace of the Cult a few times.

Karkat wasn't entirely sure why he felt so at peace, given that he was standing ankle deep in a stream of blood.

He followed the crimson current upstream, ascending a gradual slope. He passed a carved stone pillar, though he could scarcely decipher the base reliefs. As such, he pressed on.

Eventually, Karkat brushed aside a palm frond, and saw the jungle open up to a glade. The clearing terminated sharply some meters away, at a cliff overlooking a vast valley. Obscuring mist collected below, with great peaks rising out of it. It was here that Karkat realized he was on a
plateau, on the peak of some high mountain.

Far above the mountain tops, suspended in air amidst thick, white clouds, was an enormous brain, floating upside down. It pulsed lazily, and Karkat felt not even the slightest bit alarmed.

The trail of blood he'd been following ended – or began rather – at a figure sitting lotus style on the cliff's edge. A tattered hood shrouded the man's face in shadow, and his wrists and side wept blood.

Karkat didn't feel uncomfortable about this. Some distant, vague voice in his mind told Karkat he probably ought to, but didn't.

The young Mage approached the figure. Looking down at the ground, Karkat sat on a patch of unblooded stone by the man's side. He mimicked the posture of the man, crossing his legs as best he could.

He blinked, unsure of what to say.

The figure, sensing the boy's trepidation, raised his hands and lowered the hood. The sunless rays of light fell upon him, revealing a wild mane of black hair and a strong jawline. Still, his eyes were shut, and his expression serene.

Upraised, the arms revealed the wounds on his wrists were a ring of burned and blackened flesh.

“...is it you?” Karkat said, without his lips moving. “Are...are you...you know?”

“I am many things to many people,” the man said, stoically.

“Okay, but seriously,” Karkat said, frowning. “You're the Sufferer, right? Penderita, the Night of the World, the Bread of Life. Etcetera, etcetera...” He scowled. “Are you my thrice great grandfather?”

“Does it truly matter?” the man said.

“Kind of, yeah.” Karkat sighed, then fell silent for a moment.

The two sat still a while. Clouds rolled by, flowing around the sky brain. The blood brook babbled across the soil.

Looking around, Karkat asked, “Why am I here? And I don't mean in a metaphysical sense. I mean, why am I on a mountain, talking to my ancestor, and generally facing directly my enormous inadequacy? What am I supposed to take from this?”

Raising a hand, the shade of the Sufferer caught a mockingbird on his palm. It cooed at him, fluttering its wings. “...Winter is ending soon.” He held out the other hand, producing a palm full of seeds. Eyes shut, he silently bade the bird feed. “The cold snow will disappear. It is a time for new life.”

“Okay...” Karkat said, nodding.

“The rabbits that huddle beneath the ground must rise,” the man continued, stroking the bird's back gently. “It is time they took their place under the sun.”

“Rabbits...winter...” Karkat muttered. “...are they gray rabbits?”

The man nodded. “They are frightened, however, for the winter was long, and the predators
“...the Sufferer raised his hand, and the bird took flight. “They will need a strong rabbit, to lead them towards the light. Never shall they prosper, hiding underground.”

“...I...I think I understand,” Karkat said. “That doesn't mean I agree. I mean, those predators aren't going to go away, right? And maybe the rabbit who leads all the others is a useless piece of shit, and can't ever do anything right. He'll probably just end up leading everyone into the jaws of the fucking wolf, and they'll all be gobbled up, and it'll all be his fault.”

“The rabbit of blood is stronger than he knows,” said the Sufferer.

He opened his eyelids. The orbs were pure white, and hung half-lidded. A sad expression. “Believing makes it so. Hobble yourself with doubt and self-hatred, and you lead yourself to self-annihilation. A healthy body needs a healthy heart.”

The Sufferer extended a hand, pointing a finger at Karkat's chest. “You are the heart.”

“...I swear, if you start spouting trite movie cliches about believing in myself,” Karkat groaned, “I will stab my gut and puke blood. Is there any way I can get out of this? Why's it so important I lead the Cult out of the dirt? Tunneling down and staying hidden has worked well so far.”

“There will come a time, very soon, where the burrows will not be safe for the rabbits,” the Sufferer said. “Darkness fills the earth. Ancient darkness, and things that were old when the world was new. Crawling things, hideous vermin, black wyrms, and hidden secrets.”

“I don't understand,” Karkat said, shaking his head. “What's going to happen?”

“The world is hollow,” said the man. “And from that hollow, dark things erupt forth. Further, there is a sickness, infecting your flock.”

“A sickness?” Karkat sat up with alarm, mouth agape.

The man nodded. “You are a medicine man. A healer, and doctor. Cut away the cancer eating away inside, before it's too late. Expose it to the light, where it can be seen. Dark things...cannot stand the light.”

“What about me?” Karkat said, frowning. “I...I feel so helpless. I'm not ready for this. I'm useless! I'm weak!”

“Then become strong. As I said, you are a healer. Healing begins within.” The Sufferer's lips turned up into a grin.

“Physician,” he said, “heal thyself.”

“Are you sure, Dave?”

Dave nodded, pointing to the bed. “You take it, Egbert. You're the fucking guest.” He adjusted his glasses. “Think of it as reward for kicking ass and getting marked for it.” He pointed to John's chest.

John looked down, barely seeing the outline of the bandages from beneath his pajamas. “Man, but I didn't even do that much. I went invisible like once, then got captured.”

“You also kicked the guts and faces of like four guys at once,” Dave said, “and took a hammer to a dude's legs. And blew a guy...phrasing...into a panel van.” He jerked his head to the side. “To top it
all off, you managed to talk a Syn dick into losing his cool, enough that he resorted to violence. You won the moral victory. If that doesn't count as kicking ass, I don't know what does.”

“You saw my conversation with Tallfield?” John said, blinking.

“When you were changing in the bathroom, I turned time back and spied on your convo,” Dave said, tapping his shades. “Really laid down the verbal smackdown.”

“I don't know,” John said, frowning. “I didn't think I was that good a wordsmith. It was mostly my dad. Plus, I kind of failed as a diplomat. Shouldn't one try to resolve one's differences with words?”

“John, he came with eight guys as backup, and called them in rather than retreating,” Dave said. “The douchebag was probably planning to take you in by force regardless. Dude was slime.”

“I guess...” John said, looking at the floor. He yawned, stretching. “Man...I'm really beat. If you really want to give me the bed, I'll help myself.” John jumped into the bed and planted his head on the pillow. “Mmmagh...good night, Dave.”

“Same to you,” Dave said, crawling into the sleeping bag on the floor. Thankfully, he had a yoga mat under it, so that added a bit more cushion. “Night.” He removed his shades, burying his face into the pillow.

With one clap, Dave plunged the room into darkness.

Dave Strider dreamed of clockwork, magma, and scarlet that night. He woke up trembling in the vague halflight of morning.

He couldn't shake that last image, before he bolted awake. The sight of his hands, covered in blood.

Looking up, he saw his best friend snoozing soundly. Dave shook off the nightmare, flopping back down.

It took him a while to fall asleep again.

In the wee hours of the morning, Simon Captor awoke from his bed, head filled with the voices of the doomed.

He grumbled, rising from his mattress. The man was quite old now, and his mind felt older.

As he shuffled to the bathroom, he found himself mumbling an old favorite. “...I can't say if we're ever going to be free...”

He splashed water in his face, trying to grasp at the visions. Simon could make out bits and pieces. He would forward the most coherent details to some of his younger associates. Maybe they could make sense of it.


“...don't let these shakes go on...it's time we had a break from it...”

When he wandered out of the bedroom, he noticed his eldest son's door was open. Peeking inside, he found it empty. Moreover, the lad had left his safety helmet.
Not good.

Simon walked with a hurried pace down the hall, before stopping at Sollux's door. A thread strummed along his consciousness, and he entered quietly.

The man sighed, spying the two boys asleep together in the bed. Mituna hugged Sollux limply, unkempt hair shading his eyes against the first rays of dawn. Sollux's face was pressed into Mituna's shoulder.

The boy shivered and grimaced, making pained expressions in his slumber. As Simon looked further, he saw that Mituna, too, trembled under an unseen weight.

Gently, Simon reached out with both hands and touched their heads. They shivered beneath the touch, but Simon's mind shivered at the contact. Mournful voice vibrated across his brain.

“...cause we've been living in the flames...we've been eating up our brains...”

He projected thoughts of peace and good dreams along that thread. It pulsed through them, strumming away the voices of the immanently deceased.

The two boys shuddered, then relaxed. Their faces settled, betraying none of the horror of before.

“...oh please...don't let these shakes go on...”

Simon took his hands away, flashing a tired little smile. He knew the sounds of the doomed too well. Most of the time, he couldn't be around to work them through the pain. Indeed, he dreaded teaching them too much.

But, at least for one night, while he was there...let the boys have a decent night's sleep.

The man walked from the room, carefully closing the door behind him.

The bus rolled on, bouncing and rocking.

A girl sat curled up in her seat, a suitcase and backpack monopolizing the seat next to her.

Tucked in her arms was a worn, yellowed journal.

In her dreams, Vriska Serket dreamed of sailing the seas. Pirates stood at her command, and from her ring-covered fingers spread rays of sunlight. She brandished a saber, a single blue diamond tucked in her grasp.

Seven blue stars shined out before her. They were herself, and if she were to find herself, she needed those stars.

Vriska unfurled her sails and charged forward. She cackled with delight, the wind whipping through her hair.

It was the dead of night when Jade shot up in bed.

She blinked away the sleep, then scowled.

“...LeForge...”
“...Sun is shi-nin' in the sky! There ain't a cloud in sight...”

Roxy Lalonde grumbled in her sleep, pressing her face deeper into the pillow.

“...it's stopped rainin', everybody's in the play. And don't you know, it's a beautiful new day! He~y!”

“Nnngh...” Roxy groaned softly, peeking up. “Aw shit!”

It was entirely too bright. Above her, light filtered down through a high window. It gave the woman the mother of all migraines.

“Runnin' down the avenue. See how the sun shines brightly...”

That infernal noise didn't help. What she wouldn't give to just lay here, enfolded in this cocoon of blankets and keep hugging whatever this warm thing in her arms was. But no, the noise just kept on going. What even was...?

“...in the city, on the streets where once was pity. Mister Blue Sky is living here today! He~y!”

Oh. Right. “Ugh...”

Reluctantly – and with great effort – Roxy sat up on the mattress, disentangling herself from the warm thing in her bed.

One thing at a time. First, putting the mental energy towards silencing the damn phone.

“Mister Blue Sky, please tell us-”

Roxy pulled the phone out of her pocket and thumbed the screen. The ring tone died, blessedly.

But now she had to deal with the caller. Didn't even have time to check who it was. “...ugh...hello?”

“Hey Rox. Did I wake you?”

The woman opened her eyes fractionally, turning away from the light and shielding her face. “Dirk?” she mumbled, blinking. “Fuck...what time is it?”

“Well, it's two in the afternoon over here,” said the man on the other end. “So, probably three where you are.”

“Mrrr...” Roxy groaned, rubbing her face. “...feel like shit...”

“Hangover?”

The woman scowled. “No!” she whined. “I'll-”

“Mmm...”

The sudden sound and movement caused Roxy to jump. She looked down.
Oh. Right. Her Precious Baby.

Rose Lalonde lay on the mattress beside her mother, hands tucked neatly under her face. She squirmed, pawing at the blanket and pulling it closer around her. Seemingly contented, Rose curled up into herself, exhaling softly.

“...Rox?” said the voice on the line.

Roxy turned back to the phone. “No,” she whispered, eying her daughter furtively, “I'll have you know that I'm not hung over. I quit drinking!”

“Seriously?” the man said, barely concealed incredulity in his stupid voice.

“Yes,” Roxy said, emphatically. Her brow was furrowed in concentration. “Me an' Rose had a talk about it earlier this week, and we decided it was time. So I quit. Been sober for days.” She puffed her chest out, smiling.

