How They Met Themselves
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Summary

Rhys wants to change Pandora. He wants to make things better, build things up. He wants, more than anything, to prove Jack wrong.

Tim just wants to get paid.
“God save me from funny robots.” Tim loaded the SMG by feel, snapping the clip home.

The funny robot in question dragged itself down the pass between the buildings, spewing deadpan pained noises from its busted speakers in between bursts of static and shock jock patter from the local radio. A broken-ass loaderbot, the fourth one he’d seen since infiltrating the compound. They still reacted to him, even after all these years, although their programming had taken a bad hit from whatever junkyard amateur hackers Malady had working for her. For whatever reason, they had them picking up bootleg radio waves.

He took sight, squeezed the trigger. Corrosive payload ate away at the armoured plating. The loaderbot went down with a warble and burst of “—keep your head between your ears because we’re comin’ atcha—“ before exploding. They always fucking explode.

Tim heard a shout of “Goddamn mercs!”, giving him enough time to duck around the open doorway, before he caught sight of the other creatures that lurked in these halls.
A bruise lumbered into view, scarred face pulled in a sneer, cybernetic arms spewing a shower of sparks. He slammed his massive, three-fingered fist—the fucking thing looked like he’d ripped it from construction equipment—onto the ground, breaking the stone and sending shockwaves to the scrap metal pole house, shaking it like a coconut tree. The digistruct he’d stowed up there lost his balance and fell with a shatter of blue light. Tim felt the familiar pinch in his temple that signified a lost ‘struct. One down.

Bandits poured out from their hidey holes, spraying the landscape with buckshot and bullets. Tim risked a peek and caught sight of at least two bad guys with metal stuck to the side of their skulls like a crown of tetanus and rust before a burst of bullets sent him back into cover. Two cybermen, and probably more behind them.

“Come out, little one!”

And the bruise with a fucking loader arm. Malady’s little franken-monsters of the future. Whatever she’d had done to the loaderbots was nothing compared to what she did to her flesh-and-blood followers.

“Report,” Tim snapped.

“Bad news, pumpkin,” came the simpered response. “Two more scavenged loader bots, at least seven cyber-bandits, the big boy bruiser, and something even bigger comin’ down the pike. And more on their way,” his other self said more cheerfully than the situation warranted.

“Count your ammo,” Tim said.

“Sure thing, kitten. But unless you pull out another Jack to replace the one who just ate dirt, things could get ugly.” The bruise howled, as though on cue. “Uglier.”

Tim knew he was right, much as he loathed to ever admit it. But he also knew by the sharp pain that only spread through his sinuses, that he couldn’t afford another digistruct. Not for a while.

He grabbed his machine gun, leaned out, and took his shot. Three bandits screamed in agony, electricity coursing through their bodies, handily conducted by their metal upgrades. One fell. Two cracks from a sniper rifle finished the other two. It felt good, but at the cost of revealing his position.

The big bruise lumbered to a run, and the drawled “Give us yer stuff!” told him the nomad (definitely a fucking nomad, fuck those guys) wasn’t far behind.

Tim let the bruise charge, dodged to the side, running backwards and unleashing an explosive payload from his double-barrel. The bruise staggered like Tim had flicked water in his face and swung his huge fuck-off arm while Tim fumbled with the reload. The bruise just barely caught him, and the edge of the strike hit him hard enough to fling him back a few feet. His shield flickered and died with the impact.

Laughter crackled through his ECHO. Even after forcing their coding into using the same voice modulators he used, he could still hear that familiar contempt. He bit his tongue before he could order the digistruct to kill itself out of spite.

The bruise was still coming, but at least Tim’s shotgun was loaded. He raised it—

His ECHO released another burst of static. “Tim! What’s going on? Have you found Rhys yet?”

The bruise raised his arm, stumbling with the weight of it. Tim fired—six shots in two bursts at close range. The bruise didn’t even have time to scream. Blood fell like warm summer rain and Tim had
enough experience to close his mouth and eyes before the worst of it, but it would never be quick enough.

"Vaughn." He spat out the taste of salt and metal. "I'm working on it." He flicked the switch to the digistruct's frequency. "Was that the last of them?"

The thundershot crack of a sniper bullet was answer enough. "What part of 'more on their way' didn't you get? I've got 20 rounds left, by the way."

Tim stood up, vision swimming. Keeping the digistruct going this long felt like he was pulling a muscle in his head and chest. He'd pay for it worse, later. He took a breath, tried to tell himself that it helped, and broke the shotgun open.

Another crack. "19. And one less bad guy."

Tim ran down the hall, reloading with steady hands. He snapped the gun shut and unloaded explosive buckshot into the face and head of a bandit psycho with an antenna sticking out of his ear. He spotted the ripped open wall that lead to a chamber, where Malady had holed herself up good, and went for it.

It was tedious going with only one extra pair of hands, but he managed. He knew he was in the right place when his path lead into a walkway overseeing a massive, open room with a platform in the centre. He hugged the wall, wedged himself behind a row of lockers and peered out. There was a lot of equipment lying around, pieces of what looked like former loaderbots and—Tim realised with a sinking feeling in his stomach—a few clap-trap units.

"Jesus. What kind of maniac sticks clap-trap parts into people? There's twisted, and then there's twisted."

"Tell me you're in position."

"Allllllmost!"

Blood covered the floor, dripping from the grating. Malady stood in the centre of it all, looking like a fever dream. She had enough silver and baubles stuck to her person to blind the average onlooker. As far as strategies went, it wasn’t a bad one. Even through the SMG’s scope, the glare her robobacketremonts put off made Tim wince. Two of her bandits, outfitted in what looked like modified loaderbot chassis, flanked her on either side.

After nearly a half-decade playing vault hunter on Pandora, it took a lot to turn Tim’s stomach, but the sight of scabbed flesh around the bulky cybernetics came close. Malady’d saved the best mods for her personal body guards, it seemed.

Given all those distractions, it was easy to miss the scrappy kid in the black and gold suit strung up from the ceiling. Head slumped against his chest. Not moving and completely exposed.

"Oh, fuck me."

"Tim?" Of course Vaughn picked now to check in. "Tim, please talk to me. Have you found him yet?"

"I'm in position and holy crap that kid is really screwed." The digistruct laughed. "Seriously, one stray shot and he's a goner. Assuming he ain't already dead."

"Tim?"
Suddenly, the impending firefight looked like a really bad idea. He couldn’t take Malady and her goons out with the hostage strung up like a pinata. The digistruct was right, the bastard. One stray bullet and it was over.

“Tim?! Seriously, man, what’s happening? Is Rhys—”

“Uhh, you’re… breaking up.” Tim killed the line, cutting Vaughn off mid-sputter.

Seven—no, eight hours ago, Tim found himself in another bandit camp, dressed in clean clothes, standing upright and out in the open without a gun in his hands. It wasn’t Tim’s first visit, but the novelty of it all still hadn’t worn off yet. The Children of Helios were a strange bunch. They were pacifists, or as close as you could get to being pacifist on Pandora. Most of them weren’t even armed. Defending the camp was largely handled by the jury-rigged remains of the satellite’s defensive systems. That same defensive systems that welcomed Tim to Helios before the massive doors slid open with only a small shower of sparks.

The bandit king waited for him on the other side, hands folded behind his back and impressive chest thrust forward. His bare, red-smeared chest. Tim gave a low whistle.

“Look at you, all decked out like a proper killer. Last time I saw you, you were still trying to make that pocket protector work.”

“Yeah. It, uh. It broke.”

“Good riddance.” Tim clapped him on the shoulder. “You look like a man that could use someone’s scalp as a shower cap.”

It was difficult to see the flush beneath the beard, but Tim picked up on the pink around the bridge of his nose. “Thanks. I mean—I wouldn’t. Not ever, not even for a lot of money. But thanks.”

A few of the former corporate lackeys flanking Vaughn exchanged amused looks. Tim’s head twitched in their direction, and they looked at their feet.

“So, what’s this about a job?” he asked.

“I should warn you, this one’s a little trickier than the last few I gave you,” Vaughn said, once they were alone in his office.

“I don’t know if you heard, Vaughn, but tricky jobs are sort of my thing,” Tim said.

Vaughn shot him a brief look before he busied himself with the stack of ECHO tablets. “Yeah, I heard some things. About the sort of stuff you do. The massacres, and um, smoking craters were people used to live.”

“Bad people, Vaughn. Bad people lived there, the sort of people who’d take your lovely camp here and turn it into a waterpark of blood and viscera. What am I looking at here?” Tim asked as Vaughn held out an ECHO.

“A compound, about a half-day’s ride from the closest fast travel.”

“Filled with lovely people, I’m assuming, who are more than happy to cooperate and listen to reason?”

“No. Filled with bad people.” Vaughn pushed his glasses up.
“Ah, worth a shot.” Tim flicked two fingers across the screen, zooming into a likely entry point on the west wall. “What am I getting for you this time?”

“A friend of mine. Here—” He reached forward to touch the screen and Tim stiffened, hand falling to his gun out of instinct. Vaughn didn’t seem to notice, or maybe didn’t care. “His name is Rhys. He was last seen outside this bandit encampment a few days ago.”

A portrait of a man with mismatched eyes and a startled look on his face superimposed over the map.

“Nice haircut.”

“He was one of us, before Helios fell. And this is the last I heard of him.” Vaughn tapped the ECHO. The speakers emitted a soft hiss before a voice spoke.

“—close this time, sure of it. Listen, the place is crawling with… well, they look like bandits but there’s—they’ve got these metal attachments. Christ, Vaughn, they look like cybernetics but they’re all infected. How they aren’t all dead from sepsis and tetanus is a mystery, but they’re not.” There was a clip in the recording, and Rhys’ continued. “I’m nearly into their transmissions. I’ll let you know what I hear. If you don’t hear from me by tomorrow—” Another clip, and the audio file went dead.

“A couple hours later, I got this.” The speakers hissed again, and a woman’s rough voice began to speak.

“—know this thing is working? Of course it’s working, you idiot!” A smack, a howl of pain. “Listen, this is Malady of the Silver Hand. I’ll make this quick. We found your pretty boy sneaking around our camp. We’re taking care of him but our hospitality only extends so far. I know you Children of Helios have got yourselves set up nice and cozy in that broken-ass satellite, and I bet you can get your hands on some primo tech and—”

“Money! Ask for money! Lots of—” Another smack.

“Who said you could talk?” More hits, what sounded like a boot being put to someone’s chest in Tim’s expert opinion. “He’s right though. We want money too. Let’s say $10,000. Delivered in 24 hours or we start pulling your boy apart for scrap.”

“Malady,” Tim said.

“Yeah. You know her?”

“Enough to know she’s bad news.” A real up-and-comer on the scene, one of many since Vallory met the wrong end of a deal and left a hole behind in the underworld’s upper echelons that freak shows like Malady have been scrambling to fill.

“But you’ll do it? Only, I need to know kind of soon. Really soon. You were the closest agent I could get a hold of, everyone else is at least a day away and if Rhys has gone and gotten himself captured by bandits and I’ve only got a day to get someone down there before—”

“Take a breath, boss.” Tim made a show of scratching the underside of his jaw while he turned things over in his mind. What the hell was with that amateurish edit? What was a scrawny thing like Rhys doing, scouting near a bandit camp on his own? And what was it he said that Vaughn didn’t want him to hear?

If Tim still had a soul, he might’ve felt betrayed. Hurt. He liked Vaughn. Thought they worked well together. Mostly, he felt insulted that Vaughn didn’t think he’d notice.
“That ten thou she’s asking for. You’ve got it?”

Vaughn winced. “Not even close. I don’t know what she’s heard, but we’ve barely got half that.”

“I thought Hyperion was loaded?”

“Yeah, but not in liquid assets stored in locked vaults we could just raid when the dust settled,” Vaugh said, waving his hand through the air.

Tim stood, stretching his arms above his head. “Well, I’ll need it if—hah, when things get rough. I’ll bring back half when I’m done.”

“W-what?” Vaughn sputtered. “You want half? That’s—that’s half of this entire colony’s funds! That’s—insane! We’ll die in a month!”

“Then find someone else.”

Vaughn still had a soul, apparently, if the look of utter betrayal he gave Tim was any indication.

Tim rolled his eyes, the gesture going unseen behind his mask. “Alright, fine. Jesus. How about this: I take a grand now, and you can pay me the rest in a month.”

Vaughn stopped gaping. “Six months, and you can have $500 now and $500 when you deliver Rhys.”

“I’ll take $700 now, and you can pay me back in two months.”

“$600 and I said six months. Honestly, how do you expect me to raise enough funds in such a short time?”

Tim pushed a breath out slowly. “Fine. You got yourself a deal, boss.” They shook on it, Vaughn holding Tim’s hand gingerly, like it was a snake that might bite him. “Just to be clear—you want this Rhys back alive, right?”

“Of course!”

“Just checking. Hey, this is Pandora, Vaughn. People out here can get awful mercenary.” Tim felt himself smile, the same smarmy smile that looked out from hundreds of posters still scattered across the borderlands.


Rhys wasn’t dead. Tim would not accept that. If he was dead, that meant Tim didn’t get the rest of his money, which would make Tim very unhappy. And the universe owed Tim a clean payout for a job well done, goddammit.

A shimmer in the air caught his eye, and he just spotted the digistruct before it took position on the strut opposite.

“So, what are we doing here, Timtam?”

He had to get the hostage down safely before he could even think of taking on Malady. Which meant he had to come up with a plan.

“What’s your count?” he asked.
“Two.”

Tim nearly spat. “Are you kidding me? Two bullets? Why didn’t you scrounge fresh ammo on the way in?”

“Guess I was a little preoccupied making sure you didn’t get your very attractive head blown off.”

Tim cursed. Malady held her sparkling wrist up to her mouth, muttering into one of the baubles she’d stuck there. Tim caught a brief glance of her troubled expression before the device caught the light and nearly blinded him. He could hear the faint chatter of whatever forces they hadn’t killed, their voices bouncing off the metal walls behind him. He cursed again, pouring more feeling into it.

“Seriously, what are we doing here? I can’t tell if Schrödinger’s hostage is breathing or not.”

“You stay put and wait for my signal. Aim for her head.”

“Duh. What are you gonna do?”

Tim didn’t reply. He lowered his gun and stepped out into the open. A psycho caught sight of him before he could so much as open his mouth, but a shot from the hip took him down mid-scream. The body fell forward, sliding off the railing and onto the ground. Everyone went silent.

“That’s one way to get an audience,” he muttered.

“You!” Malady strode forward, flashing like a disco ball in a strobe factory. Tim squinted and tried to keep her in view. “You’re the scum that’s been killing all my boys!”

“That’s me.” Tim winced. Not the smoothest introduction he could have hoped for, but too late now. “I’m here for this guy!” He gestured to the limp form of the hostage with his free hand. “So, you know. Hand him over.”

She sneered. Tim was entirely unsurprised to see the golden teeth through the glare. “What is this? You come into my factory, kill my men, and now you’re coming out to ask nicely if we’ll give up the hostage?”

“I tried asking nicely outside, but no one could hear me over the screaming.”

The loader bandit beside her let out a growl. He stepped forward in a whir of machinery and raised his arms. “Why don’t you come down here and try that line again, funny man?”

“Yeah!” Crony #2 chimed in with a shake of his metal fist. “And then we’ll tear your legs off!”

As witty repartee went, it was better than he expected.

Malady raised her hand and the two cyborgs fell silent. “You’re here from Helios? You’re Hyperion?”

Both Tim and his digistruct laughed, for entirely different reasons.

“Definitely not,” he said. “Didn’t you hear your boys? I’m a goddamn merc, lady.”

“I got her head. I think. Hard to get her in the scope. Just say the word.”

That’s not what Tim wanted to hear. He needed a sure-fire hit. He grit his teeth.

“You look Hyperion,” she said, tapping her talon against her chin. “You look expensive. That mask
... You got some reason to hide your face, honey?"

"You’re not getting it. I didn’t actually come out here for a tea party.” Tim raised his weapon. “Hand over the hostage and you can all keep your organs inside your skin.”

Malady smiled slowly. “Oh, you’ve made a mistake, sweetcheeks. All that huffing and puffing, and yet I don’t think my house is gonna blow down. You know why?”

Tim aimed down the scope. Just as his clone said, she glittered and flashed between his crosshairs. An awful shot.

“Uh, Timmy? What are you waiting for, pumpkin?”

“Because if you could have done it, you would have. You came out to ask me sweetly instead. Oh, baby, you showed us your hand.” She patted Crony #2 on his chassis. “Take him alive, if you can. I think I can make something of him.”

“Now,” Tim said.

A few things happened next, almost all at the same time.

The digistruct fired once, and then again. The first bullet cleaved a path through the air and breezed past Malady’s cheek as she turned—just a moment too late. The second caught her in the shoulder, the force of it spun her around. She screamed.

Her boys had lumbered forward, abandoning their boss in their efforts to clamber up to the hanging pathway.

Tim raised his gun and fired corrosive bullets into the chain holding the hostage. He did this at a run, before vaulting over the railing. The bullets took a second to work their way through the metal—enough time for Tim to grab the hostage mid-air, slap a scavenged shield onto his back, and fall.