“...Bullshit. I don't believe you.”

“Make like one of those animes you like so much, Dirk,” Roxy said, smirking, “and Believe It.”

“Oh god...” Dirk said. “So wait, you're really, actually going clean?”

“Yes,” Roxy said with exasperation. Her body slouched, deflated. “It fucking sucks, Dirk. Being sober sucks so much. I've never wanted a drink so much in my life, and I had to sleep in the lab last night because of all the hallucinatory serpents crashing on the floor.”

Her nephew whistled. “That's rough. You gonna be okay?”

“Just need to take it one long, arduous day at a time,” Roxy said, rubbing her eyes. “Man, I need a drink. I mean an aspirin. Fuck.” She slapped her forehead. “Stupid, stupid!”

“Well, for what it's worth,” Dirk said, “good for you, Rox. Stay on that wagon, and all that motivational shit. Huh?” He went quiet for a moment, before his voice returned more distant.

“...what? Aunt Roxy. Turns out she stopped drinking...that's what I said!” He returned to the call.

“Sorry, Dave and his friend are over.”

“Dave has friends?” Roxy quipped, flashing a smile with some difficulty. “I thought he, like you, was too cool for friendsies?” She tried to laugh, and just started a hoarse cough.

“Fuck...hack...shit...” She clutched her brow. “Head hurts too much for sarcasm.”

To the side, Roxy saw her daughter turned over on the bed.

The young woman grumbled, “...ugh...mom?” Rose yawned, rubbing her eyes.

“Shh...” Roxy shushed, patting her baby on the head. Her fingers ruffled ivory hair fondly. “Go back to sleep, baby...”

“Okay, so,” Dirk said, clearing his throat. “That's actually what I called about. So, turns out Dave and Rose's friend John Egbert...you know, Jade's cousin?”

“Yeah?” Roxy said, yawning. Fucking infectious yawns, all up in this biz. “I think I remember Rose talkin' about him...I think...” It definitely rang some bells, this nephew or grand nephew of Mister Harley. Roxy remembered wondering why Jade never went to stay with those relatives, after Jake died. Instead of living on Blood-murder Island, with only Jake's OP Familiar for
company. “What about John Egbert?”


“Well, turns out he had his ass an Awakening,” Dirk said. “I mean, Dave told me a while ago about him, but I sort of tuned it out at the time. Anyway, he and his dad got attacked by Technocrats last night.”


“John?” Rose said, sitting up suddenly. “What’s going on with John? Technocrats, what?” Her face was lit up with alarm.

“My daughter makes a good argument, Dirk,” Roxy said, speaking quickly. “What’s this about Rose’s friend and Technocrats?!”

“Like I said,” Dirk said, not missing a beat, “the Technocracy apparently found out this John Egbert kid got wicked magic powers, and sent flunkies to convince him to join. When that didn’t work, they tried taking him by force.”

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!” Roxy said. “Is he okay?”

“What’s going on?” Rose said, grabbing onto her mother’s sleeve. “Mom!”

“Oh yeah, he’s fine,” Dirk said. “I sent Dave over, and he and the Egberts kicked their asses. There was even a ghost, and...some kind of peeping tom hobo? I don’t know. Point is, we got John and his dad back here, where it’s safe.”

Roxy breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh thank god...” She slumped against the lab wall. Sure, she didn’t even really know this John kid or his father, but getting grabbed by the Technocrats was...it was a fate worse than death. Least she thought so. It would be terrible if someone else...shit...

“Mom, talk to me!” Rose said, tugging on Roxy’s arm. “Is John alright? What’s going on?”

“Yeah, he’s alright, baby,” Roxy said, patting the girl’s hand. “Your friend is safe, and no one got hurt.”

“Oh, I didn’t say that,” Dirk said across the line. “Kid took some ‘Dox on the chest. And a whole load of Technos got cut up. But Dave got him some first aid, and I hacked the wound towards ‘faster heal’ this morning.” He grunted. “Oh, and I got some OJ in my eye. Those weren’t tears at all.” His voice was dripping with so much sarcasm, it was unintelligible.

Roxy decided not to relay that bit of info to Rose. Rubbing her head, she said, “Rose, honey, can you run back to the house and get mommy some aspirin? My head is killing me.”

Rose frowned. “...are you sure he’s alright?” she said.

The woman nodded. “Yeah, he’s alright,” Roxy said. She leaned over and patted the girl’s head. “I promise. I’ll tell you all about it...you know, after I deal with this pounding headache.” She messaged her temple, groaning.

The words seemed to mollify Rose, who gave a small smile and nodded. “I’ll be right back, mom. Just stay here.” With that, she jumped off the pink bed and jogged to the secret tunnel.

Roxy sighed, lying down on the bed. “...so what now, Dirk?” she mumbled into the phone, the
other hand shielding her face from the oppressive sun.

“Well, right now, I've got the Egberts over at my house,” Dirk said. “Quite unprompted, Mister Egbert got up bright and early, and started making french toast. I didn't even know we had shit for french toast. Dude must have snuck out and got some. Whatever, point is that shit was delicious.” He sighed. “I mean damn, if only he weren't straight. And, like, a Good Christian or whatever.”

“How Christian we talking?” Roxy said, rubbing her eye. “Monist Chorister or Septarian Chorister?”

“Septarian,” Dirk said, “although he's super polite, so it's cool. Good listener. Problem is, the Egberts being here isn't good for the Strider household's Sanctum. Plus, this place is too small for two more people. I need someplace to put them. Just until we can get them on their feet somewhere the Technos won't find them.”

Roxy sat up, groaning. “Ugh...you want I should take them?” she said, rubbing her back.


“If it's about keeping them safe,” Roxy said, rubbing her eye, “why not send them over to Jake's old island? Have them stay with Jade, as far from the Technocracy as possible?”

“I considered that,” Dirk said. “I was going to call Jade next, in case I couldn't reach you, or you couldn't do it. Thing is, Jake's island is kind of too far off the grid, know what I mean? Too much isolation can be a bad thing, especially for folks used to modern conveniences. Your place is at least on an inhabited land mass. They can go long walks in the woods, and have people who can get them shit without having to use Vulgar teleportation.”

Roxy nodded. “Yeah, I can see that,” she said. “It would be nice to have company over.” She sighed, looking over and blinking into the window. “Sure, I could take 'em. I'm sure Rose would love to have her friend visit.”

“Righteous,” Dirk said. “Oh, one thing though. I got a face-full of 'Dox last night, on account of having to open gates through space all over the world. You know, as you do. Rather not risk any more of that.”

Roxy looked over to the center of the room. “...might be able to help with that.”

“There. It's all yours.”

Terezi Pyrope stepped out of the bathroom, waving blindly to where she assumed her sister stood. The girl yawned, brushing damp hair from her face.

She didn't need sight to know Latula Pyrope rolled her eyes. “Finally,” the older sister said, hopping inside. “Sorry, for rushing,” she quickly amended, “meeting 'Tuna, and I want to look my raddest.” She threw up the horns lazily.

“Why bother with makeup?” Terezi said, stretching in the hallway. “It's not like he's in any condition to care.”

Latula poked her head of the bathroom, glaring daggers at Terezi.

“...chill, sis,” Terezi said, knowing somehow what her sister's reaction would be. The girl looked
over her shoulder and smiled a toothy grin. “I just meant the dude's too lovesick to give a crap about your looks. And really, can we expect anything less of the Pyrope women?”

The older teenager's expression softened, and she smiled. “Smooth save, sis,” she said, ducking back inside the bathroom. “Tell mom I went over if she asks, 'kay?”

“Sure.”

Tracing the wall with her fingers, Terezi walked through the darkness. Well okay, if she opened her lids and squinted really hard, she could see some very blurry shapes in one eye. It wasn't much help, so the girl didn't usually bother. Instead, she enjoyed the blackness. She knew the layout of her house well enough that she didn't even need to feel around.

Honestly, Terezi adapted to life after the accident better than could be hoped. Not as well as Latula, who got a splinter in the smell centers of her brain, and that's it. But much better than Mituna...

...Terezi didn't like to talk about it. Sore subject.

She opened the door to her room and padded around, looking for her computer. Booting it up, she found her cherry red sunglasses. She found the uniform red pleasing to her one (barely) sighted eye.

“Password?” the computer's synthesizer said.

She stroked the keys until she found the raised bumps on the F and J keys, then hashed out the password: Legislacerator413. She found the portmanteau gratifying in a personal way, and it ensured no one would ever guess it.

“Ding!”

Pesterchum showed a number of active and idle chums. Sollux sent a message to everyone, telling them to “get the fuck off [hii2] nut2, cau2e [he'2] bu2y toniight”. From last night, of course, which wasn't new. Must be another all-night coding session. She sent him a message saying that Latula would be over soon.

Terezi nearly had a heart attack when the computer's Blind Assist told her that Karkat had messaged her. Dude had been away from his computer so long, the girl had begun to feel profoundly concerned.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering gallowsCalibrator [GC] --

CG: OKAY LISTEN UP BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME. THIS IS AN ALL POINTS TO ALL OF YOU.
CG: I'M SORRY FOR NOT GETTING BACK TO EVERYONE. FUCK, I...
CG: IT'S JUST THAT THIS HAS BEEN A ROUGH COUPLE DAYS. I NEEDED TIME TO GET MY SHIT TOGETHER.
CG: TRUTH BE TOLD, I'M NOT ENTIRELY SURE SAID SHIT ISN'T STILL ALL SCATTERED ALL OVER THE PLACE. DON'T BOTHER ASKING WHAT HAPPENED, BECAUSE TALKING ABOUT IT IS THE LAST THING I WANT TO DO RIGHT NOW.
CG: JUST KNOW THAT I'M OKAY AND NOT, LIKE, IN SOME ABSURD TROUBLE OR ANYTHING. THIS ISN'T A CALL FOR ALL YOU OVERPROTECTIVE SHITHEADS TO GIRD YOUR LOINS AND RIDE OFF TO MY RESCUE.
CG: THIS SHIT IS ON LOCKDOWN ALRIGHT. I JUST...NEED SOME MORE TIME. I'LL BE BACK TO REGULARLY SCHEDULED SCREAMING INTO THE VOID OF SHAME THAT IS THE INTERNET IN...I DON'T KNOW, A COUPLE DAYS.
CG: NOW I GOTTA GO ATTEND TO A THING. LATER.

-- carcinoGeneticist [CG] ceased pestering gallowsCalibrator [GC] --

Terezi sighed. Well, at least the adorable, shouty idiot was still alive. She hammered out a well-meant bit of ribbing about sending out copy-pasted messages.

Damn, she missed the little guy. Oh well.

Getting a message from Nepeta Leijon was a surprise. “Whoa,” Terezi said, removing her glasses.

-- arsenicCatnip [AC] began pestering gallowsCalibrator [GC] --

AC: :33 *ac crawls apologetically to the dragon's cave and meows loudly*
AC: :33 okay sorry i can't roleplay right now terezi
AC: :33 i don't think I have any right to come in playing after i've b33n gone for
AC: :33 oh man a whole year?? i33z...
AC: :33 sorry, i've just b33n dealing with some stuff
AC: :33 really intense stuff
AC: :33 but also really exciting!
AC: :33 and i've b33n so busy, i haven't even b33n able to find access to a computer in all this time
AC: :33 anyway, things have gotten just a bit more stable now, so i wanted to message all my old friends and let them know i wasn't dead
AC: :33 oh i hope i'm not messaging you after you've forgotten about me!
AC: :33 that would make me really sad, but if you've moved on i understand
AC: :33 in case you still want to be friends though i would really appreciate it
AC: :33 also have you spoken to equius at all?
AC: :33 i've been trying to message or call him for hours, but he hasn't picked up!
AC: :33 i think i might try calling his parents' house next
AC: :33 or just head back over there oh man that's going to take a trip!
AC: :33 anyway terezi please message me back soon
AC: :33 i don't know when i'll have access to a computer next so...
AC: :33 anyway, i always had fun with you! kitty kisses!!!

-- arsenicCatnip [AC] ceased pestering gallowsCalibrator [GC] --

Terezi blinked blindly. Why were all her friends going on unexplained trips, with no access to computers? And this one was way longer than the last! Once was happenstance, but twice was a pattern. Her investigator's nose itched from the mystery she knew nothing about.

Also Equius was missing? Terezi hadn't noticed. After all, she blocked him months before, since he kept messaging everyone on a daily basis, asking where Nepeta was. And now here Nepeta was (but for a limited time only? What was this, corporate marketing?), asking where he was. Wait, and she would need to take a trip to visit Equius's parents house? Last time Terezi checked, the two lived in the same town and went to the same school! Where the hell was Nepeta that she'd need to go out of her way to return?

The blind girl hammered out a series of pesters, reassuring the girl that Terezi still wanted to be friends and that Nepeta should please call. She left her phone number just in case, as Terezi
suspected that a phone line would be easier to find...wherever Nepeta was.

Terezi then went to the block list and unblocked Equius Zahhak. She sent a brief message to get back to her, or preferably to get back to his best friend. Oh, and Terezi shot off one last message, asking if he’d stopped being a racist ass yet. Surely, the brute would have outgrown his childish, teenage racism by now, right?

Right?

And then there was Vriska. Terezi hadn't messaged her since last night. And it would seem she left a message after all. Surely this would be entertain-

“What the fuck?” Terezi said, after the computer read out the message. “What...THE FUCK!?”

“...Language!” Latula yelled from several rooms away. “Don't let mom catch you yelling like that...”

Terezi ignored her, scrambling to a news site. She searched for the words “Serket” and “homicide”. But surely nothing would come of-

“Fuck the what?” Terezi yelled, mouth agape.

“Okay, now you're just doing that on purpose,” Latula yelled. “Whatever it is, keep it down, okay sis?”

Terezi Pyrope sank back in her chair. It was absolutely true. Vriska Serket's mother was arrested for (allegedly) torturing a man in her basement. Moreover, the police were as of yet still finding mutilated corpses buried haphazardly in the Serket family graveyard.

“...why does Vriska's house have a graveyard?” Terezi said, the only phrase she could get out after minutes of stunned silence. “Argh!”

She hammered on the keyboard.

-- gallowsCalibrator [GC] began pestering arachnidsGrip [AG] --

GC: VR11111111SK4444444444!!!
AG: Oh hey, you got my message. ::::)

“How are you doing, H84-3?”

Three-Of-Eight looked up from the metal table. His face was expressionless, though the sunglasses on his face masked bloodshot eyes.

“What do you mean, sir?” Three-Of-Eight said, keeping his voice steady.

The middle aged black man sitting across from him smiled slightly. His clasped hands jerked their thumbs out, in a little shrug. “I just mean how are you holding up?”

The clone MiB swallowed, looking away. “Condition stable, sir,” he said.

The NWO man in the gray suit nodded. An overweight man, this Man In Gray brushed a hand through his curly black hair. The first signs of gray were forming here and there.

He clasped his hands again. “How are you feeling, H84-3?” he said, inclining his head forward.
The MiB took a moment, looking around the bare, darkened room. “Is this another part of the debriefing, sir?”

“No,” said the MiG, shaking his head. “Your previous report was satisfactory. This is merely me wanting to know if you suffer any...” He waved his hand lightly, looking to the side and quirking his mouth. “...emotional trouble. What happened...”

The clone shut his eyes, grimacing and looking away. The edge of his mouth twitched, and his chest trembled. He covered his mouth with a hand.

“...what happened was not your fault, son,” the MiG said, waving the clone down gently.

“I couldn't stop it,” the clone gasped, shaking his head. “I wasn't strong enough. It got in me, and I couldn't stop it...”

“The foreign entity,” the MiG said, frowning. “Now don't be like that, H84-3. There's no sense beating yourself up over it.”

“But...but they'd still...” The clone, took his shades off, wiping his face. His pale features wrinkled terribly, contorted in pain. “...they'd still be here! I could have stopped it.” He sobbed, burying his face in his hands. “I wasn't strong enough!”

The black man sighed, rising with difficulty to his feet. He walked around the table, standing behind the clone. He clapped his hands on Three-Of-Eight's shoulders. “There, there,” he said softly, “let it out.”

The two men stayed there, one sobbing into his hands, for many minutes.

In time, the crying died down, and the Man In Gray patted his subordinate's shoulders. “Better?”

Three-Of-Eight shook his head, but sniffed and sat up. He scrambled for his shades and put them on over red, puffy eyes.

The MiG nodded, walking around the table again. He picked up the pitcher of water and glass, set out on the end of the surface. The man didn't ask, just poured a glass and offered it. “Drink, son.”

Nodding, the MiB complied. He drained the glass in thirty seconds. A line of salty tears dried on his face.

The MiG motioned with the pitcher, and refilled the glass. “That will help, just a bit,” he said, setting the pitcher down. Water would help. Crying was cathartic, but conferred little benefit if dehydration set in. A simple Adjustment – giving water – would hopefully calm the man down.

Stepping back around, the aging black man dropped into his seat. “Hoogh...” he groaned, adjusting his sitting placement. “You know, I'm getting too old for this war.” He shook his head. “Too damn old, for this damn war. Now how do you feel, son?”

The MiB rubbed his nose, sniffing. He fished a handkerchief from his pocket and began wiping his face. “...lonely.”

“Go on.”

“...it's so quiet,” Three-Of-Eight said, frowning. “So quiet, all the time. I feel like I'm deaf. All I can hear are my own thoughts. Feel my own pain.”
The Man In Gray nodded. “Disconnection is a traumatic experience, for those who spent their whole lives connected. These feelings you have are nothing to be ashamed of, son.” He tapped the table, pulling out a smart phone from his pocket. “Now, we're gonna schedule an appointment with the Psych Ops. Now Doctor Morgan, she's very good at what she does. Soft touch. Has experience with your kind of problem.” He tapped the screen as he talked. “She'll talk you through this difficult period.”

The clone nodded, staring at the table. “…did they catch them?”

The black man looked up. “...the Reality Deviants?”

“Yes.”

“No,” said the MiG, sighing. “Signs point to them escaping through spatial manipulation. Whoever they were, they were good. Our agents are investigating the site of the jump, but they aren't having a lot of luck. The bastards covered their tracks well.”

The clone clutched the edge of the table with both hands, knuckles shaking with the effort.

“Now I know what you're thinking,” the MiG said, setting down his phone. “And no, we're not going to go out of our way to hunt them down. It's two kids and a civilian. They aren't worth the Union's resources.”

The clone frowned, gritting his teeth. He refused to look at his superior. “…they killed my brothers. And Mister Tallfield.”

“Tallfield was an idiot,” the MiG said, shaking his head. “He moved way too soon, without knowing what sort of allies the Egbert boy could call upon. He should have stuck to his strengths, and continued the wheeling and dealing.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Fucking beancounters. Now I have to take his place. You know I was looking forward to retirement?” He leaned back in his chair. “Far as I'm concerned, I don't owe Tallfield anything.” He frowned. “...again, I'm sorry what happened to your 'brothers’.”

“So that's it?” the MiB said, looking up. “It just ends like that? They kill our people, and get away clean?”

“Oh, I'm never happy to see our folks killed,” the MiG said. “But...the Union never recovered from the Dimensional Anomaly. Not completely. Oh sure, we all said we won the war, but we lost just as much as the superstitionists, during that event. Wish we could just forget about this asinine, outdated conflict with cultists and anarchists, and get on with our own concerns.”

Groaning, the black man rose to his feet. “If a bunch of kids want to waste their potential and play wizard, that's their loss,” he said, stretching. “Don't worry, we're gonna put the Egbert family's faces on our watch lists. If they show up on our radars, we'll worry about it then. But I want neither myself, nor you, lose sleep over it.” He walked to the door, hand on the doorknob. He looked over his shoulder pointing at the clone. “And I don't want to see you doing some kind of fool thing, like embarking on some quest for vengeance. The Union can ill afford more squandered resources. You hear?”

The clone swallowed.

“Is that clear, H84-3?” the MiG repeated.

“Yes sir,” Three-of-Eight said.
“Good,” said the NWO agent. He turned back to the door. “Take care of yourself, son.”

The clone nodded, looking down. He heard the door shut.

Three-Of-Eight sighed, wallowing in his loneliness and pain.

It was quiet.

“Mom! I'm back!”

Rose shook the bottle of painkillers, letting the sound of rattling fill the lab. In her off hand, she clutched a water bottle.

Roxy took both gratefully. “Thank you, baby!” she cried, shaking a few tablets of aspirin into her hand and popping them into her mouth. She knocked back a swig of water. “...ahh...fuck, my head hurts...”

“So...” Rose said, crossing her arms and tapping her foot. “What happened?”

The woman sighed. “Alright, well...” Roxy said, taking another sip of water. “…your cousin Dirk told me that your friend John got home-invaded by Technocrats last night.”

“Why?” Rose said, frowning. “Is he sure?”

“Pretty sure, since Dirk and Dave gave them what for.” Roxy stopped, then smacked her forehead. “Fuck! I wasn't supposed to tell you about Dirk being magic!”

“Mom, I figured out it was Dirk days ago,” Rose said, flatly. “It really wasn't that hard. I know for a fact that Dave was trained in katana combat, so it seemed pretty obvious.” She inclined her head, considering. “...wait, did you say Dirk and Dave fought the Technocrats?”

“Yeah,” Roxy said.

“Dave is an Awakened person, isn't he?” Rose said, frowning.

“...yeah...” Roxy also frowned.

Rose smacked her forehead. “Was there a particular reason you kept this detail from me?” Rose said.

Roxy shrugged. “Ehhh? Sorry, but...thing is, your cousins are a lot more...militant about the Ascension War. Dirk was fighting them before he brought me into this whole magic deal, and Dave is basically Dirk's clone. I didn't...” She sighed, taking a drink. “…I didn't want you getting dragged into that biz. It's why I told them not to talk to you about all this stuff.”

The young lady frowned, letting her arms drop. “...alright.” She sighed, scratching her head. “Moving on...why did the Technocracy attack my friend John's home?”

“...”

“John is also Awakened, isn't he?”

“...apparently?” Roxy said, tilting her head.

Rose smacked her forehead with both hands. “Ugh...” she groaned. “...did you know about that?”
“No, I just found out about it,” Roxy said, rubbing her brow. “Although I think his Awakening might have happened a while ago, if Dirk's bullshit memory is to be believed...”

“God dammit!” Rose growled, smacking her forehead multiple times with both hands. “Why didn't I see the signs? It was so obvious!” She waved her hands in front of her, scowling. “John was practically telegraphing that he was a Mage! And I blitzed right past it!”

“Yeah, some things just seem so obvious in hindsight,” Roxy nodded, pulling out her phone. “If it makes you feel better, Rose, it's not always the right choice to be open with your friends, when it comes to becoming magic. You never know which of your friends – or your family – will end up outing you, whether by accident or malice or even a mistaken belief that they're helping you. And then suddenly you've got Technocrats on your ass!” She threw her arms up. “Even if the Union doesn't get you, having friends brag about how their best bud is a witch is a sure way to get unwanted attention on them, even among mundane folk. Jobs get lost, reputations ruined, homes get egged. It's a mess.”

“I suppose that's true,” Rose said, looking at the floor. “Wizards, witches...mad scientists, miracle workers...I can see a number of ways being known for such practices could cause trouble, simply from a society that hates and fears such people.” She frowned, squeezing her hands together. “I...I just wish they'd had the decency to tell me...”

“There's more to it, though,” Roxy said, walking over and sitting on the edge of a panel of instruments. “There's also that...being Awakened is something that can't be conveyed easily to those who...aren't.”