Helios’ plummet had done a lot to change the landscape, and not just because the falling debris had ripped open massive scars into Pandora’s surface. A few people, those more inclined to whipping up quasi-religious fervour around the flimsiest premises, saw the fall as a sign of the end times and took measures. Tim hadn’t seen it himself, but apparently the horizon out on the Fridge had been dotted with the orange glow of camps going up like Roman candles, twisted murder-suicide pacts sparking flames, leaving behind the ashes of people determined not to see where it all would end up. Those people had been few and far, though. Most natives used the fall of the all-seeing eye as an excuse to let off steam and several rounds of bullets into the sky, like they were aiming to shoot down whatever debris—and bodies—remained in the atmo.

Tim only heard about it. He spent the few days following the crash with a bottle in his hand, tunnelling with grim determination into oblivion. In those few moments he was capable of coherence, he tried to tell himself that at least he’d never again have to set foot into the House that Jack Built. Even drunk as a skunk, this had been cold comfort.

But if Tim had learned anything over the 38 years he’d been alive, it’s that the universe hated him, personally. So it shouldn’t have been a surprise when, less than a month after Helios crashed, he received a message from the bandit king that’d taken up residence in the largest chunk of wreckage, offering him a job. Tim wanted to say no, but money was money and since when had he let his pride stand in the way of making a decent living on this hellhole?

Helios looked better on the ground. Tim hadn’t expected it, but he actually felt a little better at the
sight of that metal H, all ripped open and picked clean like an animal carcass left in the desert sun. A mean sense of satisfaction settled over him like a warm blanket.

And then he met the Children of Helios. Weedy-looking men and women, still dressed in their corporate finery. Once upon a time, all pinstripes and sleek silhouettes and sharp stilettos, each one primed with a business card in one hand and a knife in the other. Now they slunk through the broken halls and torn down walls like whipped dogs, turned out from their house by their old masters. They watched him eagerly, but flinched whenever his head turned their way. Tim checked and rechecked, but the device on his ear was intact and functioning. Whatever it was that made them twitch like beaten skags, it wasn’t his face. Maybe they didn’t need his face. Maybe they could just smell Pandora on him.

The bandit king was a compact mass of muscles and efficiency named Vaughn. He met with him in a mostly-intact office, where someone had scrounged enough furniture to set up a desk and two chairs. Vaughn laid out the job: a simple grab-n-run of materials to build a bedrock borer and water purifier. Before taking up the mantle of leading a group of terrified idiots, he’d been in accounting.

“Really.” Tim could hear the scepticism in his voice, clear through the modulator.

“Yeah, for like five years?” Vaughn paced around the dusty desk to hand Tim the ECHOpad. “I was hoping to get promoted to a managerial position next month but, uh.” He rubbed his stubble and smiled sheepishly. “Guess I’m doing this now.”

“Life happens when you’re making plans,” Tim said absently as he flicked through the maps. A few bandit camps, last spotted in the area. They hadn’t quite gotten to the equipment stashed in the crater, but...

Vaughn had been quiet for a while, and when Tim looked up he found the little man staring up at him with an intent expression.

“Can I—” Vaughn swallowed. “Um. Athena. She—she’s the one who gave me your name. She said you’d do any job.”

Tim winced. He wanted to argue, but it wasn’t as if she’d misrepresented him.

“She also said… that you, um.”

Tim lowered the ECHOpad, kept his face empty of expression out of habit rather than necessity.

“Said what?” He could guess.

“Your face. Can—can I see it?”

Ding ding ding.

“Why.” His voice was hard, but Vaughn didn’t flinch back. Maybe he wasn’t as green as the others.

“To rip the bandaid off? Get it over with?” Vaughn suggested, smiling weakly.

Tim tilted his head to the side, examining the bandit through narrowed eyes, looking for signs of—what, he wasn’t sure. Duplicity? Manipulation? Maybe the kid would try to blackmail him, although Tim really had nothing valuable to offer. But Vaughn only stared back, face like an open book. Tim sighed, and tapped the device on his ear.

Vaughn’s eyes widened. He stepped back.
“Oh,” he said.

“Yeah,” Tim said, in the voice of Handsome Jack.

Tim took the worst of the impact, and he didn’t need the tell-tale blue shatter of his shield dying to tell him that.

“Oh, you absolute asshole!” Malady held herself on all fours, one hand clutched around her broken and bleeding shoulder. Sparks of electricity danced across her body and from the way she twitched and winced, it wasn’t meant as part of her ensemble. “You prick! Look at my outfit!”

Tim stood up, slinging the hostage over his shoulder. He wanted to add a witty rejoinder, but all that came out was a wheeze. Maybe for the best. He pulled out his pistol with his free hand and shot from the hip. Instead of piercing her skull and putting her out of his misery, the bullets pinged off her shield. She bore her bloodstained teeth at him.

“Nice try, dick. Matty! Esteban! Come back over here you idiots, he’s got no shield!”

Tim was running before she finished speaking, his speed hobbled by the weight across his shoulders and the stab of pain in his abdomen that accompanied each breath. Buckshot exploded on the wall beside Tim’s head as he ducked down the flooded hall.

“Get the fuck down here,” he gasped.

“Working on it! Kind of—pinned down by robo-assholes at the moment.”

The cheerful sound of a grenade bouncing off metal dogged Tim’s steps. He lunged for the ground before it exploded, knocking his teeth against the metal and filling his mouth with fresh blood. This time his own. His least favourite kind.

“Fucking fuck—!”

Tim lifted himself on shaking arms, black stars winking in his vision and ears ringing. The hostage landed a few feet away, thrown clear before the blast, his head turned away from Tim. A bandit screamed something unintelligible and opened fire with his SMG. The worst of it bounced off Tim’s still-regenerating shield, but it broke through what little he’d managed to gain just as he pulled the hostage back over his shoulders and get them moving again. He lobbed his own homing grenade and took off before the bandit knew what happened.

He was ducking behind a convenient pile of scrap metal when the weight on his back groaned and stirred.

“Oh good, you’re alive.” Tim dropped him on the ground. “That’s one problem taken off my fuck-you list. Come on, get up.” He nudged Rhys with his boot. The kid groaned and cursed, curling up on the floor. “Nah-ah, none of that! I need you on your feet. I can’t carry you and fight our way out of here single-handedly. I’m good, but not that good. Come on!”

Rhys pulled himself up slowly, pushing his hair back with a shiny metal arm. Those mis-matched eyes blearily fixed on Tim’s face. “Whh… what?”

Tim flinched at the sound of masonry exploding behind him. “Come on, come on, on your feet, let’s go!” He grabbed Rhys by the arm and hauled him upright.

“What’s… what the hell…”
“You’re alive and in one piece.”

“This… We’re…” Rhys’ entire expression seemed to sharpen as he stared at Tim. “Your—your face —”

A handful of bullets dented their cover, the rest flying over their heads. Tim cursed, palmed his pistol.

“Hold that thought.”

Rhys yelped as Tim set three bandits on fire.

“Yes!” Tim pivoted on his heel and fell to a crouch. “Yes, let’s get this over with. My face is blank! It’s a digital mask. You were taken hostage by robo-bandits! I was sent by your buddy Vaughn to rescue you. I killed a lot of people to get here and it looks like I’m running out of ammo faster than they’re running out of bad guys, so I need you to take this—” He shoved a spare pistol into Rhys’ hands. “—and shoot it at anyone who isn’t me. You’ve got a shield,” he went on while Rhys gaped in horror, “and you’ve got a full clip, and a pair of working legs, so you’re golden. You’re gonna stick close to me, and I’m gonna cover our exit, and we’re both gonna ride off into the sunset. Got it?”

Rhys’ eyes were wide, his mouth hung open, and his skin was the colour of milk that’d gone off days ago. He said nothing, and Tim cursed again. He readied himself to deliver another inspiring speech—not his strong suit to begin with—when the kid surprised him.

“Oh,” he said. It was like a switch had been flicked. Rhys’ jaw clenched, his eyes narrowed—the yellow one flaring a little—and he held the pistol properly, with both hands. Like he’d been doing this his whole life.

“Okay,” Tim repeated, honestly surprised for the first time in a long time. “Stick close to me and do as I say. I mean it.”

Rhys nodded, his mouth pressed tightly closed. Crouched this close, Tim could see more clearly the fine tremor in his jaw. He held himself like a man trying not to vomit or scream.

Tim felt a stab of sympathy, deep in the abandoned coal mine of his heart. Another surprise.

Alright,” he said more gently than he might’ve otherwise. “You ready?”

Rhys nodded again.

They gained inch by painful inch through the compound with a dying shield and depleting ammo stores. Rhys held to his word and did as he was told, to Tim’s satisfaction. He even shot a few bandits. As they pushed their way to the exit, Tim made the mistake of feeling a little hopeful.

But the universe hated Tim Lawrence, and Crony #2 waited for them at the entrance. The metal chassis around his arms showed signs of warping from the corrosive rounds his digistruct managed to hit him with, but it didn’t seem to impede their function. He hefted a missile launcher as he spotted Tim and Rhys.

“Wh—“ Rhys managed before eight missiles whistled merrily through the air. Tim moved without thinking, flinging himself forward and toppling them both to the ground. The missiles twisted and struck the wall, the ground, hard enough to shake the building. Fire ripped across the ground, scorching the concrete and burning up the patches of grass that sprung up through the cracks. And across Tim.
His shield died and his coat caught fire. He yelped and scrambled up, tossing the coat away, instincts screaming at him to run, run now get away now now now but Rhys was still on the ground, looking dazed, and Tim couldn’t leave him to get recaptured or worse.

“Give us yer stuff and I’ll letcha go!”

“Fuck off!” Tim unloaded a clip with one hand and hauled Rhys up with the other. He shoved him inside a storage shed, just as the bandit came lumbering forward. The bandit backed away, growling, from the too-small space. The smell of burnt cloth and—god—flesh was nearly unbearable in the cramped quarters. Tim did his best to ignore it. “Okay. Okay. You still with me, Rhys?”

With wide eyes and jaw set, Rhys nodded.

“Good. Good boy. Here’s the… the thing.” Tim swallowed against the searing pain blossoming along his burnt side. “I’m not gonna lie to you, this is a pretty bad situation we’re in right now.”


No.

“Fine. I’ve had worse. Listen, I’ve got a vehicle parked about a kilometer and a half east of here, just at the foot of the hill, where the rock face splits. There’s a safe house located about a 20 minute drive further east. You getting all this?”

Rhys snapped out of whatever shock was threatening to take over his system. “Yeah. Yeah, but what about—“

“Okay, when I say the word we’re gonna—“ A thump rattled the shed, knocking them both against the wall. Tim choked back a scream as the metal pressed directly against his freshest and most painful wound. “Fuck.”

“Are you—“

“Fine. Yep.” Tim blinked away the tears he knew Rhys couldn’t see and took a deep breath. “Right. On my say-so, you’re gonna run and you’re gonna keep going until you find that vehicle I mentioned.”

“But—!” Another thump. This time Tim was better prepared; he braced himself against his stinging palm—god, when did he scrape them? When he fell?—against the wall. Rhys waited until the dust settled before continuing in a furious whisper. “What makes you think they’re just going to let me walk out of here?”

Tim grinned, not caring that it couldn’t be seen. “Because they’re gonna be busy dealing with me.”

Rhys looked at him like he was stupid or nuts. “You’ll die.”

“One day, yeah,” Tim agreed. “But not here. And not for you, stretch.” He clapped his hands onto Rhys’ shoulders. He poured as much charm and confidence as he could into the words, hearing them hum with it over the modulator. “Trust me. I’ve been doing this for a long time. Haven’t died yet.”

Not for lack of trying, eh, Timtam?

“Wait for me there. I’ll catch up when I’m done.” Tim flipped his ECHO to life. “I take it you’re still kicking?”
Rhys gave him a confused look. “What—?”

“Not you,” Tim hissed.

“Barely,” came the response. “I’ve scavenged enough shitty guns to build a house out of shitty guns but they’ve got me pinned down. Malady’s in the wind but I got one of her monsters still here. Don’t know what happened to the other one."

Fuck. Malady was probably half-way to whatever safety hole she crawled into when things got ugly.

“Is there someone else inside?” Rhys asked.

“Tweedle Dumber is out here with me. Get as many grenades as you can,” Tim said, ignoring him. “And wait for my signal.”

The digistruct groaned, already familiar with the plan.

“You bastard. Fine.”

Tim flicked the ECHO off and turned back to Rhys. “You ready?”

“Is there someone else inside?” Rhys asked, gripping his pistol tightly.

“Not exactly. Don’t worry,” he said, catching sight of Rhys’ dark look. “Don’t you got enough on your plate? Let’s focus on escaping the killer robots and I’ll explain everything when we’re not being chased by explosions.”

“Cyborg,” Rhys said.

“What?”

“Cyborg, not robot.”

“Jesus, whatever. Just—are you golden or do I have to strap rockets to you and launch your ass from this compound?”

Rhys didn’t look at all impressed, but he nodded anyway.

“Good. On my signal. Three, two…”

Walking away from an explosion might just be the coolest thing a human being can do. Tim has managed it once in the last ten eventful years, and only because he’d broken his ankle and couldn’t run. Still, he imagined that it had looked really awesome.

But because Tim valued his skin more than he valued his image these days, he ran from explosions. Or crawled, while jabbing Anshin healing syringes into his sides. He hissed through his teeth as the needle punched through his clothes, his skin, and deep into the damaged muscle tissue. The tingling of mending flesh and bone was almost enough to distract him from the incredible heat boring down on him from the flaming wreck of a bandit camp. He staggered forward a few more feet before his shaking legs finally gave up.

Fine. This was fine. Bits and pieces of cinder and ash rained down from the sky, belched out from the pillar of black smoke rising high. Tim rolled himself onto his back with a grunt, and let his head fall back. The sunset bruised the sky, what he could see of it anyway, and the compound fire glowed like a second sun, orange and hot on the wrong horizon. Tim lay on the ground and waited to heal.
He kept that last digistruct alive for too long. His head felt like he’d cracked it open. He rubbed at his temple, half-expecting to find his fingers tacky with blood, but the skin was dry and unbroken. He rubbed at his wrist, wincing at the unpleasant but familiar feeling of something solid and strange under his scars. Anshin’s finest couldn’t touch that pain, he knew.

The ECHO hissed static in his ear. The fight and subsequent explosion had knocked out his signal, although he didn’t know how. Enough shit in the sky to disrupt the frequencies, maybe. He’d tried to raise Vaughn again, but he didn’t get anything but a garbled mess of sound before the line died. He tried to raise Rhys before he remembered he’d failed to get the kid’s contact info before sending him off. That was also fine, Tim decided, letting his hand fall back to the ground. With any luck, Rhys had found Tim’s stash and bike and was obediently waiting for him.

Or he’d tried to take Tim’s stash and his vehicle and fucked off to the safe house. Tim let his eyes close. Why the hell did he tell the kid about the safe house? He had to go. The longer he waited, the greater the chance the kid would try something stupid. Yes. It was time to get up. Time to move. Just… maybe in five minutes.

He jumped as a burst of static emitted from his ECHO, his eyes flying open.

“—don’t be dead. Hey!”

Tim stared up at the sky, brow furrowed.

“Hey, you—uh, badass vault… hunter… guy! Can you hear me? Please, come on, don’t be dead…”

Tim cleared his throat. “Not dead. Rhys?”

“Ohthankgod! Where are you?”

“How’d you get this frequency? I thought the explosion…”

He heard an impatient sigh on the other end of the line. “I’m a hacker, I hack into things pretty much for a living and we’re both still within close range. Never mind that now. I’m at the rendezvous point with all your stuff. Are you close?”

“Yes.” Tim breathed in deep and sighed out through his nose. “I’m close. I’ll be there in a few.”

Walking didn’t hurt any more, but his feet still dragged. He needed sleep. And food. Maybe not in that order. He’d gone too long without either and no amount of glowing red syringes could make up for what his body needed.

He found Rhys sitting on a rock, arms and legs folded, fingers tapping, eyes narrowed. He sprung up when he caught sight of Tim.

“Hey, you made it—“ Tim stopped. Rhys had a pistol in his hands, aimed directly at Tim’s head. “Uh?”

“You. Start talking.”

Christ, he did not need this right now.

“You after anything in particular?”

“Let’s start with the man on the other end of your ECHO, the one you left to die in the factory.”
Tim’s brows shot up. He remembered that Rhys couldn’t see his expressions and decided to use his words.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t lie to me. I heard him on your ECHO.” Rhys tapped his temple, the yellow of his eye flaring to life once more. Hacker. Right.

“You listened into my conversation?” Tim felt more impressed than annoyed.

“Don’t change the subject! You left your ally to die! No—actually what you did was worse: you made him kill himself so you could escape!”

“So we could escape.” Tim rubbed his hand over his face. God, he really just wanted to eat and pass out. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Shut up.” Rhys stepped forward. “I’m telling you to explain yourself.”

Tim fell silent. There was no short version of the story that could explain the digistructs, and he really didn’t have the energy to tell the long version without incriminating himself. He sighed.

“It’s easier if I just show you,” he said. He slipped his fingers under the leather band wrapped around his wrist and pressed hard. He felt the now-familiar sensation of something solid press against his bones, a sensation of snapping his fingers with his whole body, and the taste of ozone and tin in his mouth. For a split-second, he struggled with the disorienting sensation of having two pairs of eyes, two sets of limbs, and two heartbeats. It passed as quickly as it came, and left him present in his own body, with another body that looked just like him standing three feet away.

“No talking!” he snapped, jabbing his finger at the digistruct. It held its hands up in a placating gesture and, although Tim couldn’t see his face under the mask, he could practically feel the eye roll. He turned back to Rhys, who gaped at the digistruct.

“See? This—”

“A hardlight digital construct,” Rhys breathed.

“Uh. Right.”

“A clone? Hyperion was working on something like this. You can just… make these? Whenever you want? How?”

“Not easily. Are you happy now? Because I really need to sit down.”

Rhys lowered his pistol. Tim collapsed onto the boulder with a whuff of breath. He dropped his head in his hands and braced himself.

“This is really amazing…” Rhys murmured, his one eye bright. “It’s a near-perfect copy, too. Really amazing. He—whoa!” Rhys jumped back as the digistruct winked from existence.

Tim hissed at the fresh spike of pain. Rhys said something, but Tim ignored him. He focused on keeping his head together. He flinched at the hand that gripped his shoulder. When he looked up, he saw Rhys standing over him, with Tim’s own sack in his hand.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’d give you some water or something, but I don’t want to get my hands blown off by your lock.”
“Smart.”

Tim took the sack, thumbed over the security lock and waited for the flash of green light before he began rummaging around inside. He pulled out three nutrition bars—peanut butter and chocolate flavor—unwrapped them and crammed them into his mouth. Rhys winced as he sat down on the ground. They sat side-by-side in silence, while Tim finished chewing.

“So… it hurts? When you dismiss them or whatever?” Rhys asked.

“Yeah. And summon them. And keep them going. Like an icepick in the skull.” Tim closed his eyes and let his head rest against the rocks. “S’why it took me so long to get up again. After we blew up the compound.” Tim winced and rubbed his side. “The cracked ribs and the second-degree burns didn’t help either. Here.”

Without looking, Tim pulled the sack close and rummaged around. He found what he was looking for, and tossed it towards Rhys.

“What’s this?” Tim could hear the crinkle a wrapper.

“A nutribar. Not sure about the flavour. Eat it. I’m guessing the bandits weren’t running a B&B, so you’ll need something in your stomach.”

Rhys hesitated. “Don’t you need it?”

“There’s more at the safe house. Go on, I’ll be fine.” He had barely finished speaking before he heard the sound of a wrapper being ripped open.

“Almond flavour?” Rhys mumbled through a mouthful.

“Eh, that one’s not great.”

Silence, save for the sound of chewing and the faint crackle of faraway things burning up. Tim enjoyed it, the satisfaction of a full stomach and another escape from certain death settling over him like a warm blanket. If it were made up of moments like this, he thought, then life could be alright. He cracked one eye open, and got a look at the reason he’d come out all this way.

Brown hair, messy, like he’d been pushing his hand through it. Flashy chrome arm, flashy yellow eye, and a port in his temple. Not a bad sense of style, if the corporate d-bag look was your thing. (And Tim couldn’t deny that it’d been his, once.) Skinny, bordering on scrawny. Legs for days. Tattooed, neck and chest. Interesting.

Good looking, too, Tim realised with a small start. It’d been difficult to notice before, with all the excitement and gunfire, but Rhys was attractive. Handsome, even.

“So.” Rhys pulled his legs close, and rested his chin on his knees. “I didn’t catch your name before.”

Tim dragged his gaze away from Rhys’ distractingly full lips.

“Tim,” he said. Rhys stared ahead with a blank expression.

“Seriously, what’s your name?”

Tim’s face warmed. “It’s Tim.”

“Tim. You—okay. You can shoot guys from twenty paces without breaking your stride. You create hardlight constructs clones at will. You’re a vault hunter. And your name is Tim?”
“It’s Timothy Lawrence, actually. What’s wrong with my name?” he demanded while Rhys bowed his head, his shoulders shaking.

“It’s just—I mean, I thought you all had cool names. Like Athena, or Axton. Zer0 with an actual zero. Not Tim Lawrence. You sound like a personal injury lawyer.”

Tim pushed himself to his feet.

“Oh, come on!” Rhys called after him. “I can’t be the first person to say this to you!”

“You know, most of the people I rescue from bandits are too busy falling over themselves to give me their money and their gratitude to pull out killer comedy routines about my name. But I’ll tell you what, Rhys, I’ll try to think myself up a better name. That way, the next time you get captured by gun-toting lunatics, you’ll have something cool to scream when I leave you to get eviscerated.”

“Okay, okay, point taken. I’m sorry, T-tim.” His voice wobbled on the word and Tim just knew he was trying not to laugh. Tim pulled out the camelback from his stash and took a long pull.

“Apology not accepted,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Here’s what we’re gonna do. We’re gonna go to the safe house. We’re gonna spend the night. In the morning, we’re gonna take off for the Wastes and then I’m going to dump your scrawny ass on Helios’ doorstep. And then I’m going to ride off into the sunset with a bag full of money. Sound good? Good. Get on.”

Rhys folded his arms, curling his lip as he took in Tim’s ride.

“Uh. Where?” he asked. Tim rolled his eyes.

“Behind me, stretch. Come on. Haven’t you ever seen a motorbike before?”

“Not really.” Rhys awkwardly got his leg over the seat, bouncing a little as he tried to get comfortable.

Oh. Tim had not considered the reality of his situation. If he had, he would’ve been better prepared for the sudden warmth behind him, for the feel of Rhys’ knees pressing against his thighs, and his hands fluttering around his waist, looking for a place to hold.

It was a good thing, then, that Tim was a grown ass man who shot people to death and walked away from explosions for a living. He wasn’t the type of person whose stomach flipped just because there was someone attractive wriggling around behind him. He turned the ignition, and the engine purred to life.

“There’s a helmet behind you,” he said after clearing his throat.

“Oh.” One of Rhys’ hands disappeared. “Don’t you need one?”

“Probably.” Tim ran his thumb across the widget on his ear. The air in front of his face shimmered for a second before settling into something more solid. It wouldn’t protect his face from road rash, but it would keep the dust out of his eyes. “I guess you’ll just have to break my fall if we crash.”

“Maybe try not to crash.”

Tim laughed and revved the engine.

“Whatever you say, boss!”
After five years alone on Pandora, Tim had to learn to find joy in the simple things. Like the feeling of the wind through his hair, or the long stretch of open road, or the smell of the desert just after the sun set, before all the warmth leeched away, or the feel of his bike bouncing over rough terrain.

Or an attractive person’s arms tightening around his waist, the feel of someone pressing flush against his back.

Hidden under his mask, Tim let himself smile.

“There’s something you should know,” Vaughn said. Tim paused at the door, hand outstretched. “About Rhys. And, um. Your face.”

“What about it?”

After the first grand reveal, Vaughn hadn’t said a word about Tim’s… condition, except to request that Tim keep his mask in place whenever he came to visit. As if Tim needed telling what would happen if a bunch of ex-Hyperion stooges saw their former evil overlord waltz into their camp, back from the dead. He’d seen the headless statues, thank you very much.

“It’s just. Rhys kind of has a history with Jack. A personal one.”

Tim went cold. “Oh.”

Vaughn winced, looking uncomfortable. “It’s not my place to give the details but, uh. It got pretty ugly at the end. So, if you wouldn’t mind…” He ran his finger along the bridge of his nose, looking sheepishly into Tim’s blank face.

“Yeah. Yeah, I hear you. Mask stays, no problem,” Tim heard himself say lightly. He waved his hand in front of the automatic door and stepped outside before Vaughn could say another word.

It wasn’t a problem. It wasn’t as if Tim didn’t know he had the face and voice (and body and walk) of a mass murdering maniac. Tim didn’t wear a mask every minute he was in public because it was fun. He knew what Jack did to this place, the scars he’d left behind in the landscape and in the memories of every single person that lived through his reign as self-declared king of Hyperion, Elpis, and Pandora.

But it was fine. It really was. He wasn’t a delicate flower. Being reminded of the monster whose face he wore didn’t bother him. He would have gone out of his goddamn mind by now if it did. Because most days, Tim could live with himself. He’d done some horrible things, but he would never be like Handsome Jack, not even in his wildest nightmares. It was like having a dragon’s face.

But that was Handsome Jack, the larger-than-life super villain who died in volcanoes. Being reminded of Jack, the guy who took forever in the bathroom in the morning, who wore dad glasses when he was tired and the same ugly sweater almost every day, who used his daughter’s name for his computer password, who drank day-old coffee with five table spoons of sugar and smoked wherever the hell he pleased, who brought personal relationships to ugly ends…

It could be a little harder, on those days, to live with himself.

The safe house had food but, more importantly, it still had the glass bottle Tim had stored there a month ago. The rubber band he’d put around its body to measure the waterline had lowered significantly, he noticed. Mordecai must’ve come through. Or maybe Maya, who’d try anything these days. Salvador drank his own stash and Axton drank beer or Moxxi’s rakk ale. Krieg drank the
sort of stuff that could dissolve teeth. He cracked open a new box of nutribars, and started counting.

“I locked up your horrible bike,” Rhys announced as he strode through the door. “If anyone tries to steal it, I’ll give them a medal. That thing is a death trap. I don’t think I’ve ever had a worse ride, and I once got stuck in a malfunctioning escape pod.”

“Sorry, stretch. My limo was in the shop.” Tim shoved the camelback into Rhys’ hands and pointed him towards the cistern. “Count the seconds while the water runs, will ya?”

“I’m not asking for luxury, just something with four wheels and sides,” Rhys grumbled.

“Nag, nag, nag…” Tim took a swig from the liquor bottle, closed his eyes as the burn hit his sinuses.

“Why do I have to count, anyway?” Rhys asked, raising his voice to be heard over the sound of running water.

“We have to keep track of how much we take, and then write it all down in a ledger so we know how much we owe,” Tim replied, zipping his bag shut.

“Owe to who? Whose place is this?”

Tim rummaged around the cupboards and discovered that the box of dehydrated bird chews he’d left last time were empty. Mordecai, then. He wondered if Talon liked them.

“It’s a vault hunter safe house. We share it, try to keep it in decent condition, restock it when we can.”

“Huh.” Rhys shut the spigot off. “You vault hunters must be closer than I thought.”

“Not really.” Tim found the battered clipboard stuck on a nail, a stub of a pencil hanging from it by a string. “I’ve never even met most of these guys. But word gets around about places like these, and it’s in all our best interest to keep them going.”

It was funny, the things he’d learned about the others without ever having met them, just going by how the left the safe houses. Tim could always tell when Salvadore had been the last visitor, just by the way all the pillows got piled on one bed, and the way the place stank of gun oil. Axton by the way the beds were all made up to military-precision, even the ones he didn’t use, and the empty beer cans stacked up by the door. Zer0 and his nutribar wrapper origami of creatures and flowers Tim couldn’t recognize, all of them left in a parade-line on the windowsill. He hadn’t been too active before Lillith took up residence in Sanctuary, but he remembered the empty bottles of cheap booze and the ashtrays filled with spent cigarettes she’d leave behind.

Back when Athena’d still been active, she’d leave the place in a mess. Dirty dishes in the sink, sheets balled up at the foot of the bed. A real pain in the ass. He wondered how she and Janey were getting on. The last time they’d spoken, Athena’d mentioned something about a wedding.

“That’s it, then? You’re out of the game?”

Athena stared down at the pint she’d been nursing all night. “Jenny thinks it’s too dangerous. Thinks I can do better.”

“Well, hell, Athena. She’s probably right.”
“Maybe.” Athena took a drink to hide her embarrassment. “What about you, Tim? You think about settling down? Getting out of the game?”

Tim snorted and finished his drink. “Me? Nah. I figure I’m in it ‘til the end.” When he looked up again, it was to find Athena with her brow furrowed and her lips pursed in a pout. “Whoa, what’s with the look? We’re here to celebrate, aren’t we? Have a wake for your bachelorette lifestyle?” He signalled for another drink.

Many drinks later, she’d leaned into him as they left the bar. When the door swung shut, she took his face in her hands and pressed her forehead against his.

“You’re not going to die like this, Tim,” she said very seriously, her breath reeking of cheap beer and one too many shots. Tim puffed out a laugh.

“Who said anythin’ ‘bout dyin’?”

She glared at him, squeezed his cheeks, bent his head forward and smacked her lips against his forehead. It was a little too violent to be a tender gesture, but that was Athena all over.

Tim finished his tallies, handed the clipboard to Rhys, made his excuses and stepped outside.

Even this far out, you could still see the dull red-orange glow on the horizon. It’d gotten fainter since they arrived, signs that the fire was burning itself out. He tried to reach Vaughn again and actually succeeded this time, although the connection was still garbage.

“He’s okay? He’s not—or anything?” Vaughn asked.

“He’s fine. We’ll be on our way back in the morning.”

“I can’t—you. What’s—this connec—?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s the ozone layer. Maybe it’s the giant factory I blew up an hour ago. Who can say?”

Vaughn’s response was lost in a burst of noise and static. Tim cursed and cut the line, confident that Vaughn had gotten the jist.

Rhys’d found the bottle with the rubber band around it. He looked up when the door closed.

“Everything alright?” he asked.

“You weren’t listening?” Tim shot back. Rhys had the decency to look embarrassed.

“It’s easier if I’m in the same room as you,” he muttered.

“It’s fine. I got a hold of your buddy Vaughn. Let him know you weren’t dead yet and to expect us tomorrow.”

“Good. What’s this?” He held the bottle up.

“Tequila. Sort of. Brewed from those electric cactuses you can find up north. It’s not bad stuff,” he added defensively as Rhys set the bottle down as if it might bite him. “A reposado. Do you know how hard it is to barrel age stuff in this part of Pandora?”
“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Suit yourself.” Tim scooped the bottle up and took a swig. “The electricity really makes it tingle in your teeth.”

They settled in for the night. Tim pried the windows open and took the cot closest to the door. He pulled his shirt over his head, toed off his boots, and removed his belt. He looked up to find Rhys staring at him.

“What?” he asked. Rhys jerked like he’d been slapped.

“Nothing!” Rhys turned to stare up at the ceiling, his cheeks flooding with pink.

Tim quirked a brow and looked down at his chest. He was nothing special. Long gone were the days of cut abs courtesy of the Handsome Jack exercise routine. Life in Pandora had relaxed his muscles into something a little more natural, made him look like a man who used his body for living instead of for vanity. Age had given him a ring of softness around his midsection that he hadn’t managed to shake.

His arms still looked good, though. Nice and toned.

“So, what’s a kid like you doing in a place like that, anyway?” Tim asked casually, stretching out on his cot.

Rhys turned redder. “I’m not a kid. I’m 28.”

“Huh. I would’ve pegged you for 22. You got a bit of a babyface there, stretch. The pouting doesn’t help, by the way.”

“I’m not pouting,” Rhys snapped, turning away. “And how old are you? 70?”

“Yep, nailed it. Look pretty good for a septuagenarian, though, don’t I?” he asked.

Even Rhys’ ears had gone red.

“No!”

He’s attractive, okay? Rhys wasn’t blind. He’d spotted the dark hair peeking out from his ripped collar before, so the chest wasn’t a huge surprise, but the arms and the shoulders. He’s got that martini glass silhouette, like the heroes in the comics: big, broad shoulders and narrow, slim hips. Rhys could do a lot of things with a man like that. Climb him like a tree, for starters.

It’d been a little over an hour, maybe, but Rhys had been asleep, more or less, in the compound and still felt too keyed up from their escape to settle in easily. After Tim had flicked the lights off, Rhys had lay in the dark and tried to ignore the impure thoughts of the man stretched out on the other side of this too-small space. God, it’d be easy to just get up and go over there. Show him just how grateful Rhys was feeling. Assuming Tim didn’t laugh in his face for it. Or worse.

And don’t even get him started on everything that happened in the bandit camp. The way Tim had swanned into a deadly situation, rescued Rhys, took charge, and handled guns in those big hands of his…

Look. Rhys has a type. He knows he does. But Tim is the first person to tick on every single item of Rhys’ checklist since—
Since.

Rhys let out a long breath, the hot feeling in his stomach cooling. Nothing makes a better wet blanket than the memory of the psycho sort-of ex who’d tried to kill him.

You’re wasting time, Rhys, he told himself. Put the libido to bed and think about something else. Like maybe the reason you came out to this hellhole and got captured for in the first place.

_A flash of violet like the strike of a chord through the universe and a beautiful world laid out at his feet, the past encased and stored, crystal-perfect and within reach. Rhys could still feel the echo of it in his head, something so impossibly large and old. It shouldn’t have worked, his little piece of code that bloomed into a project. The whole wide galaxy of truth, a forgotten race, countless artefacts, riches and wonders, all of it just under the surface, within reach._

Rhys shivered, his stomach turning as it always did at the memory.

He’d found it by mistake, while digging through Atlas’ files. Atlas had done their best to keep an eye on Hyperion. Their corporate espionage wasn’t great, which is why this particular project only got a few lines in a massive report, but it was enough to catch Rhys’ eye.

_‘Project code named Epimetheus: eridium as a source of digital storage. Theory likely from eridium experiments with AI. They seem to believe eridium might store ancient memory files of Eridians. Proposed method of extraction AI interface.’_

Rhys had been buzzing, coming down from a prolonged high after his exposure to the Vault of the Traveller. He’d been desperate to learn anything about the ancient race.