She looked sadly at the ceiling. “When I was dating your father,” Roxy said, “I didn't get a thing he talked about. Imagine a completely esoteric subject. Now imagine you know nothing about it...and the one trying to tell you understands that subject on levels you can't. You just can't. It was frustrating for both of us.” She frowned, looking down and shutting her eyes. “I got the impression he felt like talking to a mental invalid. He never said as much, of course, but...I felt it. That exasperation. That sadness. I didn't get it, Rose...and unless I Awakened, I never would.”

Roxy looked to her daughter. “It's all well and good to talk about scientific formula, or elements of the occult. It's another to try conveying sensations or impressions that the other person has no inherent reference for, and never did, and may never have...” She took a sip of water. “For them...for Richter and Dirk...John and Dave...talking to us about this stuff...must be like trying to convey what color is like to a person born blind.”

The young lady remained still and quiet for a while. Then, she sniffed, rubbing her eye. “...I'm such an idiot...”

Her mother pushed off from the control panel and walked over. Rosy threw her arms around the girl, hugging her. “Shh...it's alright.” She patted Rose's back. “You couldn't have known. It's...it's never easy.”

Rose nodded, letting her mother brush a hand through her ivory hair. “...thanks, mom.”

“No prob, Rose,” Roxy said, letting her daughter go. She paced the lab, chugging water from the bottle.

Sweet god, she wanted a real drink.

“Sun is shi-nin in the sk-"
Tap. “Talk to me,” Roxy said, holding the phone to her ear. “...they're ready? Okay, I'll wait. Thanks.” She hung up, continuing to pace the floor. She fixed her gaze on the pad in the center.

“Was that Dirk again?” Rose asked, watching her mother pace.

“Yes,” Roxy nodded. “Just making sure about something.”

The young lady tilted her head, then looked around the lab. “Was this Doctor Langley's lab?”

“Yes,” Roxy said, stopping to look around. She smiled. “It sure is something. The Doc was so smart.”

“What's going on over here?” Rose said, walking to the bank of controls. Looking up, her eyes fixed on the glass tube filled with yellow fluid, and a single, pulsing lump of flesh. “I presume this is science.” She smiled, then said, “Sorry. Science!” She giggled to herself.

“Ha ha, yeah,” Roxy said, walking over. “I couldn't hardly sleep last night...didn't feel like I ever would. So I decided to dust off this baby and get it working.”

Rose slid a finger over the machine bank's surface, displaying the thick, gray mass of dust that came off. She cocked an eyebrow.

“Oh, you know what I mean!” Roxy said, waving her hand dismissively. “See, this here is what Langley used for her experiments in Ectobiology.”

Facing the tube, Rose got halfway through a nod before she jerked back. “Ectobiology?!”

“Yes,” Roxy said. “You know it?”

“...what is it?” Rose said, tentatively.

“It's where you make clones of living things,” Roxy said, pointing to the machine that looked like an arcade cabinet, “by locking onto their temporal ghost – the impression their existence made in time – and copying it. Time slime gets produced most often, which can be analyzed to extract the thing's DNA.” Pointing at the filled tube, Roxy slouched, rubbing the back of her head. “He...I've...kind of been trying to clone Jaspers for a while now.”

“Jaspers?” Rose said, blinking. She shook her head. “One thing at a time. How prevalent is this...mad science?”

“Oh, it's not prevalent at all,” Roxy said, shrugging. “Langley invented the process. I mean, I suppose she talked about it to some folks in the Sons of Ether...or is that 'Society' now? Anyway, it's mostly her thing. And she taught me how to work the machine, so I've been tinkering with it on and off ever since...”

Rose waved her hand in front of her, squinting. “No, no, stop. Please.” Rose cocked an eyebrow. “So mom, you are saying that Ectobiology is a discipline that only a very select, very exclusive group of people even know about, let alone use?”

“Yes,” Roxy said, nodding vacantly. “That's correct. I don't think anyone besides Langley and I ever worked with the process. Well, and maybe Jake...”

“Then why,” Rose said emphatically, leaning forward and gesturing with her hands, “does my friend John have 'ectoBiologist' as his pesterchum handle?”
Roxy blinked. “...uh...”

Ping!

“Oh!” Roxy said, checking her phone. She smiled. “...well, I don't know that. Maybe you can ask him yourself right now.”

“...what?” Rose said, blinking.

Suddenly, the pad in the center of the lab flashed bright green.

“Rose!”

Rose Lalonde looked over, staring. “...John?!”

John Egbert stood on the circular Transportalizer pad, holding a suitcase and grinning like an idiot.

“Hi!”

Chapter End Notes

You'll note that Nepeta's typing quirks are not entirely well represented here. Blame AO3’s chapter editor, and how working with HTML text breaks her text. She uses open brackets, which the HTML uses for its...everything. So I give up. I've created a reasonable approximation of Nepeta's quirk.
Rose Lalonde gaped. “John?!”

“You said that one already, Rose,” Roxy said, nudging her daughter with her elbow. “Hello, John!”

“Hi, Ms. Lalonde!” John said, walking forward. His eyes whipped around the expansive lab room. “Whoa! So cool!”

“John!” Rose groaned, frowning. “How did you just get here...oh...” She deflated instantly.

“Yep!” John said. “Magic!” He continued forward, then set his suitcase and backpack down on the floor. “Some kind of Technomagic Dave's Bro did.”

“We figured it would be less vulgar if Dirk teleported them in here,” Roxy said, waving at the boy. “It's been forever since Langley was around, but we figured the Sanctum-ness of the space might have a little juice remaining. Fingers crossed!”

“Come here, Rose!” John said, throwing his arms around the young lady.

“Ack!” Rose gasped, flinching at the embrace. “Oh god...personal contact with someone other than family!” she said, squirming in mock disgust. She smiled.

“Oh you!” John said, patting her on the back. Peeling away, he said, “Hey Rose. Guess what?”

“What, John?” Rose said, a bemused smirk on her face.

“I'm MAGICK!” John shouted, before a gust of wind flowed up from the floor, billowing his shirt and hair.

“Hm...I see,” Rose said, covering her mouth and giggling. As the wind died down, she caught a look at something that gave her pause. “Wait, John. What's that on your chest?”

“Oh...this?” John said, patting his shirt. For modesty's sake, he didn't raise the cloth and expose himself. “It's nothing.”

“Are you sure?” Rose said.

“Okay, I got hurt because of...” John stopped, looking unsure. “Uh...”

“Don't worry, kid,” Roxy said, waving him down. “She knows about all the Mage shit, and how Technocrats attacked you.”

“Not everything,” Rose said, frowning. “John, are you sure you're alright?”

“Yeah, I'm fine,” John said, nodding. “Paradox caught me, but other than that I'm fine. And then I got Dave to patch me up when we got back to his place, and his brother did some kind of computer thing on me this morning.”

“A computer thing?” Rose said, cocking an eyebrow.

“He sort of stuck these electrodes on my face,” John said, smooshing his cheeks and forehead, “with wires running to his computer. Then he typed some stuff into it for a few minutes, and did a thing. It tingled.” He shrugged. “I'm feeling a lot better now. Dave's Bro says I'll be able to remove
the stitches in a day or so, and it doesn't hurt anymore.”

“Really...?” Rose said, crossing her arms. “I suppose I'll take your word for it. But what about the Technocracy's forces? They didn't hurt you or your father at all?”

“Naw, we're good,” John said, smiling. “Dad and I could fight pretty good. And we had Dave there. He's really good with a sword.” His smile fell a little. “...maybe a little too good. There was a lot of blood, Rose.”

“We'll discuss the psychological ramifications of your recent stressful combat later,” Rose said, staring seriously. “Now, about Dave...”

Green flash from the center of the lab.

“You called?”

Dave Strider stood in the middle of the room, hands in his pockets. He wore a pair of blue jeans, and a white shirt with red sleeves. From his belt hung a short Japanese sword, sitting comfortably in its sheath.

His face was adorned, as always, with a pair of sunglasses.

“Dave!” Rose said, jumping a bit. “How did...you know, I don't care anymore.”

“Hey Dave!” Roxy yelled, waving her hand over her head. “How's my nephew doing?”


“Strider,” Rose said, smiling just slightly.

“Lalonde,” Dave said. “Lalonde junior, I mean. Fuck it, I'm just gonna call you Rose and be done with it.”

“Acceptable.”

John looked back and forth between them, cheeks puffed out awkwardly.

The two ivory-haired kids saw this, then looked to each other.

Dave coughed.

“I believe John expects some kind of family bonding,” Rose said, smirking, eyelids drawing down to half-lids.

“Okay,” Dave said, shrugging. He stepped forward, and offered a fist.

Rose covered her mouth and giggled, raising her own fist.

The two bumped fists simply, then disengaged.

Then John threw his arms around both of them, drawing them into a hug. “Friends!”

“Oof!” said Dave, maintaining his unflappable nature with only slight difficulty.

Rose frowned, then smiled uneasily. “Hello again, John.”
“It’s great meeting you both in person!” John said, flashing a goofy grin. “I'm so happy.”

“Indeed,” Rose said. She looked to Dave. “Not...that I don't appreciate this meeting. But what possessed your brother to send you here?”

“Egberts need safety, on account of the Technos conquering their house,” Dave said. “Your mom already said okay, so...”

“She did?” Rose asked, looking over to her mother.

Roxy nodded. “The house is huge, Rosie,” she said, throwing up her hands. “I kind of always wanted to be making a whole bunch of babies with your daddy, before...yeah...” She puffed out her cheeks, looking away. “Plus, you need kids your own age to hang with. Not just online, but in person.”

“...I concede the point,” Rose said, tilting her head.

“Yay!” John said, shaking his friends and hugging them close. “Slumber party!”

“Do boys even get to have slumber parties?” Dave said. He inclined his face up. “Aw what the hell. We can play ironic party games.”

Rose struggled to contain her laughter. She couldn't reach her hand up, in John's grasp. Then she paused. “Wait. Dave, did you say Egberts plural?”

Another green flash from the middle of the room.

“Oh what now?” Rose muttered under her breath, then looked.

Paul Egbert stood on the circular pad, hands laden with two large suitcases. Multiple plain, serviceable hats sat on his head, stacked one atop the other.

He shuddered as he appeared, scrunching up his face. “…not my preferred method of travel.”

“Wowza!” Roxy said, mouth and eyes wide. Her cheeks flushed.

Oh no, she thought. He's hot!

“Hey dad!” John called over, disengaging his friends to wave to his father.

“Mister Egbert,” Dave said, nodding. He jerked his thumb out. “This is my cousin Rose...”

“Hello, Mister Egbert,” Rose said, bowing her head. “I can say I wasn't expecting your arrival, but it is a pleasure. John has told me much of you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Paul nodded, stepping forward and putting down his suitcases. He doffed his hats politely. His face turned to the side. “And who is this young lady?”

“That's my Aunt Roxy,” Dave said, jerking back to the older Lalonde. “Rose's mom.”

“Well, and here I was thinking you had to be Rose's sister,” Paul said, approaching Roxy and extending a hand.

Roxy's face flushed harder and harder. “Oh boy!” she gasped, placing her hand on his.

She nearly melted when he leaned forward and kissed her hand. “Oh man, oh man!” she muttered,
“Ah, I'm sorry,” Paul said, standing up and letting the hand go. “I don't mean to be so forward. Is there a Mr. Lalonde?”

The woman shook her head. “No, no, no!” Roxy said, smiling. “No, there's no Mr. Lalonde! I'm...afraid I'm a single mother.” She leaned closer, pressing her hand to her chest. “Poor Richter,” she said, lowering her voice, “Rose's father and I never got a chance to marry. The Technocracy took him before she was born. You understand.” She frowned sadly.

The man frowned. “I do. John lost his own mother many years ago. We've had to make due by ourselves since then.”

How horrible! But...available! The woman's eyes lit up.