An old Hyperion experiment, the data of which had been lost in the fall of Helios, along with everything else. It’d taken Rhys almost a month to track it down, following damaged signal after damaged signal, picking through the physical and digital remains of the old satellite until he’d found the right one. Of course, it’d been just his luck that a troupe of psychos had planted their operations over it.

He should’ve waited. He’d intended to. He’d set up camp a half-kilometer away, content to monitor their ECHO communications until Vaughn could send back-up, confident in Malady’s lack of ability. It would take her time to break into the stack of servers Rhys had come to investigate. But he’d underestimated her and Malady and her gang weren’t interested in waiting. She and her band of vultures had been picking through Hyperion’s corpse for months, looking for the same thing Rhys’d found the right one. Of course, it’d been just his luck that a troupe of psychos had planted their operations over it.

Getting inside without being seen had been tricky, but tunnelling into the systems had been child’s play. The servers had taken pretty bad damage during the impact, but Rhys was able to extract enough to get a name.

Dr. Etna. The AI. Project Epimetheus. Rhys folded his pillow over, huffing with annoyance. He had no way of knowing if Etna survived; and even if she did, he had no idea where he could start looking. But a lot of Hyperion survivors had fallen in the same area. He could only hope she hadn’t gone far.

He let his gaze rest on Tim, who had one arm flung over his face. He’d worn the mask to bed. Rhys’ ECHOEye couldn’t see beyond the visual static the earwidget produced, which impressed and disturbed Rhys. It took a lot to fool the eye, which meant the earwidget couldn’t have been cheap.
What sort of person would rather spend that much money to do what a strip of cloth or a piece of cardboard could do? Who needed to hide their face that badly?

Rhys remembered Zer0 and considered the notion that maybe Tim was an alien. But what sort of alien had grey hair at his temples and freckles on his shoulders?

Rhys only realised he’d gotten to his feet after he’d taken the two steps towards Tim’s bedside. The earwidget emitted a soft glow in the dark, highlighting the long line of Tim’s neck, the sharp curve of his cheek. The gadget looked simple enough to disengage and his curiosity burned him.

Tim had stopped snoring.

“What are you doing?” he growled. Rhys fought against a shiver threatening to crawl up his spine.

“Um. I couldn’t sleep?”

“How is that my problem?”

“I was, uh, just gonna go outside… stretch my legs…” He cleared his throat. Tim stared at him. Rhys felt his face burn.

“Bad idea. Go and lie down.” Tim kicked him in the shin and Rhys jumped back. “Count skags if you’re bored. You wake me up again, and I’ll put you to sleep with my fist.”

Or you could use your thighs, Rhys’ horrible brain supplied as he slunk back to bed.

He did fall asleep, eventually. He dreamt of burning metal, flickering monitors, and a man with no face who stalked him through ruin.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone. This is the first chapter of an already finished novel I wrote over the summer. Updates will be pretty regular, maybe twice a week.

By the way, this is LONG. I'm about 2/3 of the way through my final revision and last word count clocked in at just over 200k. So, uh. There's that, I guess.

Also, this story will feature depictions of physical and mental abuse. I'll give the proper warnings at the top of the chapter where such scenes occur.
Part I: Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Rhys gives Tim a bad business proposal.

Timmy makes a new friend.

Chapter Notes

I'm a dope who forgot to mention that this story is a canon-divergent AU. Tim knew Jack before he agreed to become his doppelganger, basically. That's the extent of the AU alright thanks. Thanks for reading this note and the following chapter.

Also, I'll be sticking to a Tuesday/Friday update schedule from now on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN

Tim had a soul, once. He had a lot of things. Soft hands, red hair, freckles. He had big brown eyes and a hiccup when he laughed and a way with words, even if his voice wasn't particularly nice to listen to. He was never special. He aimed for mediocrity when he could get it; a silent presence in almost every class he attended. On time, obedient, invisible.

Tim had only explained his situation once, to someone who wasn’t really interested in hearing about it. He talked about student loans, because money was something everyone could understand. He didn’t talk about the truth. He knew how the truth made him look.

Here is the truth, or the start of it.

Tim Lawrence graduated with a double-major in Creative Writing and Drama and a minor in Earth Classics when he was 21. After a series of odd-jobs, rejections and failed auditions, he left Eden-2 when he was 23. He joined Hyperion when he was 25. It was a good job, paid well, and didn’t demand a lot from him, mentally. He filled an administrative position, the sort of job everyone said was vital and important but no one was going to respect him for. Tim made good money for the first time in his life, but he found himself unhappier than ever. He didn’t care to examine the reasons why.

Ten months into a position that was only supposed to last six, Tim found himself on a firing range. Hyperion did a lot of business, but their primary money makers were guns. They encouraged all employees to become accustomed with their line of weapons. Nobody really expected Tim to take his hand to them. He’d found himself there only because his supervisor mentioned it in the office, and Tim had overheard, and it would’ve been strange to opt out when everyone else was volunteering to go.

They all took turns, and when it was Tim’s, he took the pistol and took aim and whiffed it same as everyone else. His coworkers--people whose names Tim had forgotten within the year--laughed.
They patted Tim on the back, talked about the fourteen dollar yard margs at Biggersons.

Tim didn’t put down the gun. He may have told them he’d meet up with them later. He didn’t remember.

The rest of the clip went the way of the first bullets, fanning out wide. Tim adjusted his stance, took a breath, grew accustomed to the feel of the kickback. He hit the target on the second clip. By the third, he was hitting centre mass.

One person stayed behind, long after everyone else had left. He watched Tim for a while–Tim could feel his gaze on the back of his neck–before picking up his own pistol and taking up position on the range. He shot better than Tim.

Tim noticed he was handsome, and got flustered. His next six shots went wide. He flushed and stared at his gun, pretended as if he needed all his focus to reload.

When he looked up, the other man was staring at him expectantly. He smirked and mouthed something Tim couldn’t hear. He pulled down his noise-cancelling headphones and asked the man to repeat himself.

“I said, ‘nice shooting’. This your first time?”

“Um. Yes,” said Tim.

“Not bad. What department are you in?”

“Uh. Administrative.”

The other man arched one sharp brow. He let out a low whistle. “Okay, now I’m definitely impressed. I had you pegged for development for sure.”

Tim didn’t know how to reply, too preoccupied by the sight of the other man. His eyes weren’t the right colour. The safety goggles made them look grey, but Tim could see now that one was blue, the other green.

The other man smiled. He stuck his hand out. “Name’s Jack. What’s yours?”

NOW

The smoke had spread through the night, and the morning sky was covered in a fine, grey haze.

“Compound’s still burning,” Tim said as he refilled the bike’s tank. “I’ll tell you, nothing burns like old Hyperion junk.”

Rhys shot him a glance. “You knew about the Hyperion tech?”

“I’m not blind,” Tim said mildly. His temperament had improved overnight. He hadn’t objected when Rhys indicated he wanted to go outside, although Rhys had been ready for more threats. Tim merely scratched his stomach and told Rhys that was fine, but he wasn’t going alone.

Rhys eyed the sky. The smoke and other garbage spat up by the fire might still cause interference, but it wouldn’t be as bad as it’d been last night.

“I’m going to make a call,” he said. Tim grunted without looking up from his work.
It didn’t take long for Vaughn to pick up. “Rhys! Are you alright?”

Rhys didn’t even try to fight the smile that grew at the sound of his friend’s voice. “Hey-hey, buddy! Of course I’m fine. Just another brush with certain death.”

“Must be Tuesday,” Vaughn said through a yawn. “Are you guys on your way?”

Rhys glanced behind him. Tim had his back turned, still busy tinkering with his death trap.

“Soon. Listen, I need you to switch to the secure line.”

“Sure thing. Just give me one--” The line clicked and Vaughn’s voice came in with a little more fuzz when he continued. “There. So, what’s up?”

“I’m going to send you something. I want you to look it over and see if you can’t find the location of the woman named in the files.” Rhys twitched one of his cybernetic fingers and summoned his palm screen. The data package was large, weighed down with corrupted files and junk, but it only took two minutes to send in full.

Vaughn’s voice hummed down the line.

“Etna, huh? I think I recognize that name. She’s connected to Epimetheus?”

“If that file’s to be believed, she’s the one responsible for it. Look, I need you to see if you can’t find out if she’s still alive.”

“Sure thing.”

“Like, right now,” Rhys said. Vaughn fell silent.

“Bro.”

“I know. I need you to wake up Argos.”

“Bro.”

Rhys paced the short distance between the house and the foothills. “I know! But look, I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t desperate! I don’t know how Malady heard about Epimetheus but this isn’t the first time we’ve run into her goons while chasing down data. I don’t know how much info she managed to get before that vault hunter you sent came and blew the place to hell. I don’t even know if she’s still alive, but if she is, she’s gotten a head start on us. I need to know just how bad it is.”

“Last time we used 4RG0S, you ended up in a coma. For two days.”

“Those were bugs! We fixed those bugs, remember? It’s fine now. Come on,” he wheedled, pushing his hand through his hair. “We both agreed this was important. I’ll be fine. Tim’s here if anything goes wrong.”

Vaughn said nothing for several seconds and then sighed.

“God, you have the worst plans. Alright.”

Alright?” Rhys stopped.

“Yes. Against my better judgement, I’ll send up 4RG0S.”
“Great. I knew I could count on you, Vaughn. Just put in Malady’s frequency--”

“I know how it works, Rhys.”

It works like this: 4RG0S was a program developed to scan all local transmissions made within a certain amount of time and retrieve recordings. All a person needed was a frequency to look up, a broadcasting station, a chunk of eridium, and an ECHO device. Vaughn would go to 4RG0S’ shell, type in the frequency they were after, and upload the program to Rhys, who could serve as both a broadcasting station and an ECHO device.

4RG0S was Rhys’ baby, one of many ideas he’d had since returning from his unexpected voyage with the Traveller. It was the sort of ambitious piece of code that he used to dream up in university, before the limitations of his own skill caught up to him. But now that he had the strength of a moderately sized corporation behind him, and more than a few talented coders, such things could more easily become reality.

But Vaughn was right to be concerned. That coma had been… unexpected.

4RG0S was a monster. It took a little while to upload.

“So… about that vault hunter you sent out.”

“Tim? What about him?”

“You’ve known him for a while?”

“For about a year, I guess. I got in touch with him not long after Helios fell. Why?”

“Nothing. He seems pretty talented but I’ve never heard of him before.”

“He’s a bit of a recluse. I only got a hold of him through Athena. I don’t know much about him, to be honest.”

Rhys had a long, enduring relationship with Vaughn. He could tell, even when he couldn’t see his face, when Vaughn was hiding something from him. Rhys frowned.

“You ever see his face?”

“No. Alright, 4RG0S is online. You ready?”

Still frowning, Rhys confirmed that he was.

Tim wiped the grease off his hands and looked around for his wayward charge. Rhys had wandered to the back of the safe house and Tim could hear snippets of a whispered conversation, although nothing specific. Unlike certain people, Tim had been raised properly enough to know it was impolite to eavesdrop on other peoples’ private conversations. Unless he was getting paid for it.

But he was running out of ways to kill time before Rhys was running out of conversation, it seemed. Tim had no choice but to head around back and find out what the holdup was.

“Rhys, you--“ Tim stopped and stared at the odd sight that greeted him.

Rhys had his cybernetic arm stretched into the air above his head, palm flat and facing the sky. Projected above him appeared to be a topographical map made up of pale blue light. A few yellow dots pinged as Tim watched before they vanished. Rhys’ eye shone gone brighter than Tim had ever
seen it, glowing bright as anything Malady’d worn.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked.

“Shut up.”

Tim’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “Excuse me?”

Rhys spared him a brief look, his face twisted with strained annoyance. “Look, I’ll explain in a
minute, I just--Argh!”

His lanky body twitched like he’d shoved his finger in a light socket, and the map above his head expanded until the blue light covered the terrain around them. Tim looked down and saw what looked like a map of the mountain range projected across his chest.

“This is different,” he admitted, watching the play of light across his arms. “You’re doing this?”

“Please, please be quiet,” Rhys said through gritted teeth. His head tipped back, the light in his yellow eye twisting. His right arm jerked back. He gasped and whimpered in pain.

And then he collapsed.

“Got something!” Vaughn’s tinny voice was just audible over Rhys’ ECHO. “Tell me you didn’t
die, bro.”

Tim couldn’t see the device anywhere on Rhys’ ears, which would make answering for him impossible. Tim tapped his own ECHO and rang for Vaughn.

“He’s not dead is he?” Vaughn asked as soon as he picked up.

Tim nudged the kid with his boot. Rhys groaned and twitched.

“Nope, not dead,” Tim reported. “Just an idiot.”

“I’m… fine. Perfectly fine.” Rhys groaned again, and pushed himself up. “Vaughn, you said we got something?”

“Yes. ECHO transmission. Here--“

Before Tim could even ask, an unfamiliar voice cut in over both their ECHOs.

“--keep your outrage to a minimum, darling. We can talk on this like civilized adults, surely.”

“Don’t give me that garbage!” a woman’s voice snapped. Tim stiffened and Rhys’ sighed. Malady. “I have just lost a great deal to a damn vault hunter. I am not in the mood to play games! Just tell me about Etna, goddammit.”

“I would request you not talk to me like a simpleton. At least respect that I am not an imbecile. I know of Dr. Etna. I know she worked for Hyperion. I only ask that you tell me why your sudden interest in her.”

“Is she with you? Is she in Crisis Ridge?”

“I’m getting the impression you don’t take me seriously as a threat. That’s a shame.”

“Callum, let’s not stand on ceremony. We both know that in the game of bandit chess, I have all the
“best pawns.”

“I thought you weren’t interested in playing games?”

“Don’t screw me around, Callum. Just tell me about Etna. She’s with you, isn’t she? I know about your set-up in Crisis Ridge. I know about the factory. Just hand her over and I’ll leave your hide-out in one piece. Fair?”

The man’s laughter rang over the line, light and contemptuous. “How about a counter-offer? You come down here. I’ve got something special set-up. A little tournament I had intended to play with the local bandits, but I’d love to have you there too.”

“Callum…”

“Come down and bring your strongest. If they win, you can take the prize and the doctor.”

“Or I could come down there and blow your stupid factory to Elpis. How’s that for a counter-offer?”

Another laugh. “I’ll be waiting. Goodbye, Mal.”

Rhys dropped his head in his hands. There was a pause before Vauhgn’s voice returned.

“That’s all we have.”

“Malady. Still alive and on Etna’s trail. Great.”

“I feel like I’ve missed a page of the script here. Who’s Etna?” Tim asked.

Rhys ignored him. “How long ago did she make that call?”

“Uhhh… Four hours ago. Guess there was too much interference in the air to get through before.”

Rhys chewed on his lip in apparent thought. Tim took a breath and counted to ten. No use in letting his temper go off.

“We can’t let her get any further ahead. Where’s Fiona and Sash?”

“Out in the northwest coast, last I heard. I only sent them a message yesterday. It’ll still take them at least a day to get out there, and that’s only if they don’t run into trouble.”

“I can’t wait that long. We need to get to Etna before she can.” Rhys looked at Tim. Like a man might look at a used car he intended to drive across the continent.

Tim counted to twenty.

“Say, Tim,” he said. “How much is Vaughn paying you?”

“I can make you a lot of money,” Rhys said. Tim had heard worse business proposals, but not many.

“I’m already making a lot of money, stretch.”

“I can get you more.”

Tim snorted. “You don’t know how much I’m making.”
“It doesn’t matter. Whatever it is, this is worth more. This is worth…” Rhys struggled for words. “Like, imagine a whole planet of money.”

“That’s an awful metaphor.” Tim should’ve turned away then, gotten the bike started and ordered Rhys to get his scrawny ass onto the seat. But bad metaphor or no, the image of a planet made of money intrigued Tim.

Rhys chewed on his lip, and looked Tim up and down. “Alright, look. Do you know a boss by the name of Callum?”

“Callum Cready? Sure. He’s got that set up in on the bank of the Shivering River. Likes robots. Scavenges a lot of Hyperion shit.”

“Right. Before it fell, Hyperion had been working on a project they called Epimetheus. It…” Rhys struggled for a minute. “Look. You’ve got those digistructs, right? The clones? You said it yourself that keeping them going wasn’t easy, right?”

“Right,” Tim said warily.

“Well, like I mentioned before, Hyperion was working on that same tech. The market for inanimate digistructs was flooded, but practically no one had managed to perfect an animate digistruct.”

“You’re talking about putting AIs in digistructs?” Tim asked.

Rhys nodded. “Everyone wanted to be the first to get there. AI-imbued digistructs could change the way we do… nearly everything. No one had quite gotten there. But Hyperion was close.”

Tim tapped his fingers against his holster. “How close?”

“Very. Close enough that they were in beta testing already.”

“Alright. Let’s say I believe you. How is this worth the amount of money you seem to think it’s worth?”

Rhys sputtered a laugh. “Are you kidding? Think about it! Imagine if you could summon an army without the pain. Imagine what you could do.”

Tim imagined. He suppressed a shudder.