“I'm very sorry for your loss,” Paul said, nodding gravely. “I've slowly become aware that this Technocratic Union is an organization of great potential for good but, alas, few scruples.”

“The fewest scruples,” Roxy said, smiling. “But don't worry. That was a long time ago, and I've had time to...adjust...” She shot a look over to Rose.

Her girl blinked, cocking her head to the side.

“It's just...” Roxy continued, patting the man's shoulder (fuck, it's solid muscle!), “…it's just been the two of us, here in this big house. Well, not this house...” She rolled her eyes around the room. “This is a separate building, devoted to what one of my dear friends, called Progressive Science. The...house is up the hill.” She gestured over her shoulder, to the passage. “We can take the tunnel up to the yard. Passage keeps the entrance safe from spies.”

“That sounds lovely,” Paul said, a bemused smile forming on his chiseled, masculine face. His solid jaw. His high cheekbones. His...strong nose.

Fuck, were those bishonen flowers in the air, or was Roxy hallucinating again? She didn't care.

“And then when we get up,” Roxy said, “we can...oh my!” Her stomach grumbled, and she blushed. “We can get some food. Haven't had anything all day. Ha ha ha!” She laughed nervously, brushing her ivory hair into place.

“I would love to, ma'am,” Paul said, doffing his hat. “If you direct me to your kitchen, I can make us all something.”

“Oh, you don't have to do that,” Roxy said, patting his arm (holy momma, his biceps!). “You're the guest! It wouldn't do to make you work so hard, especially after what you've been through.”

“It's perfectly alright, Ms. Lalonde,” he said, patting her hand. “If John and I will be staying here, we expect to pull our weight.” He smiled. “Plus, I happen to love cooking.”

“Marry me!” Roxy said, grabbing the man's perfectly pressed shirt. After, she looked around.

Everyone stared at her. John's face was flush, beet red. Rose pressed her face in her hands. Dave clapped a hand over his mouth, stifling a giggle fit.

Roxy quickly unheaded the man and started smoothing his shirt. “Ha ha ha...” she laughed nervously. “Kidding! I'm kidding...” Her smile twitched. She started wringing her hands. “How about we head over now, Mister Egbert?”
The man blinked, then smiled, tipping his hats. “Alright,” Paul said. “Just let me get my bags...”

“Of course!” Roxy said. Noticing movement in the corner of her eye, she turned around.

“Mom,” Rose whispered, walking over and cupping her hand over her mouth, “what are you doing? Mister Egbert just got here.”

“Rose...honey...light of my world, baby...” Roxy leaned way over so she could whisper in Rose’s face. “I lost your father almost a decade and half ago. You and booze have been my only company in all those years.” She frowned intensely, puffing out her cheeks and staring intensely into her daughter’s eyes. “I have needs, baby. In lieu of a wizard, a beefy gentleman will do.” Roxy squinted. “Just give me this, Rose.”

“Alright!” Paul said, stepping up. Suitcases swung in his hands. “I’m ready to go.”

“Wonderful!” Roxy said, turning back to him and smiling broadly. “Let’s go, Mister Egbert!”

The two moved towards the door to the secret passage. Dad Egbert nodded. “Very good,” he said. “But please, call me Paul.”

“Well...if you insist!” Roxy said, patting his back. “You can call me Roxy...”

As the adult retreated into the tunnel, the three kids stood in the lab and stared.

“...what just happened?” John said, gaping.

“Snk...Rose's mom is putting the moves on your dad...snk...” Dave said, desperately holding fits of raucous laughter behind his lips. “Oh my god...”

Rose sank into herself, face bright crimson and buried in her hands.


A green flash went off behind them.

“...uh...did I miss something?”

The three looked back, startled.

“Jade?!” Rose cried.

Jade Harley stood on the circular pad.

Her shoulders were laden with brown messenger bags, one for each side. Strapped to her back, the butt of a rifle peeked out just to the side of her head. She wore a white shirt with a blue atomic symbol, and from her hips hung a heavy tool belt. A loose white skirt hung down to her ankles.

She brushed a strand of long, ebony hair from her face, sunlight hitting her glasses (which seemed sort of goggle-like, actually). Her face was a mixture of confusion and indignation.

“Oh, hey Jade,” Dave said, firing off a mock salute. “How’s Blood Murder Island?”

“Pleasant, as always,” Jade said gravely, huffing. She planted her hands on her hips. “Don't change the subject. Were any of you going to include me in your little get-together?”

“We were gonna,” Dave said, shrugging.
“Hi Jade!” John said, waving his hand and, of course, grinning like a doofus. “Is it really you?”

Jade's anger cracked, and she smiled. “Yes!” she said, running over. “It's so good to finally meet you, John!”

“Ha ha!” John laughed, embracing his cousin. “So good to see you!”

“Likewise!” Jade said.

“Can someone tell me what's going on?” Rose said. She pointed at the island girl. “Jade! How are you here? Did Dave's brother send you too?”

“Huh?” Jade said, letting John go. She blinked.

“We didn't bring her,” Dave said, throwing his hands up.

“I brought myself,” Jade said, smiling.

She raised her hands to her thick glasses and tapped the rims. Suddenly, they lit up, rectangles and shapes forming on the glass. “I found you all, saw you had met up, and came over. It was easy, actually, reestablishing the old connection from Grandpa's Transportalizer to the one here.”

Rose gaped.

“...Rose?” Jade said, looking at Rose through her GUI-filled glasses.

“ARE ALL OF MY FRIENDS MAGES?!” Rose shouted, messing up her hair with both hands. “When did this happen!? How?!”

“Magic,” all three other kids said, in unison.

“AAAAAAAAARGH!”

While Rose sank to the floor and engaged in exaggerated emotional theatrics, Dave turned to Jade. “So Jade, where were you all morning? I mean, besides anywhere you wanted to be.”

Jade smiled. “Well, I heard all about what happened last night,” she said, standing up straight. “It sucked that I couldn't help at all, and that you boys went to bed without giving me a full report.” She tilted her head to the side, frowning. “I couldn't even check to see if you were alright, because Dave's Bro wards his apartment too well.”

“Sorry about that,” Dave said.

“Yeah, we're sorry Jade,” John said, frowning. “It was pretty crummy, keeping you out of the loop like that.”

“It's alright,” Jade said, nodding. “I figured that Dave and his Bro had everything in hand, so I needed a way to pass the time until you all woke up. Stupid time zones.” She snickered. “So I took a nap.”

“A nap?” John said, blinking.

“I take a lot of naps, out on my island,” Jade said, nodding. “Keeping up with your sleep schedules means being flexible. Anyway!” She pointed up. “While I slept, I used my Dream Prognosticator to focus on finding ways I could help.”
“Dream...Prognosticator?” said Rose, who rose uneasily to her feet. She rubbed the side of her head groggily.

“It’s a machine that focuses my dreams, allowing me to see through time,” Jade said, gesturing with her index finger. “I used to have vaguely prophetic dreams all the time as a kid, but it was hard to apply. So, when I started studying Progressive Science, I built a machine to focus that ability.”

“Oh,” Rose said. She blinked. “...alright. That, as they say, is a thing.”

Jade giggled, nodding. “Anyway, I slept a while, and when I woke up, I knew what I needed to do.”

“What’s that?” Dave asked. “What were you doing all morning?”

Jade looked sideways, smirking. “Tying up loose ends.”

---

**Minutes Ago (But Not Many)**

The woman sometimes known as LeForge sat up, rubbing her head.

Why were the plane seats so hard? And...granular?

Raising her hand, she watched bleary-eyed as a handful of sand fell to the ground.

“...what the fuck?” she said. She looked around.

She was sitting in the middle of a vast, stark, flat desert. In the far distance, she saw what may have been a mountain range...or a mirage.

“...what the fuck!?” she barked, scrambling to her feet. “No, no, no!”

“Yes.”

LeForge wheeled around, shielding her eyes from the blaring desert sun.

A little girl stood a few meters away, long raven hair blowing in the wind. She trained a rifle in LeForge's direction.

“What the hell is this?” the woman spat, flailing her arms. “Get that the hell out of my...face...”

Upon further inspection, the little girl looked very remarkably like that student. The one with the Enlightenment, yet squandered it beating up bullies. The one LeForge reported back to her superiors in the New World Order, securing her escape from the world's most useless and tedious undercover job.

“...oh...shit...” LeForge said, brow breaking out in a sheen of sweat.

“Ms. LeForge,” the girl said, aim not wavering. “You outing my cousin John. He can never go home again, because of you.”

LeForge clenched a hand into a fist.

Gritting her teeth, she said, “What the hell was I supposed to do, you stupid brat? I worked in that school for a year, waiting for that kid. An entire year of my life, wasted!” She batted the air in front of her with her hand. “Don't blame me for what happened! I did my job! I did my duty, to the Union!”
The girl simply sighed. “Fine,” she said, “but in my dreams, the axis on which this whole event
turned was you. If you'd come earlier or later, or been quicker to leave...or done your damn job, as
a teacher...none of this would have happened.”

“I'm...not...a teacher!” LeForge screamed. “I'm an information analyst! I got picked for this shit
job, because I happened to know French! I never asked for any of this!”

The girl shrugged. “Neither did my cousin. But there really is no changing things now. You had
your duty, to the Technocratic Union. I have my duty, to my family.”

She lowered her rifle, then jerked her head back, over her shoulder. “That road eventually reaches a
gas station. Either direction doesn't matter, it's exactly equidistant from civilization.”

“...you can't be serious.”

“Honestly,” Jade said, smiling, “I'm being exceedingly lenient. All you have to do is walk.” She
waved with one hand. “Bye!”

“No, wait, stop!” LeForge yelled, running forward.

But Jade already had her finger to the green button on her belt. In an instant, she disappeared in a
flash of emerald light.

“Noooo!” LeForge cried, stumbling to a stop where the girl stood only precious seconds before.
“No!” She grasped the sand on the ground, clutching it in her fingers.

The woman whose name was not LeForge scrambled on the ground, walking onto the black,
cracked asphalt of the road. Her eyes darted around, falling upon an object by the roadside.
Rushing over, she looked over the object...and fell to her knees.

It was a road side, saying, “Alice Springs – 40 Kilometers, Brisbane – 2635 Kilometers”.

The woman, whose name didn't really matter, then proceeded to flip the fuck out.

Jade's three friends stared, frowning, silent.

“...remind me never to get on your bad side,” Dave said, adjusting his glasses. “You are scary,
Jade.”

The island girl grinned cockily. “Damn straight.”

“I don't know, Jade,” John said, face slick with sweat. “I mean, what Ms. LeForge did was kind of a
jerk move. But did she deserve that?” He looked away. “It just seems really mean. And vindictive.
And disproportionate to the crime.”

“Eh...?” Dave said, shrugging. “I'm sure she'll be fine. It's only a hike. I'm sure a car came and
picked her up anyway.”

“Exactly!” Jade said. “When it comes to the Technocracy, you need to teach them lessons
sometimes. They've gone too long as undisputed masters of reality. Like Grandpa always said, they
need to understand that they have more to lose attacking us than they have to gain. It's the only
way bullies learn.”

John rubbed his chin. “I guess...” He kicked the ground, thinking. “Hmm...I suppose this means
I'm committed to the Tradition cause, huh?”
“Welcome to the world's most dysfunctional family, John,” Dave said, patting the chaote's shoulder. He flashed John a thumb's up.

Rose stood apart from the three Mages, smiling sadly at them. She turned to walk away.

“And where do you think you're going?” Dave said. “Come on, Rose. Don't tell me you're getting pissy because you're jealous of our collective magical swagger.”

“Yeah!” Jade said, pointing at Rose. “You're our friend too, Rose! Don't walk away, like this changes anything.” She pointed with her other hand, making her hands into pistols. “We're involving you in this friend circle, even if I have to hold you hostage. Pew pew!”

It was too much. Rose cracked up, smothering a chuckle with her hand. “...oh lord...” She turned around, grinning stupidly. “Hah hah!”