“An intelligent digistruct would have practically no limitations,” Rhys went on, oblivious. “It wouldn’t need maintenance or replacement parts the way robots do. If Project Epimetheus had worked, then Hyperion would’ve had a way to produce ‘structs cheaply and efficiently. Every household in the six known galaxies would want one. And that’s just thinking small. Imagine how the borderlands would look if we didn’t have to send out foot soldiers to subdue hostile forces.”

Tim looked back over his shoulder, where the factory still smoldered. “Right. I think I’m getting the picture. And I’m guessing this little adventure with Malady has something to do with your Epimetheus?”

“There was a stack of servers, badly damaged from the fall, but not completely broken. They had data on Epimetheus. I had come out here to find out what I could about the project, but Malady and her goons had beaten me to it. And now they’ve got the name of the head researcher, and they’re on her trail.”

“That would be Etna?”
Rhys nodded. “We have to get to her before Malady does. If Callum’s telling the truth, and he’s actually got Etna, then we can’t afford to dawdle. If we have any hope of getting Epimetheus back on track, then we’ll need Etna’s help.”

A tireless army. Intelligent and relentless. It wasn’t the horizon Tim had envisioned, but he was no futurist. Even though he found the view distasteful, he knew that it had potential.

“You keep saying ‘we’, but I haven’t agreed to anything,” Tim said at last. Rhys held out his hands and gave him a smile.

“This is a once in a lifetime opportunity, Tim,” he said.

“I’ve heard that before.”

“This isn’t a vault. You aren’t going to fight a giant alien monster at the end of it. All I’m asking is you help me save some poor scientist and maybe kill some bandits. And then we’ll have the chance to change the very face of this universe. How many people will be able to say that? And we can make a lot of money.’

“Potentially,” Tim said.

Rhys sighed. “Alright, how about this: I’ll pay you $3,000.”

Tim’s eyebrows shot up. “You should’ve lead with that.”

“Most people would’ve been convinced by the whole ‘changing the universe’ thing,” Rhys said sourly.

“Not on Pandora, they wouldn’t.”

“Are you in or not? Because I need to know right now,” Rhys said. Tim tapped his finger against the pistol at his hip in thought.

“How do I know you’re good for the money?” he asked.

Rhys made a big show of sighing and rolling his eyes. He reached into his jacket.

“What’s this, you giving me your ECHO digits...?” Tim trailed off, the words written in red projecting above the card in a flashy hologram. “Atlas--? But I thought--” He looked up. “You’re the CEO of Atlas?”

Which wouldn’t have meant something six months ago, but all over Pandora, formerly dormant Atlas manufacturing plants had started spewing smoke and toxic waste, churning out fresh product—mostly weapons—for the first time in nearly five years. Even more surprising, people were getting jobs there, with titles like ‘Senior Manager of Bullet Casings’ or ‘Chief Director of Problem Solving’. People were making money. Atlas was making money.

And this babyfaced haircut was the CEO.

Rhys preened, looking very smug. “That’s right. Still want proof that I’m good for it?”
Rhys could have been lying, Tim realised as the desert whipped past. It wasn’t like business cards couldn’t be forged, even fancy hologrammed ones.

Then again, if Rhys was lying, then Tim would just extort the promised money from his best pal Vaughn and if that meant the Children of Helios had to starve, maybe it would teach the beanpole a lesson or two about how they do business on Pandora.

Crisis Ridge was a small settlement, a four hour ride from Malady’s now-destroyed hide out. Rhys fretted about this, worrying about Malady’s head start and what it could mean for Etna. Tim told him there was no helping it now.

“If Callum’s anywhere, he’s probably at the factory,” Rhys said once they’d pulled up to the edge of town. He bounced on the seat, tapping his ankles against the bike’s frame. “We should just keep going,” he said when it became obvious Tim wasn’t getting the hint.

Tim cut the ignition. “Bad plan. I’m not flying in blind. If Etna’s been in the neighbourhood, people might’ve seen her. For all we know, Callum was lying to get under Malady’s skin. Can’t say I’d blame the guy. Besides, I’m running low on ammo.”

Crisis Ridge had been well-protected, once, located as close as it was to an old Atlas factory. Even after Atlas went under, the place enjoyed a certain amount of peace and quiet, thanks to the former Crimson Lance members who still made the place their home. It sat well into the scrublands, on the bend of a small river that meandered down from the mountains.

“Place looks dead,” Tim remarked as he strolled through the main drag. Rhys strode ahead, his long legs giving him something of an advantage there.

“But whole, at least.” Rhys huffed. “Maybe we’re not too late. Callum and his goons might not have been through yet. Maybe we—”

“Hey!” A man jogged down the street, his face red and twisted into an expression of outrage. “Hey, you! Robot boy! We don’t want any of your kind ‘round here!”

“Uh.” Rhys stopped and leaned away as the stranger drew level.

“Didn’t your cyberears hear me?” The man stepped forward, his hand raised. “We don’t want—”

A soft sound, subtle and nearly unremarkable, cut through the air like a knife. The sound of a pistol holster’s latch unsnapping.

“Step back,” Tim suggested, hand on the butt of his pistol. The man, an older gentleman with an alcoholic’s flush and stubble bristling his chin, glared at Tim. He backed away.

“You better take your friend and go,” the stranger said.

“Why’s that?” Tim asked.

“His kind’s been through here before. Nothing but trouble.”

“You’re talking about Malady’s gang?” Rhys asked. The stranger turned his sullen glare to Rhys.

“I’m talkin’ ‘bout your kind. Robomen and women. Spying on decent folk with their cyber things.”

“Cybernetics,” Rhys said.

“We’re not here to spy on anyone,” Tim said. “We’re just passing through.”
The stranger chewed on that, sending Rhys a murderous look. “Fine,” he said. “See to it that you don’t dawdle.”

“Nice folks,” Rhys remarked as the stranger stomped away. “Friendly.”

“Yeah.” Tim watched the old man leave, his hand still on his pistol. “Maybe you should find something to cover your eye up with.”

Rhys scoffed. “This is ridiculous. I’m not spying on anyone. My ECHOeye’s just in observation mode,” he said, tapping his temple. “It’s not even scanning.”

“All the same.” The main drag was empty, leaving Rhys and Tim alone once more. A breeze rolled through, stirring the dry sprigs of grass and nothing else. The hairs on the back of his neck raised. Tim knew they were alone, but his animal hindbrain was telling him something different.

“Let’s see if we can’t find someone who’s heard about your scientist and get out of here.”

“You’re the one who wanted to come here in the first place,” Rhys muttered. Tim ignored him. He watched the empty windows.

They found a public house, miraculously still open in the middle of the day. An old man stood behind the counter, playing a game of solitaire. He informed them that a woman named Etna did indeed live ‘round these parts, and the last time he’d seen her was several weeks ago, while she was being dragged screaming from her house by bandits.

Tim rubbed at his brow. Rhys stared at the old man.

“You didn’t… think to help her maybe?” he asked. The old man turned over the nine of clubs.

“Lotta people with guns hangin’ around. Seemed like it might’ve been a good idea to keep our noses out of it,” he said.

“No one stepped in? No one? Everyone just stood by and watched while some poor woman got kidnapped by thieves and murderers?” Rhys asked, his voice rising with each question. One of the few people inside stirred at the sound.

“Rhys,” Tim cautioned.

The old man looked at him through rheumy eyes. “The people of Crisis Ridge mind their own business. It’s what keeps us here,” he said.

“Nice suit,” a voice from a nearby table said. Tim shifted his stance, turning his head slightly to take in the folk behind them. The mask kept Tim from glaring at people the way he used to, but the sight of a blank face had its own magic. The people of Crisis Ridge looked away.

“Where’d they take her?” Tim asked.

“North.” The old man flipped over a red seven.

Rhys shot Tim a meaningful look he pretended not to see.

“Nothing out there but the old Atlas factory,” Tim said while Rhys clucked his tongue.

The old man hummed in agreement. “There’s been talk of a game. S’been all over the ‘net. Lots of unsavoury folk comin’ ‘round.”
“Bandits? They came through here?” Tim asked. The old man nodded. “They say anything about Etna?” The old man shook his head.

“Not much. They mentioned the game, though. A little violent entertainment for the local gang. Heard some boys in here talkin’ about it before.”

“But you didn’t ask questions,” Tim said.

“That’s right. But I listened. Those boys mentioned something about a prize. Maybe that was Etna. Maybe she’s got something they want. Lord knows she had plenty of tech at her home, although it’s since been stripped clean. Maybe that’s what they’re after.”

“They took her for the game?” Rhys asked.

The old man shrugged. He didn’t ask questions.

“I don’t think so,” Tim said quietly. “They took her weeks ago. Does the name ‘Callum’ ring any bells?” he asked, raising his voice.


“Let’s go,” he said. Rhys followed reluctantly, and Tim kept himself between him and the people in the bar.

“Say there, son,” the old man called out. “That’s some nice gear you have. You a vault hunter?”

Tim looked back, saw the old man staring up at him, directly into his eyes. It was only Tim’s restraint that kept him from touching the earwidget. He knew it was working. He’d have been fending off broken bottles and pool cues by now if it wasn’t.

“Mind your own business,” he said, and let the door swing shut.

THEN

If Tim were asked to describe himself before he became a lunatic’s doppleganger, he would use the phrase ‘nothing special’ and mean it. But no one asked, so it never came up.

Tim kept going to the shooting range. He went every Wednesday, and then every Wednesday and Friday, and then three times a week, and so on, until he practically haunted the place. He learned accuracy from pistols but quickly grew bored and moved on to SMGs, where he learned the meaning of ‘spray and pray’. He tried shotguns and got bruises the size of silver dollars on his arms until he got used to the kickback. He tried explosive rounds, corrosive rounds, fire rounds. He even got permission to use high powered rifles.

People ignored Tim. In his cubicle, he was a cog. Outside of work, he was a face in the crowd. But at the range, he was a man with dead eye aim. The people at the range knew his face.

Sometimes, Jack would be there too. Sometimes, they would go out for drinks afterwards.

Jack was in engineering. He wore leather jackets, piercings in his ears, and a wedding ring on his finger. He spoke loudly, gestured expansively, and took up space wherever he went. He had a face people looked at, and a body people (attractive people!) checked out. People noticed Jack.

Tim noticed Jack. Once he started, he couldn’t stop noticing Jack. He’d seen Jack’s type before,
those larger than life figures whose voices would carry in a loud room. Those people always seemed
to stand out from their surroundings. They had an aura, a golden shine, the opposite of whatever Tim
had. Tim had black oil in his stomach, cold and bitter. He could feel well up in his throat, trapped
behind his clenched teeth whenever he noticed the golden people. Tim had admired and hated those
people from afar, the way people like him were meant to.

But Jack wouldn’t let him. Jack kept him close and for the first time, Tim experienced what it was
like to sit in that glow. He didn’t know why Jack let him stay, but he tried not to seem like he didn’t
belong.

Jack wore obscenely tight jeans and biker boots. He smelled of cigarettes and hair products. He
spoke crudely, cursed frequently, laughed at his own jokes, and teased Tim as easy as anything. He
was every bad boyfriend Tim had always dreamed about having, but could never attract.

The wedding ring, though.

It was for Jack’s second wife, a woman named Serena who worked in Hyperion’s R&D division.
Jack had known her for a year, married her after six months, and spoke about her rarely. It didn’t
stop Jack from smiling at pretty women across the bar. It didn’t stop him from leaning into Tim’s
space, no matter how much Tim tried to edge away (which wasn’t very much, if he were being
honest).

Back when Tim was nothing special, he turned 26 while working a job he hated, with people who
didn’t respect him, no one in his life, no prospects for his future. It was perhaps the lowest he’d ever
felt. He’d given up auditions long ago, but this was around the time he’d stopped writing. The sight
of a blank page made him sick to his stomach.

He promised himself that he wouldn’t tell a soul this, but after three drinks, he admitted it to Jack.

Jack paused with the bottle half-way to his lips. “Twenty-six? Wow, you look…” He looked him up
and down. “Older.”

“Thanks,” Tim said, slumping forward.

“Hey, I meant it as a compliment!”

“No, you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t,” Jack agreed. Another drink appeared at his elbow just as soon as he finished the first.
Jack didn’t even look over; new drinks appeared for Jack when he needed them, just as easy as that.
“But look--why are you so miserable? You could be doing a lot worse with your life.”

“How?” Tim signalled for his next drink. “I’m wasting my life in a windowless office working a job
I don’t even like and has no chance of advancement, surrounded by people who call me ‘Tom’. I’m
not married, I don’t even have a girlfriend--or a boyfriend. I haven’t written a single line of anything
in almost a year. I’m pathetic. I’ve got nothing.”

Jack considered this while staring down at his day-glo blue drink.

“You’ve got me,” he said.

“Ooooooh, where’s my drink?”

“I’m serious!”
“So am I.” Tim leaned over the bar, trying to catch the bartender’s eye.

“Alright.” Jack knocked what was left of his drink back. He grabbed Tim by the arm and hauled him from the stool, nearly knocking them both over in the process.

“Hey!” Tim tried to pull away but Jack barely seemed to notice. He lead Tim from the bar, shouting at the bartender to put what was left on his tab. People stepped out of Jack’s way. Nobody seemed inclined to help Tim.

“Where are we going?” he asked, resigning himself to following Jack’s whims. It was either that or dislocate his shoulder.

“It’s a surprise for the birthday boy,” Jack said as he pulled him through the streets.

Tim’s stomach clenched and resumed his struggling.

“Hey, come on--“ Jack yanked him back on course, down the street towards a cab line. “This is a good thing. You’re definitely going to like it.”

“Yeah, no, Jack, it’s fine, I’m fine--“

“Timtam, you’re insulting me!” He pulled Tim close, threw one arm around his shoulder and held him at his side. “You’re acting like I’m taking you to the airlock for an Eos Special. This is gonna be fun!”

“I know what your idea of fun is, Jack,” Tim said but he stopped fighting. Jack pressed up against his side, arm heavy and hot against the back of his neck. Tim could smell the old leather, old cigarettes, sticky drinks, and aftershave that smelled like wood smoke. It made his mouth water. It made his chest hurt. Even if Jack did lead him to an airlock, Tim didn’t think he could be strong enough to pull away.

But Jack didn’t lead him to an airlock. He lead him to their office, deep into the guts of Hyperion, to the elevator that the men and women of the engineering department took to work every day. Jack flashed his employee ID and punched in a code. The console flashed and the elevator doors slid shut.

In an enclosed space like this, Jack took up every one of Tim’s senses. Jack didn’t speak as they rode the elevator down, but he hummed softly. His thumb pressed against the back of Tim’s neck, toying with the small, soft hairs there. Tim wondered if he even noticed he was doing it. Tim felt hot all over. He felt electric. He wanted to pull away. He never wanted to leave.

He cleared his throat.

“Seriously, where are we going?”

Jack pinched the back of his neck.

“Patience, pumpkin. Just sit quiet and be a good boy for daddy.”

Tim wanted to die.

Jack had to disengage more high-tech locks, the sort of things Tim expected to see standing between him and the fun things at Hyperion. He lead him into a massive room, lined with windows on one wall, and what Tim recognized as digistruct tech in the middle. It looked like a Constructor with the guts pulled out. Jack released Tim and approached the machine, the heels of his boots clicking against the metal floor.
Tim wrapped his arms around himself, trying to ignore how cold he suddenly felt.

“What is this place?” he asked.

“This is what I’ve been losing my beautiful mind over for the past three months,” Jack said, getting on his knees in front of the machine. He pulled a console out from a tangle of wires and began punching in commands Tim couldn’t see.

“Just looks like a digistruct device,” Tim said, trying not to stare at the way the denim hugged Jack’s ass and thighs.

“Ohohoho, look who’s the expert. This, Timmy, is more than just a digistruct device. Here—” He unholstered his pistol and held it out to Tim.

“Uhh, what do you want me to do with this?” Tim asked, taking it gingerly. “You’re not—you didn’t bring me out here to have a duel, did you?”

Jack barked out a surprised laugh.

“No, but that’s an idea. Maybe some other time. No, I brought you out here for this.”

Jack hit a button. The machine hummed to life, glowing Hyperion colours. Two figures collected in mid-air, forming together from a jumble of blue hexagons. The figures were humanoid, made up of polygonal shapes, looking like the ball-joint dolls artists used.

“Whoa,” Tim breathed.

They turned their blank faces towards Tim. They both raised their hands as if they were holding weapons.

“What are they--whoa!” Tim dodged just as the first one fired. He looked back to see the scorch marks on the metal where he once stood—and saw the figures turn to him again, arms raised. He ran.

Cover exploded out of the ground, a stretch of waist-high blue light just in front of Tim. He vaulted over without thinking, stumbling only a little, before cramming himself tightly against the protection it offered.

“Come on, Tim, it’s no fun if you just hide!”

“What the hell, Jack!” Tim yelped as a blast bounced off the lip of his cover. “Are you trying to get me killed? Call them off!”

“I gave you a weapon, didn’t I? And a full clip. Come on, Timmy, this should be a cakewalk.”

More constructs rose from the ground, pieces of cover forming from hexagonal blue light until the room no longer looked empty. Tim peered over the edge and spotted the two figures, coming slowly towards him. He caught sight of Jack, seated beside the machine on what looked like a throne of blue light. Tim wanted to kill him. He looked at the machine instead.

How much could that thing be worth?

He rose and took the shot. The bullet bounced off a white shield.