“That's the spirit!” John said. He grabbed Dave and Jade by the wrists, guiding them over to Rose. When all of them were mashed awkwardly together, he swept them into a group hug. “Ha ha!”

“Ghck...ha ha...ha ha ha!” Rose snorted, then broke out laughing openly. “HA HA HA!”

The others, recovering from their surprise, returned the hug. Even Dave, though he would say he hugged ironically. His lips turned up just slightly at the ends.

“Ha ha!” Jade laughed, her bags pressing awkwardly into her friends' bodies.

“...heh heh...” Rose said, regaining composure. “...you know...ha...I'm not entirely without magic of my own.”

“Really?” John said, lighting up. “Oh yeah! You've been studying your dad's books!”

“Oh yeah,” Dave said. “I forgot all about that.”

“I can show you what I've learned,” Rose said. She coughed into her fist, looking away. “It's not nearly as impressive as summoning casual gusts or teleporting across vast distances.”

“Show us!” Jade said, leaning towards Rose.

“Yeah Rose!” John said, also leaning forward. “Show us!”

The two descendents of Colonial Sassacre grinned like imbeciles.

Dave played it cool, as always, “I wouldn't mind seeing this magic,” he said, cocking his head. “If it tickles my fancy, I might make a rap about it.”

“Oh! Swoon!” Rose said, pressing the back of her hand to her forehead. “If that's my reward for a mere bit of hedge magic, how can I possibly refuse?”

She turned around, pointing towards the tunnel entrance. “I'll show when we get back to the house. Come on.”

“Yeah!” John said, starting to run forward, stopping with a panic, running back to grab his bags, and then running forward again. “Yeah!”

The two others followed suit, taking their place beside Rose and John.

As they filed into the dark tunnel, Rose turned back to John. “While we're walking, John,” she said,
“I’m curious about something.”

“Really?” John said. “What?”

“Where did you get your chumhandle?” Rose said. “That is, ectoBiologist. How did you come by such an esoteric name?”

The boy looked up at the dark ceiling of the passage. “You know...I don't remember. I mean, I'm pretty sure it's Ghostbusters related...but I could swear there was more to it than that...hmm...”
Chapter Notes

"There’s a huge step between the realm of the Fool and the realm of the Magician and his associated cards: the High Priestess, Empress, Emperor, and Hierophant. The first step represents wonder, peril, and potential; the following steps reflect control. This is where Awakening becomes the Path."
-Mage: The Ascension 20th Anniversary, p. 46

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 2006

John Egbert looked out his window, gazing upon the white landscape. At the flurry of snowflakes falling from the sky, guided gently by the bitter winter wind.

He smiled. Today was going to be a fun day. He just knew-

“Bustin’-!”

John looked over to his computer. That sound clip – a classic line cut from Ray Parker Junior's excellent Ghostbusters theme song – meant only one thing.

Someone was pestering him.

He walked over and sat, jiggling the mouse.

-- ????????? [??] began pestering ghostlyTrickster [GT] --

?: Hello.
GT: hello?
?: Oh good, I'm getting through clearly! That is good to know.
GT: who is this?
?: I apologize. My name is Doctor Lana Langley. I am a...I suppose you could call it a bio-researcher.
GT: why is your pesterchum handle so weird?
?: My what?
GT: pesterchum. it's the instant messaging program we're using to communicate. how did you get it to display your handle as all question marks like that?
?: Oh! I apologize again! I'm not using this “Pesterchum”.
GT: oh. what are you using?
?: A complex text messenger I dug up in one of...that's not important. What matters is, I'm not talking to you from across just space, but also time. (Don't tell anyone).
GT: ...
GT: wow, the trolls are getting more inventive by the day.
?: I'm sorry, I might not be getting that right. Did you call me a “Troll”?
GT: yeah, a troll. you are trolling me.
??: I'm going to assume you mean I'm playing a prank on you. I apologize. I didn't mean this to be an attempt at deception.
GT: ...so...are you roleplaying? is that was this is?
??: Sure, why not? That will make this easier...and less likely to get me in trouble with my superiors.
GT: weird. so, according to this scenario, “doctor”, why would your superiors get mad?
GT: wait, you said you were talking across time? are you talking to me from the future, and you're breaking some trans-time rule?
??: The past, actually. My computer is uploading messages automatically to the internet, with the directive to feed those messages to your computer. In turn, I've been peering into the future, allowing me to respond to your side of the conversation.
GT: that seems really complicated and weird.
??: You have no idea. Like I said, this isn't my program. I fished it from our archives...which I shouldn't be talking about.
GT: so is there a point to this conversation, besides confusing everyone involved? because it's snowing outside, and i want to get some playing in before it gets dark.
??: Ah, of course! Yes, there is a reason I contacted you. I have need of...an experimental subject. You, John Egbert, happened to be the person I selected at random from the phone book.
GT: an experiment? what kind of experiment?
??: An experiment in Ectobiology!
GT: ectobiology? what, with like ghosts?
??: Of a sort.
GT: because i like ghosts. have you seen ghostbusters?
??: You know, I just did a few months ago, when it was at the cinema. But that is not this. Ectobiology is a method of my own design, which draws upon the ghost imprints that living beings make in time.
GT: time ghosts?!!
??: Indeed! I've been experimenting with the ability to draw upon these ghost imprints, and sample their DNA. I've made strides with the process, and have been able to clone frogs from past impressions.
GT: ...okay, i'm both confused and intrigued. assuming this isn't bullcrap, why would you want to clone frogs from the past?
??: Because it is only a few steps removed from being able to clone Humans from the past. And that has many potential applications, don't you think?
GT: i can...imagine how that would be cool. like, make a clone of all the smartest people in history, and get them in a room together.
??: And be able to solve all the world's problems! And that's just one idea. My idea could revolutionize biology! Why...why did they...
GT: uh
??: Nevermind. I shouldn't talk about that. Back to business. After taking DNA samples of human being from the past, I got to thinking...why not try future humans?
GT: uhhhhhhhh
??: Mister Egbert, would you mind terribly if I took a sample from your future ghost image, to prove I can?
GT: what?!
??: Pretty please? It will help advance science.
GT: i don't know how much i like the sound of that. i mean, i'm not saying i believe you.
GT: because this scenario is patently absurd.
GT: but if i did, i don't think i'd feel comfortable with someone grabbing my dna, and
making a clone of me.

GT: i mean, if it's in the past, who knows? you could end up cloning me, and then that clone would turn out to be ME!

??: What? A clone created from itself? But that would create an ontological paradox. The genetic code wouldn't come from anywhere. And that would just be silly!

GT: i know! which is why i don't want anyone doing that! i don't want to become my own father! i like the father i have!

??: I understand. I won't press the matter.

GT: really? just like that?

??: That's right. Unlike some of my colleagues, I like to think of myself as an ethical practitioner of science...mostly...I told myself I wouldn't try future ecto-reading without the express consent of the subjects in question.

GT: so you're just going to give it up?

??: Of course. Admittedly, though, it means I went to all this trouble to arrange this conversation for nothing...

GT: oh. i'm sorry. is there anything else i can do?

??: Well...is there anyone you'd like to see again? Someone who isn't around anymore?

GT: what do you mean?

??: I just mean...I can clone anyone, theoretically. Is there anyone who isn't alive that you'd like to meet...if only as a clone?

GT: ...

GT: there are a bunch of historical figures i'd love to meet...

GT: ...but I kind of think I ought to ask for someone else.

??: Who?

GT: my nanna. that is, my grandmother, jane egbert.

??: Your grandmother? I see.

GT: i mean, my mom is also gone, and i know my dad misses her. but he also misses nanna, and at least she is a woman i've had the pleasure of meeting, even if it was only when i was real little.

??: Interesting.

GT: plus, i'm pretty sure my nanna was already born back in the same year ghostbusters came out. So you can't go making her into her own mother or something.

??: Ha ha! I see. You, as her next of kin, are consenting to allowing me to capture her temporal ghost, for research and possible cloning?

GT: sure. why not? it's not like i believe any of this anyway. i'm sure nanna would get a kick out of it, were she here. so go nuts.

??: Thank you, Mister Egbert.

GT: anyway, i'm going to go out and play in the snow now.

??: That's fine, John. And perhaps, when you get back, I'll have used the magic of science – and scheduling – to arrive at your door with a clone of your grandmother, by the time you get back!

GT: ha ha, yeah, maybe! well, this was fun, if a bit silly. have a nice day, doctor!

??: The same to you, Mister Egbert.

-- ???????? [??] ceased pestering ghostlyTrickster [GT] --

John rose from the computer, thoroughly perplexed. He surely wouldn't forget this encounter, being so singularly odd. Also, the word Ectobiology appealed to him.

But he business to attend to, in the snow. John ran to the closet, wrapped himself in many layers of warm clothing, and dashed out of the room.

All this, an unseen spirit floated in the middle of the room, watching the boy leave.
Jane Egbert watch him leave with even more puzzlement than the boy felt. Part of this was from covertly feeding on his feelings of confusion and vague enjoyment. A girl had to eat, after all. The greater portion of her confusion, however, was in the content of John's conversation.

Ever since John discovered this...Pester-chum, Jane made a point of looking in every once in a while. A boy's privacy ought to be respected, but Jane was so phenomenally bored. Being dead was many things, but one of them was “frequently boring”. So, though it was a little naughty, Nanna Egbert took her jollies where she could. And the simple dramas of children talking to other children were as good as distraction as any. Especially compared to her own son's Serious Business, whose conversations were wholly uninteresting. How could a bunch of men on a chat log spend so much time discussing plain, serviceable clothing items?

If Nanna were being charitable to herself, however, she'd also say that she watched John's conversations on the off chance it turned out to be someone trying to take advantage of him. The internet was a place full of predators. The Television said so, and she had a hard time believing TVs as advanced as they had now would purvey lies.

John's conversation with this “Doctor Lana Langley” gave Jane pause, however. She didn't know much about computers, so question mark handles or sending messages into the future was beyond her. What grabbed her, however, was this idea of a clone created of her. If the Doctor created a little Jane Harley in the mid eighties...why, the girl would be a twenty year old in the now.

The prospect was silly. But...Jane was talking to her fellow Wraiths, and learning a lot about the stranger aspects of the living world. Wizards, vampires, shapeshifters, fae-souled children, immortal mummies, psychics, and mad scientists. And a million other, stranger things.

The prospect was silly. But...what if?

If nothing else, standing around waiting for the Doctor and clone would help pass the time.

As such, Jane Egbert spent the next fortnight waiting for visitors.

But no one came.

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**October 2010**

“Madam Chaudhri! So good of you to visit! Is our work to your satisfaction?”

The woman held a hand up and clenched her fist.

Harriet Indira Chaudhri smiled. “It's pretty damn good,” she said, her dark, youthful face opening to display a set of straight, white teeth. Her smile faltered, and she scowled. “You know, aside from the obvious.” She turned her head on the man, staring at him with eyeballs almost solid black.

Doctor Chance swallowed, adjusting his glasses. “Yes, well,” he said, shaking on his feet, “we apologize again for the inconvenience. You can rest assured, however, that the discoloration of the sclera was accounted for, and is being looked into.” He smiled. “Our colleagues among the Genengineers estimate that the mutation is well within their ability to correct, with the proper gene therapy.”

The woman stared gravely at the man.

She smiled. “Good,” Chaudhri said, “I'm glad to hear it.” She stretched her arm up, her business
suit clinging flatteringly to her svelte, youthful body. Her long, black hair swayed with the motion, trailing almost to her feet. “In the meantime, I'll just have to see what Q Division can give me, in terms of holo emitters.” She smoothed out her suit. “But really, Doc, what was so urgent that I had to fly down here so soon?”

“Ah! Of course!” Doctor Chance motioned for her to follow him. “There is a slight matter that requires your attention, Madam. If you will, come this way.”