“Whoa-ho there! Not cool, Timtam!” Jack shouted as Tim took off at a run, pursued now by the constructs. “That machine’s worth more than your life!”
“Jack, you asshole! Call them off!” A blast pinged off a blue wall, just as Tim ducked behind it. Jack only laughed. “I’m not joking! They’re gonna kill me!” He flinched back as one construct fired again, nearly taking off his nose.

“Only if you don’t fight back!”

Tim tried for another exit, only to find himself cornered, walled in with blue light. He cursed viciously, turned around and found himself face to blank-face with one of the figures. He raised his pistol without thinking, squeezed the trigger once-- Twice--

The figure jerked and collapsed in a cascade of blue. The other one, standing ten paces away, turned like a marionette pulled by strings, and began striding towards Tim. Tim’s mind felt blissfully empty and the only thing he could see through the red haze was a target.

The second figure twisted, its neck snapping back. Right between the eyes.

Tim lowered his gun, breathing hard. Jack applauded.

“Nicely done, kiddo! A little rough at the start, but you got there in the end. How many shots did you use? Five?”

Tim rounded on him. “You asshole!”

“Take it easy, Timmy.” Jack’s grin widened. He raised the console in one hand. “Ready for round two?”

They went four rounds, two enemies at a time, whose speed and accuracy only increased with each new ring of the proverbial bell. As if they were learning. The arena changed with each new fight and Tim quickly learned how to make better use of cover. Jack watched the whole time, seated on his throne, the console dangling from his fingers. Whenever he met Tim’s eyes, he would smile. Tim felt like someone had set a firecracker off in his chest.

They left nearly two hours later, Tim leaning heavily on Jack, punch-drunk and badly singed where a shot had managed to get him. Jack gave him an Anshin syringe, told him to suck it up, grinning at him like he’d won a prize.

Jack brought him to a large but cluttered office and sat him down in the only other chair.

“You’re not getting another gun out, are you?” Tim asked warily while Jack rummaged through the desk.

“Can’t get enough, can you, killer? No, no. No more gun play tonight.” He pulled out a bottle of amber liquid, grabbed two coffee mugs and set them down in front of Tim with a flourish. “This is the second part of my surprise. I got this as a wedding gift and it’s too nice to keep drinking alone.”

“What is it?” Tim asked.

“Heran Scotch. Single malt. The real stuff.” He pulled out the cork, producing a sweet, hollow sound, and poured them each a finger.

“So.” Jack flung himself into his chair, kicked his feet up, and tossed his glasses onto his desk. “How does it feel being twenty-six?”

Tim took a tentative sip while he considered the question. His ears rang. His side hurt. His sweater had a hole in it and his hands were shaking, still. The adrenaline made his head buzz. He’d felt
something like this before, after spending 48 solid hours awake. A sort of sharp, broken sensation in
his mind, like he was looking at everything through a crystal lens, something cold and sharp in his
head, making him dumb.

Jack looked at him from across the desk, one corner of his lips raised in a half-smile. The golden-
yellow light of his banker lamp brought out the caramel tones of his tousled brown hair. His rumpled
shirt collar gaped open, his shirt sleeves pushed up to his elbows.

Tim took another drink, and licked the taste of smoke and oak off his lips.

“It feels pretty good,” he admitted with a grin.

Jack’s own smile widened, his wrong-coloured eyes gleaming. He raised his mug.

“To being twenty-six.”

Tim shook his head and clinked his mug against Jack’s.

“To being twenty-six.”

He remembered that he still had Jack’s gun tucked into the waistband of his trousers.

“Keep it,” Jack said, when Tim tried to hand it back.

“Really?”

“Sure. Consider it a gift. Happy birthday, Timmy.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who’s been following along and leaving me kudos and kind
comments. Especially the comments, which have been so nice that I have to lie down
for a while after I read them.

By the by, if you catch any errors or typos, please let me know.

Next chapter: Tim and Rhys play a game. Malady can't make a deal. Jack and Tim find
an outlet for their aggression.
They rode north, killing the engine and stashing the bike out of sight of the factory, and approached on foot. Tim had made this decision in the hopes they could approach in silence. Rhys didn’t get the memo.

He fumed the whole way. “I can’t believe the people here sometimes. Is there something in the water? Some kind of contamination that erodes people’s basic sense of decency?”

“As opposed to Helios, where everyone exchanged hugs and kisses and shared their feelings every morning during the two minute love.”

Rhys walked in silence. “Okay, that’s fair. But no matter how bad it got up there, I don’t think any one of us would have stood by and watched someone get dragged off screaming.” Tim snorted. “I wouldn’t have.”

“Congratulations. For the record, that attitude in Crisis Ridge isn’t exactly normal, even for Pandora.”

The old man's face stuck in Tim’s mind, the way he spoke like they were discussing the weather. And there was something odd about the way he’d looked at Tim, like he might’ve recognized him. Tim rubbed his distinctive jaw. Not possible, he told himself. The mask was perfect, and he’d never even been to Crisis Ridge before today.

“So, you’re from Pandora, then?” Rhys asked, pulling Tim away from his thoughts.

“No,” Tim said, dropping his hand from his face.

“Where are you from, then?” Rhys asked.

“That’s kind of a complicated story,” Tim said. “We’re here.”

The factory didn’t look abandoned. A lot of bandit technicals had been left outside the front entrance, parked and double parked haphazardly in front of a sign that cautioned people to PIS OFF. The factory walls had been reworked to make the place look like a fortress, scrap metal bolted onto concrete to create walkways and guard towers. Tim and Rhys stared down at the layout from the ledge of a distant hill—Tim through a high powered scope—and both frowned.
“Eight guards on the wall. Probably more inside. Aaaand that’s a turret,” Tim muttered, pushing the zoom in tight on one of the guard towers.

“Are they having some kind of convention?” Rhys asked as another vehicle packed with bandits roared up.

“Or a party. The old man mentioned a game.” There was only one turret, at least. There’d been another one once, but all that remained was a blackened hunk of metal. Both had likely been installed for Atlas, long ago. The remaining one didn’t look to have been kept in good condition.

Tim sighed and lowered the rifle.

“Good news, bad news. Good news: that turret’s about one grenade away from becoming scrap metal. Bad news: it’ll probably cut me in half before I can get close enough to deliver the payload.”

“Don’t you have a rocket launcher?”

“Oh, yeah. I keep it in my magical back pocket, along with my unicorn and a partner that doesn’t ask me stupid questions.”

“I don’t pay you to make smart comments,” Rhys snapped, flushing.

“I haven’t seen a dime outta you yet. And until I do, I’ll make as many smart comments as I like.”

Tim refocused down the scope, watching the patrols. There was no mechanical gate, leaving the entrance open to spy on. Tim spotted three toughs loaded down with enough hardware to blow up a tank stood not far from the entrance. He saw the glint of metal on their limbs, and cursed.

“Some of Malady’s boys in the yard, by the looks of things.”

Rhys cursed. “Surprised she had any left, after you blew everyone up.”

“There’s always more bad guys.”

Rhys dropped his head in his hands and groaned. “That’s it then. We’re too late. Malady’s beaten us to the punch.”

“I don’t think so,” Tim said. “If she had Etna, she’d’ve come and gone by now, right?”

Rhys raised his head and focused his gaze down at the factory. “Maybe,” he admitted. He glanced over to Tim, gnawed on his lip, and finally said, “So, what’s the plan? Because if you’re right, Etna’s not out of our reach just yet but she’s not exactly safe. If this bandit convention really is here for her, she’s definitely not safe.”

“I know.”

“Then what are we doing?”

“I’m trying to think. We can’t strong-arm our way in, we’ll get slaughtered.”

“What about your digistructs? Can’t they lend us a hand?”

Tim shifted his weight, and looked away. The digistructs weren’t a bad idea, he knew. Except... He’d kept the one quiet last night during show and tell, but if he brought them out in a fight, he would need them to communicate. And even though they used the same voice modulators Tim did, he wasn’t confident Rhys wouldn’t recognize something in them if they spoke.
“I’d like to keep them as our last option. They wear me out quickly,” Tim said, which wasn’t a lie. Rhys sighed but didn’t push him.

“What about one of the cars? Some of them’ve got mounted guns. Maybe we could steal one and, I don’t know, shoot up the place?”

“And in this scenario, where around 90 or more bandits are bearing down on us with grenades and rocket launchers and machine guns, are you the driver or the gunner?”

“Um. The driver?”

“Good call. But let’s call that ‘Plan D’ for ‘desperate’.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Rhys’ brows and the corners of his lips were drawn down in a serious scowl, but his chapped lower lip stuck out in a pout. Tim looked away, something in his stomach warming at the sight.

Simple pleasures. Like the sight of a lip just begging for a little nibble…

Focus, Tim.

No other vehicles had rolled up since the last, and the guards at the door thinned out. Tim was about to suggest they try sneaking in when the wall-mounted speakers crackled to life.

“Greetings and salutations, dirtbags! Welcome to the first annual Splatterdome!”

“Oh boy,” Tim muttered.

“What’s a Splatterdome?” Rhys asked. “I don’t even see a dome.”

“Registration is in the tent behind the torso pole! Remember all contracts are 100% legally binding! If you can’t read or write, get someone to put an ‘x’ on your contract! Entry fee is non-negotiable! If you need a doctor, you should have brought one!”

“I bet this is the game.” Rhys squinted. “Maybe it’s another death race…”

“Nah, they left their cars outside. Wait—” Tim lowered his rifle. “What do you mean another death race? How many death races have you seen?”

Rhys’ smile was decidedly smug. “I know you think I’m just some soft company man, but I’ve been on Pandora for a while. I’ve seen things you couldn’t imagine.”

“I can imagine a death race,” Tim said, unimpressed.

“Ohoho! And who’s this? It looks like our guest of honor has decided to grace us with her presence! Boys and girls, say hello to Dr. Llewellyn Etna!”

“—rather rude, I was in the middle of my work—!”

The colour drained from Rhys’ face.

“‘Guest of honour’ doesn’t sound good,” Tim admitted.

“We have to get in there. We can’t let this happen. We can’t—” Rhys stopped. Tim patted him awkwardly on the arm.
“Alright, take it easy, Atlas.”

Rhys took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes shut. He exhaled, shoulders relaxing.

“I know how we can get inside,” he said, his confidence catching Tim off-guard. When he opened his eyes, Tim saw the yellow glow of his ECHOeye. “We’re going to need a change of outfit, and you’re going to need to trust me.”

“Ah, there she is!”

Malady held her head high, refusing to cower under the suspicious glares and outright gaping she received from the assorted scum of the borderlands. Callum’s smug tone during their last conversation had apparently been warranted, although Malady was loathe to admit it.

She had intended to storm whatever compound Callum set up for himself and take Etna by force, but those plans had been scuttled as soon as she laid eyes on just how well-fortified Callum and his crew were.

And what a crew! More men and women than Malady herself had at her disposal, especially after that faceless asshole had his way.

Callum was—or had been, anyway—a two-bit, low level bandit boss, barely worth her time and energy. The last time they’d met, he’d had barely a handful of followers to his name. Clearly, things had changed.

“Callum,” Malady purred. “I wish I could say it’s good to see you, but I respect you far too much to lie to you.”

Callum’s smile twisted the scars that crossed his cheeks. He’d been handsome, once, which is why Malady had given him the time of day. But picking one too many fights he couldn’t win had shredded his good looks. There might’ve been some charm to be had in that face, but if there was, Callum wasn’t the man to use it.

“This is why I like you, Mal.” He strode through the factory’s enclosed yard, stepping lightly to avoid the trench. “Your forthrightness does you credit. It makes you one of a kind to my eyes. Shall we discuss this in my office?”

“Yes, that sounds…” Malady struggled to remain honest. “Ideal.”

Callum’s office was a monitoring station. A large console sat in the centre of the room, and the three walls flanking the door were lined with screens depicting security feeds from around the complex. Blue light glared off of every surface, hard on the eyes and grating to Malady’s esthetic sensibilities. She couldn’t see a desk, or any chairs. There was nothing, in fact, save for the console and the screens.

Callum leaned against the computer and smiled.

“Where’s Etna?” Malady asked.

“Yes, let’s just get to the heart of the matter. Dr. Etna is in a safe place. For now. I’m keeping her there until the game is over.”

“Why the game at all?” Malady demanded. “Nobody else out there cares about her. The only people
who want this ‘prize’ are the ones I brought with me. Just give her to me and we’ll be on our way. You can enjoy your violent theatrics in peace.”

“No.”

Malady’s finely painted lip pulled back, revealing gem encrusted teeth.

“I could blow this place to the sky,” she said.

“Not without killing Etna.”

“Maybe I don’t need her so badly after all,” she said. Her bodyguards shifted their weight, fidgeting like poorly trained attack dogs.

Malady spared a brief thought to her previous guards, who had been so unjustly sent to bandit Valhalla by that prick with no face.

“I don’t think that’s true. We’re still talking,” Callum said, spreading his hands.

And there was something wrong with his smile. The blue light made it look sharp, made the shadows pool strangely in the scars on his face.

“Not for much longer. Not if you insist on being difficult,” Malady said, sounding more annoyed than she would have liked.

Callum shrugged. “Look, I like that you’ve been honest with me, so I’ll return the favour. I didn’t actually intend to use Etna as bait for this little game, but certain factors have pushed my plan ahead of schedule.”

“Your… plan?” Malady scowled. “What plan?”

“The game was just supposed to be a little bit of fun for me, but an important pawn showed up earlier than I expected. Oh, not you,” he said with a laugh as Malady opened her mouth. “No, see, I think this is your trouble. You think this is about you.”

Malady became uncomfortably aware of the small space she was enclosed in. She became aware of the closed door behind her, and the unseen eyes of Callum’s people standing against the wall, their gaze heavy and strange on the sides of her face.

“I took Etna for my own reasons,” he said. “I’ll lose her for the same. And for this to work out, I can’t lose her to you.”

“For what to work out?” Malady struggled to reign in her temper. She hated cryptic nonsense—especially when she was on the receiving end.

As though sensing her rising agitation, her bodyguards drew themselves to attention on either side of her. The one on the right—Malady could never remember his name—dropped his hand to his holster.

One of Callum’s people oozed out from the shadows and took them in silence. Malady didn’t even look. She kept her face clean and blank, pretending as though the oddly blank-eyed stare of Callum’s followers didn’t make her skin crawl.

“Let’s be careful here,” she suggested without turning her head.

“That might be the most intelligent thing you’ve said all day,” Callum said. “I can’t let you take Etna.
But I can offer you something better.”

“Better?” Malady sniffed.

The console beeped and text flashed across the monitor. An alert Malady couldn’t follow. Callum dismissed it without turning his gaze from her face.

“You want corporate technology, right?” he asked. “That’s what you and your people have been scrabbling through the wastes for, right? Well, what if I told you I can give you something better?”

Malady snorted. Callum’s people hadn’t backed off and their close presence started to strip away at her nerves.

Something about the way Callum watched her put her teeth on edge. There was an eagerness in his gaze that made the small hairs on her arm stand up.

“I can give you Atlas,” he said.

“Found these two lurking outside,” the guard said, knocking Tim forward with the butt of his rifle. Tim fell to one knee, catching himself with bound hands before he ate dirt.

They’d been taken what looked like a guardhouse inside the compound. Tim had caught sight of the packed registration tent and the torso pole on his way in. Both were about what he expected, although the torso pole had caused Mr. ‘I’ve Seen Things You Can’t Even Imagine’ to faint.

They dumped Rhys on the ground beside Tim.

“Looks fancy,” the guard captain remarked, nudging Rhys with the toe of his boot. “Nice duds. The headband’s a little strange, though. Doesn’t really go with the rest of the outfit.”

“I tried to tell him, but he wouldn’t listen,” Tim said.

The captain turned his attention to Tim with a curl of his lip. “Well, well, well. What do we—Holy shit what’s wrong with your face.”

“I got a little overzealous during my morning shave,” Tim said.

“It’s some kind of techno mask,” the guard supplied, tapping Tim on the side of the head with the barrel of his rifle. “We think it’s got something to do with the thing on his ear.”

“It’s a delicate condition and I’m very sensitive about it, thank you,” Tim said, leaning away.

“Why didn’t you take it off?” the captain asked. The guard scratched at the line of his mask sheepishly.

“Uh. Cormorant tried, but it shocked him.”

“That’s right. Two thousand volts to anyone I don’t like,” Tim said with a smile. It pulled at the sore skin on his cheek, where he knew a bruise had begun to blossom. Cormorant had been knocked silly, and his buddy hadn’t and he hadn’t taken kindly to the way Tim laughed at him.

His buddy glared at Tim now, and jabbed the barrel of his rifle into his neck.

“Do you know what I do to people I don’t like?” he asked.
“Barrel down, Jackdaw. Alright, you—” The captain pointed at Tim. “Start talking or we start hitting. Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Tim considered drawing things out, stalling until Rhys could wake up, but he didn’t fancy getting his ribs kicked in before the fun could even start.

“Tim. And the beanpole’s name is Rhys.”

“Well, Tim. You put a lot of work into hiding your face. Makes a man wonder what you’re so afraid of letting people see.”

“Maybe I’m just shy,” Tim said.