The two stalked down the hallways of the Construct devoted to the Forced Adaptation and Clone Alteration Developmental Eugenicists (FACADE). Its sterile white walls were only broken up by the occasional colored paint, bulletin board, and potted plant. The Syndicate VP suspected the plants were plastic, though she couldn't put it past the Progenitors to genetically modify the shrubberies to release pacifying aroma. Or something to that effect.

One advantage of the Progenitors: when they threw enough abominations against the wall, some of them were bound to stick.

By and by, they approached a security checkpoint. Doctor Chance produced his security clearance, while the Madam wiggled her visitor's pass in front of the guards. She got more than a little kick out of seeing the men check out her behind (even while they conspicuously avoided her disturbing eyes).

Both effects gratified the woman, for personal reasons. Damn, but it was nice to have a new body!

Beyond the door of the checkpoint, they turned a corner and found an elevator.

“We'll be heading down to one of the clone holding levels,” said Doctor Chance, slipping his security card into the slot by the elevator doors. Their ride arrived in moments, and they headed down.

Exiting the lift, they passed another checkpoint (Chaudhri taking the chance to flirt with the guards, for fun), and advanced on to a series of hallways with long glass windows.

“This where you hold your easy bake people, doc?” Chaudhri asked, looking through the windows. Behind each were sterile white rooms, where men and women in various colored jumpsuits milled about, reclined on white furniture, and poured over white desks. Many of the clones had shaved heads, though some had full manes of hair.

“Indeed, this is where we let the clones mill around...socialize,” Chance said, tapping at a tablet computer and looking into each room as they moved. “If the clones aren't to be shipped out immediately, we keep them here while they undergo conditioning.” He looked over his shoulder at the woman, then looked away nervously. “The matter of clones is actually what we wanted to discuss, Madam Chaudhri.”

“What clones?” the woman asked, looking almost bored as she watched the sea of literal Human Resources.

“...yours, Madam.”

The Syndicate exec stopped in her tracks. “Wut.”

“Allow me to explain, Madam!” Doctor Chance said, throwing up his arms.

The woman sighed, starting to move again. “Make it quick, Doc.”
“...you see, Ma'am,” Chance said, “in order to maximize the success of all transfers of high-ranking Union personnel to younger bodies, FACADE produces more than one clone. This allows us to then choose the most viable clone, with the least unfavorable mutations.”

“My eyes are black, Doc,” Chaudhri said, frowning.

“And would you believe that off all six bodies we produced,” Chance said, smiling nervously, “that one had the most acceptable genes?”

The woman cocked an eyebrow.

“...you were the one who insisted on having the transfer as soon as possible, Madam...”

“Ugh, fine,” Chaudhri said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “So you said I had five other clones? What'd you do with 'em?”

“Well...” Doctor Chance said, hissing. “...that's the problem, isn't it? Normally, we'd terminate the superfluous clones. Sometimes, on request, we retain one or two as...backups. In case the one we went with turned out to have some terminal flaw, and a new clone couldn't be grown in time.” He tapped his tablet, then led the woman around a corner. “However, given that genetic similarity leaves one open to...superstitionist attack...more Union personnel forgo the retention of clones as a matter of course. We assumed you had no desire to retain your clones, especially given the unfortunate rash of mutations this batch seemed to have.”

“Mmm hmm...?” Chaudhri hummed. “Bored here. Get to the point, Doc. Time is money.”

“Well, we terminated four of the clones, their biomass recycled for other projects,” Chance said. “Standard procedure. But the fifth...well...” He stopped in front of another set of windows, and waved at them. “See for yourself.”

Madam Chaudhri stepped in front of the window, and froze.

Inside the room were two young girls, both looking ten years old. One of them was Caucasian, with short black hair, freckles, and a set of buck teeth. The other was Indian, also with black hair, this currently reaching down to her shoulders. The former was currently engaged in braiding the latter's hair.

The second girl, Chaudhri immediately recognized. It was the face she would see in the mirror when she was a child, roughly two centuries ago.

“...why's she so young?” Chaudhri said, after a moment of silence. “Mine came out of the tube a grown ass woman.”

“Accelerated aging,” Doctor Chance said, looking in on the girls. “The clones began in the fetal stage, and can be brought out in infancy. We accelerate their growth for convenience sake.” He frowned, hissing. “Ssss...problem is, a month ago or so, there was a malfunction in the tube of that one. We were forced to take her out early. Normally, we'd just pop her back in once the malfunction was fixed...but...”

“But?”

“We lost track of her...”

“How?” Chaudhri said, scowling. “She'd be a baby, in mind if not body. How did you lose track of her?”
“We perform standard sleep teaching methods on all clones, Madam Chaudhri,” Chance said, cocking his head, “just to get them on their feet...literally, they need it to walk. As well as to understand and speak language, and a number of basic skills. This is performed while they are in the tubes, so if anything like a malfunction happens – or we need to evacuate the lab – they can be moved and directed. Instead of being dead weight. Naturally, this initial programming is removed right before the transfer of minds, because it's no longer needed. Obviously.”

“So...what?” Chaudhri said, cocking an eyebrow. “You plopped her down beside the machine, told her to stay put...and she just wandered off?”

“...basically,” Chance said, scratching his head. “She got as far as the front door before security managed to catch her. We still don't know how she managed to get that far, but our best security analysts are hard at work figuring it out.”

“Hmm...” Chaudhri said, leaning close to the glass. “...so she's a clever one.”

“Almost certainly,” Doctor Chance said. “She was missing for an hour before she was spotted making a break for the door. Somehow in that time, she learned at least three swear words that are NOT in the sleep teacher.” He removed his glasses and rubbed his face, groaning.

“Who's the other girl?” the woman said. “Another clone?”

“Hmm? Oh!” Chance smiled. “Yes. That's Jane, one of my personal projects.”

“Jane?” said the Syndicate exec.

“It's a whole story,” Doctor Chance said. He then proceeded to tell that story. “Over a decade ago, when I was just starting out in FACADE, I discovered a genetic sample confiscated from the lab of a defector. Another FACADE researcher, who apparently ran off after embezzling funding for a private project. It was a jar of green slime, labeled with the word 'Jane' on a strip of masking tape.”

“Uh huh...” Chaudhri said, no longer listening. She stared at her clone, watching the child laugh and talk with the girl behind her.

“Upon testing the slime, it turned out to be an unknown, but inert, biomass,” Chance continued, staring at the white girl inside the room. “But it had DNA. Human DNA. So, as a way of proving myself valuable enough to advance up in FACADE, I sequenced the DNA, and turned it into a clone. Just to prove I could.” He smiled. “Jane is a part of my ongoing experiment, to see if the clone made from that genetic slurry was at all viable.

“Heh heh...you know, it's funny. But I've grown kind of attached to her. She's sort of like my own daughter...” Chance shook his head, smiling. “Silly, isn't it?”

“...daughter...” Chaudhri mumbled.

She pressed her hand against the glass, watching that thin, bird-like little girl. Smiling teeth like a shark.

Chaudhri could see why the girl was rejected. Upon further study, the girl's eyes were white. The pupils were barely visible, a dull, milky gray.

“...is she blind?” Chaudhri asked.

“Hmm? Oh, you mean your clone!” Doctor Chance said, looking over to the woman. “No, she's not blind. Not completely. We think she might need corrective lenses, but she can see well enough. The
mutations she exhibit stop at slightly decreased visual acuity. Obviously, this was less than ideal, so she was slated for termination.”

The woman flinched, leaning against the glass. “Termination?”

“Well she was,” Chance said, shrugging. “Problem was, when the guards who caught her heard about it, they refused to give her up. Said they wouldn't allow the girl to be killed.”

“An attack of conscience?” Chaudhri said, snorting. “But you lot terminate inconvenient clones all the time. What gives?”

“Those guards worked the upper levels,” Chance said. “They aren't involved in that. Even when they know that it happens intellectually, it's easier to rationalize away clone death when you never see the clones. And when the clones aren't little girls that laugh at you and called you...names...” He raised his hands and shook his head. “We had to agree to forgo termination, before we could get her back. Obviously, those guards have received re-conditioning, and we're free to do so now. But...well, the staff and I decided we probably ought to ask you first.” He smiled. “You commissioned her, after all.”

“I want to talk to her.”

“...pardon?” Doctor Chance said.

The Syndicate VP turned to face the doctor. She was grinning.

“I want to talk to her. Now.”

Karkat Vantas threw himself on his bed. His regular, normal bed, in his regular, normal room. Burying his weary face into the pillow, he reflected on the past several hours. Much as Grand Elder tried to talk everyone down from constant rituals and miracle working, the other Elders insisted on a special ceremony commemorating his “retreat into reflective self-seclusion”.

He sat up, looking down at the pillow. The cloth pillowcase was smeared with red. Karkat rubbed his eyes, looking at the crimson eyeshadow that came away on his fingers. He sighed, plopping back down.

“Apakah anda merasa baik, pria kecil?”

Karkat looked up, seeing the mustachioed old Indonesian standing in the doorway. His arms were crossed, eyebrows turned in concern.

He nodded. “Ya, ayah kepiting.”

The old man nodded, smiling. Karkat's often crabby guardian waved at him. “Mimpi manis, Karkat.” He drifted from the doorway, disappearing.

The Night of the World shut his eyes and sighed, rubbing his cheek against the pillow. Hopefully, a sense of normalcy would return. This was Karkat's fervent hope, every time he returned from the underground tunnels that provided the local Cult it's headquarters. Every Bask Day, ceremony...even his birthday. Cult business reached for him at every turn. Karkat relished the return home, when he could put the matters of faith, sanctified blood, and endless prostrate asses behind him. Yearned for a homecoming, during each Cult function. It was his way of maintaining
sanity in the face of the absolute madness that was his birthright. He could build a wall between the two worlds, and keep his fragile life standing.

But...Karkat wasn't sure it would work this time.

He could feel it against his skin. The cloth of the sheets, pillowcases, blankets. Under his fingers, he sensed a wealth of information. Rubbing his makeup-smeared fingers together, he could parse out the minerals and plant dyes that made his eyeshadow. Focusing down, he studied the spirals of the box spring under his mattress, without seeing it. Sensed the minute impurities in the metal.

Karkat pushed the subtle tick of information away, closing himself off from the supernatural awareness. It used to distress him, being able to study every object (or person) that brushed against his skin. Now it only distracted him.

He sighed, rubbing his face. Walls couldn't be built like they were anymore. Karkat's whole life was Cult insanity now. And there was no escaping it – no running away. More than ever before, the young messianic figure felt the palpable chains of obligation binding him. Wrapped around his neck, drawing him along. As unreasonable as they often were, his followers were lost without their Sufferer Reborn. Grand Elder implied as much. The other Elders proclaimed as much. The Cultists prayed as much. Even Karkat's own subconscious – or the ancestral memory of the Penderita – taught as much, in Karkat's dreams.

The Healer of the Dying breathed deep, curling in on himself. Obligation smothered him, an oppressive weight that pressed in on him...and out, from his blood.

“Ping!”

He looked up, blinking. Karkat squirmed on the bed and dug the phone from his pocket.

That's right. He wasn't far underground, and outside the city limits. Karkat actually had signal here. Will the miracles never cease?

“Oh god...” he muttered, eyes going wide. “...so many messages!”

Those idiots. All his “friends”. His inbox was filled with an outpouring of support. Holy shit, was that a message from Nepeta?! He hadn't talked to her in so long. Even Gamzee got off his reefer-addled ass and sent him messages.

Shit. Long messages. Good luck reading all that barely legible, barely intelligible text, Future Karkat.

His chest felt tight. He sniffed, rubbing his eyes. They were so wet.

Karkat climbed off the bed, and took a seat at his desk. In moments, the computer was on, and he could peruse the series of Pesterchum messages he was inundated with, without making his eyes bleed holy blood from eye strain.

His fingers danced over the keys, as he began composing replies. Slowly, the pressure in his chest began to ease.

Maybe he couldn't create the same walls between his life as Cult Figurehead and Normal Loser. But maybe, with time and support...he could learn to find a new arrangement...
“Vriska did WHAT!?"

“Jane! Can you come out for a moment!”

“Coming!”

Doctor Chance collected Jane when she exited the room, ushering her into the hallway. “Wait here a moment, will you Jane?”

“Okay,” Jane said, nodding. She looked up at the woman standing with Doctor Chance. “...who are you?”

Madam Chaudhri smirked. “Someone very important, kid.” She peeked into the room, seeing Doctor Chance talking to the other little girl. Said girl looked kind of bummed.

“...you friends with that girl?” Chaudhri asked.

Jane nodded. “We’ve had a lot of fun. I’ve been teaching her all the games, and how to color with crayons. And how to braid hair, although I don’t have enough hair to really braid...” The girl looked at the floor sheepishly, stroking her sparse ebony locks. She shot a glance up at the woman. “...you have a whole lot of hair.”

“Yep,” Chaudhri said, smirking. “Lot of hair.” She ran her hand through the raven-colored strands.

Doctor Chance returned, nodding to the Syndicate exec. “You can go in now,” he said. Turning to Jane, he held out a hand. “Why don’t we go get you some juice?”

Jane smiled. “Okay!” she said, taking the man's hand and allowing herself to be led away.

Harriet Indira Chaudhri took a breath and sighed. Drawing upon her two centuries of experience, she put her game face on. The effect might be compromised slightly by her mostly black eyes. Hopefully the girl wouldn't be too used to normative reality that she'd find such a thing weird. Living in the middle of a FACADE lab is bound to skew one's standards of “normal”.

As she entered the room and shut the door behind her, the woman felt her heart flutter.

The girl sat up in attention, a look of surprise changing to one of fascination.

Chaudhri sauntered over, hand on one hip. She smiled down at the girl. “Sup, gurl?”

The tike blinked rapidly, staring into the woman's eyes. White, meeting black. She flinched, slouching down and frowning. “Who you?” she grumbled, still not letting her eyes wander from the woman.

Oh man, the girl was trying to act tough and aloof. How adorable! The Syndicate woman smirked. She looked down. “Mind if I sit down?”

“...free lab...” the girl said, looking away.

“Ha! Good one!” the woman said, pulling out the tiny white kid's chair and sitting down. Even sitting, she towered over the little white table between them. “My name's Chaudhri. Madam Chaudhri.” She leaned forward, hands clasped in her lap. “Do you have a name?”

The girl squirmed in her chair, looking at the table. She frowned. “...no.”
“You don't?” the woman said, frowning. “Come on...everybody got a name.”

“Well I fucking don't!” the girl snapped, barking up at the Syndicate woman. “Everybody else has a name, but I don't! So fuck you!”

The woman blinked, then snorted. “Ha! That's some fucking language you got there, gurl!” She smiled. “So they never gave you a name, huh? That bites.”

“I know...” the girl said, sitting back. Her lips turned up at the edges a moment, then she frowned. “All they ever say is 'hey you' or 'report to chamber 11, subject'. Sometimes Doctor Chance calls me number four, but four's a number. And numbers can't be names. So I don't have one.”

A weight formed in Chaudhri’s chest. She had control enough of herself that she didn't allow her mask to slip, but she did allow a softness to come to her smile. “...would you like a name?”

The girl squirmed in her seat, looking around. “...maybe...”

“Gurl...do you know who I am?” the woman said, tapping her foot on the ground.

Shrug. “I dunno. Someone important?”

“Someone really damn important,” Chaudhri said, smiling. “Down here, the Progenitors do science. But getting that wicked science done takes money. That's where I come in. I'm a part of the Syndicate, and the Syndicate makes money. A lot of money.”

“...money?” the girl said, sitting up. She had a blank look on her face, like the woman just spoke to her in straight Malayalam.

“It's how we exchange for goods and services,” the woman said. “It's what makes the world go 'round. You need money to get what you want, money to make things happen. Cash, moola, greenbacks, bucks, dosh.”

“Oh! You mean currency!” the girl said, lighting up. “I know that word!”

“Yeah, currency,” Chaudhri said. “Well, now you know a bunch new words for it. And words, like money, are the key to power.” She smiled.

Oh man, look at the kid, hanging on her every word. A regular old convert to the worship of the Holy Dosh.

What was this feeling, in Chaudhri's withered heart? This warm, fuzzy feeling, that made her want to take the kid into her arms and...ugh...snuggle!? Chaudhri shuddered internally.

Could this be...maternal instinct? It was a disturbing thought for Chaudhri...but not without its appeal. It felt good. She was almost sure she felt it before, so many years ago. Her descendents – like pious little Feferi – were living testimonials to the fact that she'd been a mother, once.

But...wow, didn't her work get in the way. Chaudhri didn't regret a single minute of her time in the Syndicate. She wasn't a woman who allowed herself to be held back by regrets. But still...this was a feeling she missed...

The woman played with a strand of her long, black hair. “I heard tell, you got all the way to the front of the building before they caught you. That true?”

The girl blushed sheepishly, looking down to the ground. “...yeah...the Doctor said it was wrong,


“what I did...”

“I don't mean to judge, kid,” the woman said, shrugging. “Although, I gotta know. What made you try to escape? I promise I won't laugh or get you in more trouble.”

Rubbing her little hands together, the girl looked up. Looked up with those milky white eyes, with only a little gray and some outlines betraying sight. “...when I was in the tube, I learned things. But...I also dreamed...” She frowned. “I dreamed that if I didn't run, I would die. It...made me really scared.”

“...your dreams told you that?” Chaudhri frowned.

“I shouldn't be talking about it!” the girl said, curling in on herself. “The Doctor said I shouldn't be talking about my dreams. And especially I shouldn't say they told me things. That it was just the sleep teacher. That me talking about my dreams was...superstitionist?”

“That's a big word,” Chaudhri said, nodding.

“I don't know what it means.”

“It means a user of magic.”

“Magic? I don't know what that means either...”

“D'aw!” the woman said, smiling. This child was precious! “It doesn't matter, because it's fake anyway. So, you got out of the lab, and snuck all the way to the exit?”

The girl nodded. “It was really hard, but...I figured out how to hide, and sneak around the guards when they weren't looking. Or when they left the door open a little too long.”

“You are a clever one, aren't you?” Chaudhri said. Her heart was racing. “I like you, kid. You remind me a lot of me when I was younger.”

“I do?” the girl said. A little smile formed on her face. “You really think so?”

“Damn right, I do,” the woman said, nodding. “Where do you think you came from?”

“Uh...the doctors made me?” the girl said, tilting her head.

“Yeah they did. But only because I asked them to.”

The girl's white eyes grew wide.

“You were grown from one of my cells,” Chaudhri said, smiling. “You're my clone. So I know for a fact you're clever. You're just like me.”

The girl gasped, face lighting up. “Really?!”

The woman nodded. “So hey...in honor of proving yourself so resourceful...how about I give you a name?”

Oh man, the girl was practically vibrating with excitement. Totes adorbs!

“I can have a name?!” she cried, face ecstatic with awe. “What is it?!”

“I'm gonna give you a name near and dear to my heart,” the Syndicate woman said, leaning
Rose Lalonde looked up. “Hmm?” she grunted.

John Egbert wandered into the observatory, face craning back to take in the high ceiling, and the enormous telescope sticking down from a hole. “Wow...so this is the telescope?” he said, padding forward in his blue and green pajamas.

The young woman nodded. “Yes,” Rose said, patting the small end of the cylinder. “According to mother, the late Doctor Langley had this observatory installed to the house. It was a request from my father, apparently.”

“Huh,” John said. He walked over, looking down at the table at Rose's side. “What's with the notebook? Does it have something to do with stargazing? Or is it a magic thing?”

Rose smiled, stooping down to peek through the lens. “It has everything to do with both stargazing and magic,” she said. She fiddled with knobs and levers, and the telescope shifted incrementally. “I believe I already introduced you to the phrase 'As Above, So Below'?”

“I think so.”

“That is the idea,” Rose said. “It applies to everything in creation, this principle. All things are connected, including – nay, especially – the stars. As such, Hermetic rituals often take celestial alignment into account. The placement of planets in their orbit, the shift of the constellations.”

“So, Astronomy?” John said, looking up at what stars he could see through the hole in the domed ceiling.

“ Astrology,” Rose said. “Not merely base horoscopes, like from a newspaper. Different magic is more or less powerful, depending on the placement of stars. As such, to master ritual work, I must perform them when their corresponding planets are in the right Zodiacal signs. Only then will I align myself to the music of the spheres.”

John blinked. “Uh...”

“It's alright, John,” Rose said, smiling. She looked up at him. “You aren't obligated to understand everything.”

“Yeah, but I'd like to understand a lot of things,” John said, displaying his hands. “There's so much of magic I just don't get. So many styles, techniques, and philosophies. I'm a chaos magician, so I should at least have a broad base of knowledge.”

“What are you studying now?” Rose said.

“Jade has been showing me a lot of old copies of this weird science journal great uncle Jake used to collect,” he said.

“Paradigma,” Rose said, nodding. “She told me about it, too. It's nice to see so much energy being put into a subject matter. And so much passion. What articles I've read are fascinating. It's like a particularly spirited internet forum, except with editors. So, in many ways objectively better than
“Yeah!” John said, smiling. “I'm thinking of trying my hand at inventing. I don't think I'll go full techno-mage, but...”

“But?” Rose said, smiling. She had an idea where this was going.

“But...I'd like to be able to make a proton pack,” John said, lighting up. “It would be so cool! A real Ghostbuster!”

The young woman giggled, covering her mouth. “Well, Bust what thou wilt, shall be the whole of the law.”

The two laughed together.

Eventually, Rose turned back to the telescope.

John scratched the back of his head. “...so your mom tells me you intend to join this...Order of Hermes?”

“If they'll have me,” Rose said, making notes with a pencil on the notebook besides her.

“They'd be crazy not to let you join,” John said, shaking his fists. “Any group of stuffy old wizards who wouldn't take you is all the poorer for it, and not worth worrying about.”

Rose went very quiet, frowning. “...I just don't want my...infirmity to get in the way. To reflect poorly on the Order...on my father...on you three...”

“Nonsense!” John said, with the tone of one with absolute, unquestionable authority. “You aren't any less because you haven't Awakened. You work a lot harder than me, and should be respected for that.” He smiled. “Plus...you're a brilliant girl, Rose. You'll wake up, sooner or later.”

“...you think so?” Rose said, turning to face him.

“I do,” John said, nodding. “You told me yourself, that a Magus is so because of a honed Will. Well, you have the strength and persistence to have one of those. If anyone can study and research and tease Enlightenment out of non-Awakened...stuff...it's you.”

Rose smiled. “Thank you, John. That means a lot to me.”

The young woman turned back to her telescope. John, meanwhile, stretched his arms over his head. “Anyway...” he yawned, scratching his back, “...I'm going to go back to bed. You staying up?”

“Just until I have the positions of all the constellations and planets firmly grasped in my head,” Rose said, nodding. “At least, the ones I can see right now. If I'm to achieve my own Enlightenment, I need to understand in a concrete manner. Not just from a book or star chart.”

“Sounds good,” John said. He turned around and headed for the observatory door. He waved backwards. “Good night, Rose!”

“Good night, John!” Rose called, smiling and keeping eye pointed heavenward.

And as Rose gazed upon the infinite sea of white dots...for the briefest moment, she thought she saw an emerald star far in the distance.

And for the briefest moment, the Green Sun peeked down upon her and all of creation. It regarded
Thus ends Book 1. I don't have any fancy titles to append onto it.

Like I've said before, we'll be taking a break between Book 1 and Book 2, to handle some character stories. The World of Darkness is an enormous place, and there are many fascinating people in it.

I thank you all for reading, and hope to see you continue to follow me through this surreal, heady journey of symbolism, mysticism, violence, and humanity.

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