The captain snorted. “Maybe. Maybe my boys and I give you a reason to keep your face hidden. This place used to be a processing plant, and we’ve got plenty of molten metal just bubbling away, waiting for something to do. Maybe you keep that in mind before you make another smart comment. Now—” He knelt down until he was level with Tim. “What brings you boys to our lovely home on such a fine day?”

“We heard your announcement over the ‘net. Something about a reward caught our attention. Thought we might come and see what it’s all about.”

“What’d you find on them?” the captain asked Jackdaw.

“A bandit pistol, a bandit shield, and two pipe bombs,” Jackdaw reported. Tim noted he didn’t mention the small chunk of change they’d pulled from Rhys’ coat.

The captain must’ve noticed something amiss too. His eyes narrowed at his subordinate. “Really? That’s everything.”

While Jackdaw assured his captain as earnestly as he could manage that he’d found only what he said, Rhys finally began to stir.

“Whuh—” Rhys groaned and tried to push himself off the ground, only to have his arms jerk to a stop. His uncovered eye widened, the pupil swivelling until it found Tim. “What—”

Tim glanced at the guards, still preoccupied with their drama, and leaned a little towards his partner.

“Do what I tell you and follow my lead,” he muttered.

“Hey!” The captain rounded on them both. “What did you just say to him?” he demanded.

“I told him that everything was fine. That we’re still in the negotiation phase,” Tim said while Jackdaw yanked Rhys upright by the back of his shirt.

Jackdaw laughed. “It’s not nice to lie to your friend like that.”

“He’s not my friend, genius. He’s my boss.” This proclamation was met with stunned stares and silence, from Rhys as well as the others. Tim squared his shoulders. “Come on, can’t you tell he’s the brains of the operation? He’s obviously a badass. Look at his face! How do you think he lost that eye?”

Everyone turned to stare at Rhys, whose expression didn’t exactly scream ‘Pandoran hardened badass’.

“I’ll tell you how,” Tim went on, glaring at Rhys. “It took seventeen—no, seventy bandits three solid
days to wear down the fortifications. And only one made it out alive, after. And he had to crawl away, on account of having both his legs broken.”

Everyone continued to stare at Rhys.

“I haven’t heard about anything like that,” the captain said.

“Well, what about Hyperion? You’ve heard of them, right? Haven’t you ever wondered why that satellite ain’t in the sky anymore?” Tim jerked his head towards Rhys. “This guy thought it spoiled the view.” Rhys’ head snapped towards Tim, his one eye wide and eyebrows high.

“How—” he began but shut his mouth when Tim gave a minute shake of his head. The guards exchanged uncertain glances.

“I heard some desk jockey went nuts and destroyed the energy core or something,” one said.

“Who told you that?” Rhys demanded, looking believably angry.

“You expect me to believe that load? Everybody and their cousin’s been taking credit for sinking Hyperion,” the captain said, unimpressed.

“Well, they’re all liars,” Rhys said before Tim could speak. “I did it. I overloaded the satellite’s core with nothing but a stun baton and—and a dwindling oxygen supply because the systems were trying to vent me into space at the time!”

“Nice,” Tim muttered.

“Alright, tough guy. If that’s the case, what’s he need you for? And what do you both need money for?”

Tim shrugged. “Haven’t you ever heard of hard times? Things get rough. We need to get this guy a new eye before he can get back on his game, and a new eye needs money. *Ipso facto, quid quo pro, noli me tangere, et cetera.*”

The captain looked thoughtful, which Tim took as a good sign. Rhys had fallen silent, which Tim took as an even better sign, although the kid’s little piece of improvisation had been impressive.

“So. You’re just after the prize, is that it? You want to join the Splatterdome?”

Rhys winced. Tim nodded.

The captain stared into Tim’s blank face for a while, before he sighed and shrugged.

“Whatsoever. Your funeral.” He gestured to Jackdaw, who reluctantly took out his knife. “There’s an entry fee, just so you know.”

“Oh, that’s no problem,” Tim said, rubbing at his now-free wrists. “Your pal Jackdaw there already collected from us.”

“How did you hear?” Rhys hissed as soon as they’d been left alone. Their captors/escorts had taken them to the registration tent, and then to a grand hall filled with smashed machinery and other bandits.

“Hear about what?” Tim asked, distracted. A group of bandits had found a cache of liquor—or maybe they’d brought some in. They were loud, and getting louder, egged on by each other’s voices.
Tim could hear them boasting of conquests both violent and carnal, their hands resting on their hips, close to their guns.

“About Helios. About—about what happened. Did Vaughn tell you?”

“What?” One of the bandits nudged his friend nodded towards Rhys and Tim. They didn’t turn to stare, exactly, but the body language of the group changed and Tim knew he was being kept in their sights.

“About Hyperion. Hey!” Rhys grabbed Tim’s shoulder.

“What!” Tim snapped, rounding on Rhys, keeping himself between the kid and the bandits’ sights.

“Did Vaughn tell you about Hyperion?”

“What are you talking about? I saw it fall out of the sky, same as everyone else.”

Rhys furrowed his brows and stared at Tim for a long beat. “You… were guessing?”

“Guessing about what? What are you even—” Tim stopped, realisation dawning. He released a long breath. “Wait… Are you trying to tell me…?”

Rhys looked away, one hand tugging at the torn sash they’d tied around his head.

“You…? You. You broke—You and the satellite—You—!”

“Shut up,” Rhys said. Predictably, he’d started blushing again.

“You broke Helios?”

Rhys grabbed him by both arms and man-handled Tim to the far wall. Tim allowed it to happen, too stunned to fight.

“Shut up!” Rhys leaned in close and lowered his voice. “Yes, yes, I broke Helios.”

“How?”

“It went like I said. With a stun baton,” Rhys muttered.

Tim’s mind crowded with questions but all he could manage was a weak, “Why?”

Rhys’ gaze sank. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You—you crashed a satellite armed with nothing but a stun baton while the systems were trying to vent you into space.” Tim wasn’t sure he believed it, but there was nothing of that smug, self-assuredness that Rhys had displayed earlier over far less-impressive boasts. This wasn’t a death race, or cyborg bandits, or a woman dressed up like a broken mirror factory. This was Hyperion. This was Jack’s legacy—and Tim’s last shot at getting his old face back.

Rhys glared at him, one eye doing the work of two and managing just fine.

“I don’t. Want to talk. About it.”

Oh, but Tim wanted to. He could feel heat crawling its way up his neck, all the questions in his mind falling away like dead and dying leaves during a coming storm. His face. His identity. All of it had been on Helios, held hostage in Jack’s fucking system, the only proof that Timothy Lawrence had
ever been a real person and not just some invention of Tim’s imagination.

And this fucking babyfaced, slicked-back haircut—

Tim’s grip tightened on Rhys’ arms and even without seeing his face, Rhys seemed to sense something in the atmosphere between them had changed. His glare fell away. He stepped back, but Tim held him fast.

“Tim, what—” Rhys tried, but Tim couldn’t think of a single thing to say. Probably wouldn’t have heard himself over the sound of blood in his ears anyway.

“Alright, you scumbags! It’s time to get your idiot selves killed!”

The gate rumbled open, cutting a white square into the dim room. The crowd roared and cheered, bandits clapping each other on the back, smacking each other on the back of the head, and generally pushing and shoving towards the outside.

Tim and Rhys remained where they were, staring at each other. Rhys’ mouth was pulled into a thin line, his brows low. Tim didn’t know what his face looked like at that moment, while the red-hot tide receded, leaving his mind empty. He could guess.

Rhys’ gaze flicked down to his arms. He quirked one brow.

Hotter than the anger that came before it, shame and regret bloomed thick and horrible in his chest, squeezing the breath from his lungs. Tim released Rhys carefully and let his hands drop. He stepped away, out of arms’ reach.

“We should, uh.” Tim nodded towards the doors. He couldn’t look at Rhys.

“Right,” Rhys said, staring hard at Tim. “Splatterdome.”

The sun hung high in the bright, clear sky. The sound around them rose up to a deafening roar.

Rhys was right. There were no domes.

Outside, instead, they found what looked like an ore processing line, a long stretch of conveyor belt that lead into a large drum of treated water. Like the rest of the factory, it’d seen improvements courtesy of the bandits. Jagged scrap metal had been bolted onto the sides, creating low-hanging arches that one might attempt to jump over, or limbo under, although Rhys couldn’t see how you’d do either without dislocating your pelvis. There were spinning saw blades and swinging machetes, glued to robot arms that spat sparks with each jerking movement. A trench filled with yellow-orange ooze had been dug up underneath. This lead to a finish line, where something glittered in the centre of a metallic spiderweb.

“Is this… an obstacle course?” Rhys asked.

Tim didn’t reply. He hadn’t spoken since they’d walked outside. He had his arms crossed, his body turned slightly away from Rhys.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, welcome to the Splatterdome 3000!”

Someone had built stands around the perimeter of the course. A cheering, screaming audience filled the boxes.

“I hope you’re all warmed up and ready to face the impossible! We’ve got a real treat for you all
here today! We’ve got almost 60 contestants—that’s six times as many fingers as y’all were born
with—comin’ in from all over the borderlands, all linin’ themselves up to get torn up! This course
slices, it dices, it chops, it purees, it roasts and fricassees! Once they flip, shimmy, and fight their way
past the chopper, they’ve got to jam and jive over a ten foot pool filled with whatever we could find
inside those skull-and-crossbone drums inside this dump!”

Rhys ran a hand slowly down his face. His heart pounded and his palms were damp. He was past the
age of his knees knocking together with fear, but he felt like it was a close thing.

“And if they can make it past the bouncy platforms of destruction, then they’re awarded with the
ultimate prize: an Eridian artefact!”

“What?” Rhys’ disbelief could scarcely be heard over the roar of the audience.

“—courtesy of our guest of honour, Dr. Etnaaaaaaa!”

“What?!”

“And a bunch of money, of course. Now! Seal the exits! Throw your hands in the air! Make some
noise! It’s tiiiiiime!”

“We’re gonna die,” Rhys said faintly. The guards from before entered the arena just as the gates slid
shut. They were armed, but at this point it was a mere formality. The crowd of contestants pressed
tightly against them from all sides, surging towards the starting line. Rhys’ vision began to grey
around the edges as panic began to take hold.

“Waitwaitwait what’s happening. We’re not doing this, are we?”

“Take it easy,” Tim muttered.

“Take it easy?” Rhys wasn’t proud of the way his voice cracked, but he was too wound up to care.
“Didn’t you see that—that thing? We’re supposed to run through that thing? With everyone else? I
don’t know if you were paying attention, but this thing is a death trap! And everyone has guns and
we don’t! We—Hey!” Rhys yelped as someone grabbed his metal arm, yanking him until he was
face-to-mask with a blood-splattered psycho.

“Meat! You smell like clean meat! You—” A large hand wrapped around the psycho’s face. There
was a flurry of movement—Rhys could see Tim’s knee, hear the impact, the crunch of cartilage—
and the psycho staggered back, significantly more blood-splattered than before.

“You need to start paying more attention to your surroundings, boss,” Tim said, breath hot against
Rhys’ ear. Rhys could smell fresh blood. They were close, Tim flush against his back, with one arm
around his shoulders.

Rhys tried to think of a response, anything beyond ‘arms’ or ‘hands’ or ‘please’, but before his brain
cells could reconvene, Tim let him go. One of the guards shouted something at them while waving
his rifle around. Tim raised his hand, either in placation or acknowledgement, Rhys wasn’t sure.

Tim pushed something into Rhys’ hands. Rhys looked down and saw he’d been given a bandit’s
pistol. He hadn’t even seen Tim disarm the guy.

“There. Now we’re armed,” Tim said.

“What about you?” Rhys asked, even as he slid the clip out to check the ammo.
“Don’t you worry about me. This is my job, remember?”

They were at the starting line now, crammed in the middle of the pack. No one else tried to grab Rhys, but Rhys could see out of the corner of his eyes the way people were eyeing them. They stuck out, he supposed.

“What’s the plan?” he asked.

An airhorn went off and the men standing at the starting line surged forward, urged on by the crowd and the guards standing on either side. Panic resumed and Rhys’ stomach roiled, his meagre breakfast threatening to make a return. The sound of the crowd seemed to come from far away. He was moving forward.

Tim’s hand brushed against the small of his back, almost tentative.

“The plan is you stick close and let me do the hard work.”

Rhys looked at Tim and he wondered if he looked as frightened and pathetic as he felt. Tim patted him gingerly on the shoulder.

“Relax, boss. I got this.”

Tim’s personal fuck you list was an ever-changing, ever-growing list of things to accomplish before he could finish a job, collect a payout, or before some asshole could kill him. These were the current items:

1. Keep Rhys alive
2. Get a gun
3. Figure out a way to get to Etna
4. Figure a way to get out with Etna and Rhys in one piece
5. Don’t get killed

They were steps in front of the machine when Rhys grabbed his arm.

“The robot arms,” he said urgently. “They’re in awful shape. You should be able to break them with some effort.”

Tim made a note.

He managed item #2 less than a minute after getting onto the conveyor belt. It was packed with humans, and people were only beginning to realise forcing their way onto the aptly named ‘chopper’ wasn’t going to get them far. A machete lodged itself into the man standing directly in front of Tim and Tim ducked and grabbed the gun from his limp hand before it could fall into the muck. He pulled Rhys under another swing, grabbed the dead bandit, and held it out in time to absorb the next strike.

The crowd loved it.

“What do we have here? We got ourselves a thinkin’ man, looks like!”

Tim heard the whirr of servos as the robot arm struggled with the new weight of a dead body. Rhys was right—these things were in bad shape. The next arm that swung for them came in low, aiming for their shins, and Tim lifted his feet and stomped down hard on the joint, snapping the cheap metal struts that’d kept it up. Another arm came down from the arch, blade aimed for Tim’s scalp. Tim
ducked, grabbed the robot’s three-fingered grip, spun Rhys to his side and twisted the blade into the man creeping up behind them.

“Holy shit,” Rhys said, barely audible over the crowd.

“Look at that! Strategic, I love that! This man’s got no face but he’s got plenty of guts! Let’s see if we’ll get to see ‘em up close soon, eh?”

The machetes swung behind them, and Tim heard the sound of someone grunting, followed by the screech of torn metal. The wreckage they left in their wake made it easier for the others to follow and Tim knew without looking that it was starting to get crowded. He kept a tight grip on Rhys’ hand and his new best friend and pushed forward.

It was a bit like dancing, although Tim had never seen a show quite like this. He kept Rhys at his side, spinning him out and pulling him close as needed. He wanted to move slow, but the conveyor belt’s movements didn’t make that easy. Buzz saws the size of car tires screamed on either side of the path ahead, already flecked with red. Tim saw a pale body vanish into the teeth, heard a brief scream, followed by a series of splashes from far below. Rhys groaned beside him as the audience screamed. When the buzz saw bowed into sight again, Tim saw it dripped with fresh blood.

“Another one’s gone and another one’s gone—!”

No obvious arms to grab this time. And weight obviously didn’t bother the servos. No time to ask Rhys for strategies. Even without the conveyor belt forcing them onwards, the surging bandits behind them sure as hell motivated Tim to keep moving.

“Stay close!” Tim shouted. Rhys’ response was lost in a scream of an unfortunate bandit somewhere behind them.

The first step took them between the first two blades, a tight fit that barely allowed enough room to breathe. Rhys had both arms around Tim’s waist and if this had been any other situation, Tim might’ve found it distracting. He counted each blade, taking each step as carefully as possible, his feet slipping on fresh blood. He caught a glimpse ahead of the others who’d managed to make it this far and took aim. Another blade fell into view, blocking his sights.

A lot of things happened, next.

Tim heard another scream from somewhere behind him. Rhys shouted something and Tim felt something slam into him from behind, directly into his spine, knocking the wind out of him. Tim lost his balance, fell a precious few inches forward. He felt Rhys twist from his grip, his feet slipping and they both fell.

Tim hit the conveyor belt and it was only animal instinct that made him pull his arms and legs in tight, preventing himself from losing both. He thought he heard Rhys scream, but there was too much noise, coming from every direction. Tim gripped the sides, fought the wave of disorientation, and took off at a running crouch between the next blades. He looked back for Rhys—

Saw the bandit with his hand raised and the man behind him with a gun—

(but no Rhys)

—and fired. Two shots. The closest man fell, fresh holes in his chest. The man behind him shot, but the descending blade caught the bullet before Tim could. He heard it ricochet, ducked in time to avoid the next round of saws.
He had to go back. More attackers on their way.

“Rhys!” Tim dodged the next shot, caught the first strike of the man in front of him, pushed the bandit back like a human battering ram. They were in the centre of the worst of it, blades rising and falling on either side. The bandit had a knife in his hand and a gun in his belt. Tim forced him back for the next blade’s descent, turned his head in time to avoid the spray getting in his eyes. He shot the next man behind the first, caught him in the neck.

Hadn’t he wanted this? Not too long ago, in that hangar. He’d wanted to see Rhys hurt, or worse. Tim grit his teeth hard enough to feel his jaw creak.

It was getting too slippery, and the bandits crawled over the pieces of Tim’s and the machine’s victims, coming for Tim—too many of them. One swung with a club, just as Tim tried to fall out of the way of another blade. The hit caught him around the face, knocked him back. Tim felt something whisper across the back of his head and lurched forward in time to miss a partial-scalping, but practically fell into the arms of the men trying to kill him.

Two men grabbed him, falling over each other in their eagerness. Tim managed enough leverage to swing one around and off the conveyor belt. He tried the same with the second, but he held fast, dug his fingers into Tim’s face, looking for his eyes. Tim twisted away, until he could get his teeth around the hand and bit down, until his mouth filled with blood. The bandit howled, Tim kicked him in the knee hard enough that he could hear the crack, and flung the unbalanced bandit off the platform.

“Rhys!”

He wouldn’t let Rhys die out here. It didn’t matter what he wanted before. He wasn’t that man. He wasn’t the thing his anger turned him into.

Tim spat out another man’s blood. He could hear the announcer, somewhere, but it was hard to listen to the sounds and understand the meaning behind them. He blocked another strike, lost an inch of ground to another round of gunfire. He heard someone laughing. Light flashed off each blade, turning blood into a spray of molten rubies. He felt skin under his fingers, felt the kickback of his pistol firing, heard a scream, a gurgle. Two men fell. Tim remained.

Rhys was gone.

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“Looks like that’s the end for—oh no, will you look at that! The little guy’s got his grip on the buzzy blades! Will he become part of the action or just mincemeat?”

Rhys’ shoulders were on fire. His metal arm kept its grip around the robot arm, but it pulled at his shoulder socket, stretching human skin and muscle. The servo arm jerked and twitched, spitting sparks and straining under the new weight. The blade crudely attached to its manipulator spun and shrieked through the air, the whole thing lurching as it tried to lower again. Rhys dangled high above the ground, holding on to where the arm attached to the shaking conveyor belt. The structure shook with the force of the dozen or so men rushing down the pike, stamping and jumping through the destroyed obstacles.

He could see their boots, and the undersides of their chins. He couldn’t see Tim, but he thought he heard his voice. He spared one glance at the bubbling pit of yellow-green ooze below and decided falling wasn’t an option. He looked up, but the climb back seemed impossible. No one had noticed him yet, but how long would it take them?
It was odd. He didn’t feel calm exactly—there was no forgetting what kind of position he’d gotten himself into—but the battering force of panic he’d felt now seemed far away. He felt almost relieved, like his mind had emerged into the eye of the storm.

He tried to raise Tim’s on the ECHO net, only to discover something blocking the frequency. Rhys swore.

The structure shook again and he heard gunshots. He saw a blurry shape fall past, and heard the splash below. Not Tim, he told himself. Tim wouldn’t die here, not like this. People like Tim died fighting giant alien monsters, waging one-person wars against corporations. They died inside vaults.

But he spotted Tim above, struggling with bandits who’d latched onto him as if they were trying to pull him under, or into the path of a blade. Rhys tried to shout—internally he could feel the storm again, the beginnings of the breeze, could smell the rain—but his voice didn’t even carry past his own ears, drowned out by the crowd, the machine, the bandits.

Gunshots.

Focus, Rhys. You can’t just hang out and hope for the best.

Rhys pulled his headband down, revealing the ECHOeye. It whirred to life like a good little cybernetic and spat out packets of information almost faster than Rhys could keep up with. He tried to get Tim’s ECHO, but something jammed the frequency. Of course. He looked to the machine and tried to get a read.

The machine had been put together recently, and rather poorly. It used a lot of former Atlas tech (which made it Rhys’ property, technically). It ran on a simple program, fed to it by a mainframe in the factory. Rhys’ curse turned to a shout quickly when the conveyor shook again. The servo jerked, and fell back, arm bending backwards and dropping Rhys with a suddenness that nearly had him losing his grip. The buzz saw spun wildly above him, sparking and screaming.

He held on, but his abused shoulder didn’t thank him for it. He grit his teeth and refocused.

The machine was no good, then. Rhys could project if he had the program installed, but for the sake of Rhys’ sanity, 4RG0S had been pulled before they left.

The PA system was hooked up to a computer someone had dragged into the field, stored beside the announcer’s booth. He could, in theory, do something with that.

He scanned the crowd but found a list of criminal records and projected images of wanted posters. Rhys heard someone scream. He looked up.

Tim nearly lost inches off the back of his skull, fighting his way out of a hold and away from a buzzing blade. Rhys stopped breathing. And there were only more coming, slipping and sliding down the conveyor belt. One pulled the broken machete from the servo and held it aloft.

Rhys had to do something. Tim couldn’t fight them all, and he couldn’t die here.

“Come on, come on,” he muttered, scanning his surroundings. The ECHO gave him more about the local flora, the chemical composition of the dirt, the location of deep ground aquifers. He saw rakks fly high above, too far to catch their attention.

He looked at the guards again, desperate.

One of them had an expensive rocket launcher. One with an onboard computer.
The structure shook again, and Rhys’ grip slipped. He fell, smacking his metal hand off of the arm before he grabbed the y-shaped leg holding the structure with his flesh hand, nearly pulling his wrist and elbow and shoulders all from their sockets. He screamed.

A blurred shape rushed past. Rhys had barely enough time to open his eyes when he felt something yank hard on his foot, nearly pulling him loose.

He looked down to see a bandit gripping his ankle with one hand. He turned his bloodied face up to Rhys and laughed, raising the gun in his other hand.

Ten years living this life had forced Tim to develop a certain tolerance for ridiculous situations. He didn’t think anything could surprise him anymore. And really, in the grand scheme of things, Tim considered as he ducked behind a saw in time to hear the bullets bounce off the metal, this wasn’t the worst situation he’d gotten himself into. Miraculously, he’d kept all his limbs intact and his organs inside, but he could feel his luck turning. This couldn’t last forever. He was good—the best shooter in the place, in all likelihood—but he wasn’t inexhaustible. All the bandits had to do was wear him down. Tim had to be good all the time. Anyone else just had to be lucky once.

Tim’s ammo was running low. He flipped over to a shitty SMG he’d pulled off a twitching body, retreated to better cover, and opened fire. He managed to wing someone, puncture another. He just needed space, a little breather, and then he could call for back-up. All he needed—

The flung machete caught him off-guard. He managed to lean out of the way in time, but the spray of bullets that followed it got him in the shoulder, and the arm. Tim staggered back, his balance gone, feet slipping on the wet conveyor belt. He fell hard, knocking the breath from his chest, looked up and saw the blue sky framed by metal teeth. They raised up, just level with Tim’s eyes, death’s silver smile, and fell—

Bandits came running for him—

Tim tried to scramble away—

The PA system let out an unholy shriek—

Everything went hot and red and white.

The explosion tore through the conveyor belt, knocking the approaching bandits into the drink and shuddering all the servos. They twitched, glitching and sparking at the sudden loss of programing instructions (although Tim wouldn’t know that until later, their wires having been cut off by the rocket). The blades slowed and when Tim opened his eyes he saw them hang a foot above him, still and quiet. Tim’s ears rang.

The silence lasted less than a second.

Tim heard the stutter of machine guns, people shouting. The conveyor belt had stopped and when he looked up, he saw that what he’d left behind of it had been torn clean off, leaving a gap between the starting line and where he lay. With a groan, he pulled himself up on his hands and knees. A few others lay around him, sprawled out and face down. Tim didn’t know if they were breathing, considered wasting the bullets to make sure.

Where the hell was Rhys?

As if summoned by name, his ECHO hissed to life.
“—im! C— hear—?”


“What d— y-o th—nk? —ghost?”

Tim let out a ragged laugh. He dragged a hand over his face, smearing blood and soot in its wake. Rhys was alive. He hadn’t completely fucked everything up.

“Where—?” He heard the whistle just in time, his legs reacting before his brain could process the meaning. He clutched the conveyor belt and rocked with the explosion. He turned away, felt the heat on the side of his face. The stands had been hit. People were screaming.

“Where are you?” Tim pressed two fingers against the inside of his wrist, felt the full-body sensation of being split in half, and then split in half again.

“—on the —und, hid—ng behi— struts.”

“—just got 25% more handsome.”

Tim breathed out, his vision returning to normal. The two digistructs stood on either side of him, faces blank, waiting.

“You, Thing One, you take sniper and cover me. Kill anyone wearing a mask—do NOT kill a woman that looks like a scientist.”

“Need— artefact!”

“What about the glitter bitch?” The first clone asked, the rifle forming in his hands as he spoke.

“Yes, kill her.” Tim glanced over to the end of the line, where the artefact remained suspended above the chaos. Rhys wanted that? They did sell for a decent chunk of change.

“Thing Two—” Tim jabbed his finger at the other one as Thing One took off. “Shotgun. Find Rhys, protect him with your life and get him out of here. Do NOT talk to him. You talk to me and only me. Got it?”

“Whatever you say, cupcake.” Thing Two gave a two finger salute, the shotgun assembling in squares of blue light in his other hand.

Tim flinched at the shriek of feedback blaring over the PA system. He turned away from his departing digistructs to face the artefact. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye; other contestants, guards, or just the mob, he couldn’t tell. He slammed a fresh clip into his SMG.

A new voice howled over the PA. “—vault hunter! The man with no face is a vault hunter! Whoever kills him gets the bounty!”

“Nice to see you too, Malady,” Tim muttered. He ran, ducking bullets and praying for luck.

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THEN

“It’s just weird. He kind of gives me the creeps, you know?”

“Right. He’s so quiet and he spends so much time on the range.”
“Right? It’s like, you’re an admin, guy.”

Tim stopped, his previous task forgotten. He stood outside of the kitchen, out of sight of the gossipers within, and listened.

“How do you think he’ll go psycho on us?”

“God, if he does, I hope he kills Simmons.”

Someone—Tim had known their name at the time—let out a muffled laugh, as though they were hiding it behind their hands.

He shouldn’t listen to this. He stared down at the tablet in his hand, listened to the sound of his own breathing.

“Doesn’t even go out. There’s nothing in his cubicle, which is is also creepy. What does he even do?”

“Man, I don’t know. Hey, I think your lunch is burning…”

Tim walked away, putting as much distance between himself and the now-cursing people in the kitchen. His face felt hot and numb, the sort of burning you can only get from touching something freezing. He felt the way he felt sometimes in dreams, when he had to give a speech to the corporate investors, or when he showed up to the last day of a class he’d forgotten he was supposed to attend. He sat down in his empty cubicle and tried to think. Of what to do. Of what he was going to do. Of anything, really.

Kind of gives me the creeps, you know?

This was why he didn’t call attention to himself, in the hope that people would find him so uninteresting that they wouldn’t think to have opinions about him. They wouldn’t talk about him behind his back. Nobody cared about the invisible man.

No one’s opinion really matters, he told himself, but of course he didn’t believe it.

You’re creepy. You’re pathetic. Psycho. What do you even do?

Tim’s vision blurred. He sucked in a deep breath and tried to calm down, but his heart raced ahead with his thoughts and his hands shook.

Twenty-seven years old and what do you even do? Psycho.

His hands moved over the keypad before he could think about it. He brought up the company listings and scrolled through the names. He took deep breaths. He kept his mouth shut. He found what he was looking for and started punching in the frequency before he could think better of it.

What do you even—

“What the fuck do you want?” the voice snapped over the line like the jaws of a trap and Tim felt his whole body flinch. He opened his mouth but couldn’t think of a single thing to say. “Seriously, who the fuck is this? If you’re one of Blake’s, you can go ahead and tell that coiffed prick that his weak attempts at espionage give his mom and I something to laugh about—”

“Jack.”

Jack’s tirade died. “Timtam? That you?”
Tim felt suddenly exposed, as though everyone were listening, watching. What a weirdo. Pathetic. He hunched further into his cubicle, retreating like a hermit crab into a stolen shell.

“What’s up, pumpkin? You want something?”

“I want—”

What do you even do psycho psycho—

“Timmy? Seriously, you sound fuckin’ terrible. You sick or something?”

Tim sucked in another breath and tried to speak in a stable voice.

“Not sick,” he managed. “I just wanted—” He sank lower in his chair, trying to hide from everyone, everything. Psycho psycho psycho.

“Spit it out, cupcake. I haven’t got—”

“I want to kill something.”

Silence. Tim felt frozen. He felt on edge, almost literally, like he could see the distance between the ground he stood on and yawning death far below.

And then, Jack laughed, low and quiet.

“Oh, Timmy. You’re just full of surprises, ain’tcha? Come on then, precious. Meet me out front.”

Precious. Tim shivered and told himself it didn’t mean anything.

He sent a message to his supervisor, grabbed his jacket and left without a word to anyone. He met Jack outside the building, smoking on the steps in blatant disregard to the settlement’s air pollution bylaws. He stubbed the cigarette out when he saw Tim, and flung an arm around his shoulder.

“This is such a fantastic idea, Timmy. You have no idea how excited I am right now. Seriously, I’m at half-mast.”

Tim flushed and definitely didn’t check.

“Jack.”

“I’m not joking. Seriously, you can feel if you want.”

“Jack!” Tim was on fire.

Jack cackled and strong armed him into an armoured company car. Jack gave the address and settled back. The ride took them out of the settlement, beyond the fortified walls and into the semi-untamed wildlands. Jack kept up a steady monologue through most of the trip, telling Tim about the idiots in his office, about the latest attempt at corporate sabotage from his enemies, about the latest all-nighter he’d pulled. He didn’t speak about his wife. He hadn’t for a long time. Sometimes he didn’t even wear the ring. Tim didn’t ask, although he was dying to know.

“How’s Angel?” Tim asked. Nothing made Jack fall silent like the mention of his daughter.

“She’s good,” he said at last. “Coping.”

Tim turned to face Jack. “Coping?”
“Her mom died, remember?”

“Yeah but that was—years ago, I thought,” Tim said. Jack shrugged, his gaze fixed on the scrolling landscape.

“Is there a time limit on grief?”

“I guess not.” Tim picked at fabric of his pants. He wondered if Jack still missed Angel’s mom. He wondered if he still loved her.

They pulled into another Hyperion facility, nestled into the blast site of a cliff. Jack lead him to the edge, where they could see the quarry spread out below. Hunched shapes of construction equipment stood out against the horizon.

“They’ve been having a lot of problems at this site lately. Some kind of lizard infestation. Nasty things, teeth the size of a chef’s blade and just as sharp. They spit acid.”

“I can never tell when you’re kidding,” Tim said.

Jack flashed him a crooked smile. He kicked the pad of a nearby crate, which emitted an angry wail before opening to reveal its contents. He picked up a rifle—sleek, Hyperion black and red—and held it out to Tim.

“You’ve gotten some practice in with snipers, right?”

“Some,” Tim said, taking the rifle from Jack carefully.

“Good. Aim down the scope and look for movement. Anything that doesn’t look human, you shoot.”

The sun hung low over the sky, casting everything in optimal light. Jack stood on the ledge, leaning over on one knee. He had a profile you could carve from marble. He wore his company sweater and his old leather jacket, both rolled up to his elbows. It should’ve been ridiculous—why even bother with the layers if you were just going to keep your arms bare?—but Tim only found it endearing.

Tim aimed down the sights. He waited until he saw movement, something sleek and long scuttling through the rocks, moving like an eel. He hesitated only for a second and then squeezed the trigger. He missed, of course. The creature arched up, opened its mouth to reveal its teeth—rows of them, as big as Jack said—and started making hell-for-leather towards them.

“Uh,” Tim said. A few others began to emerge from the cracks.

“Oh yeah,” Jack said. “Didn’t I say? They’re vicious fucks. Don’t like threats. Travel in packs of, oh… maybe 30?”

The rifle sagged in Tim’s arms. “You’re kidding.”

“Barrel up, kiddo. Those things aren’t going to slow down.” Jack strolled over to a near-by observation tower as he spoke.

“But there’s—” Tim stared down the scope in horror at the mass. They looked so small before, but now he could see their size was somewhere around ‘small horse or big dog’ levels. “There’s so many!”

“Get crackin’!” Jack climbed the ladder.
“Where are you— Jack!” He could hear them now, emitting a yowling hiss, like a cat might sound while being held underwater. He jerked the rifle upright, took quick aim, and squeezed the trigger.

Jack cheered. “Nice one! Right in the chest. And— Ooo that’s a shame. You hate to see such a near miss.”

Tim frantically reloaded. A small tendril of smoke rose from the ground where the last shot had gone wide. The bastards moved too fast, the minute he hesitated and they’d twitched to a new position, like they could tell where he was aiming.

“Tick tock, Timtam.”

Tim got two more in his sights, practically running over each other in their hurry to kill him. Tim swallowed, fired—missed.

He cursed, took aim—

They’re too fast, he told himself. You can’t hit them like this. Just take a breath. Don’t aim where they are, aim where they’re going. Tim’s jaw hurt from clenching.

“You’ve got maybe a minute before—oh ho! Look at that! Nothing but brain! Nice fuckin’ shot, Timmy!”

He did it again and again. He didn’t hit every time, but he got better. He could see how they moved now, their little lizard brains sending signals he could predict. He lost track of time. He killed monster after monster, until they had to crawl over a hill of their fallen brethren. Until there were none left.

Hyperion stabilizers would spoil him one day, he suspected. The kickback felt like a light kiss against his shoulder.

Tim breathed out. He lowered the rifle. He looked at the pile of bodies he’d left on the quarry, surrounded by pools of blue-violet blood. He looked up to find Jack leaning on his hand, watching Tim with that familiar lopsided smile.

“So, what brought all this on?” Jack asked once Tim had joined him on the tower.

There was only one chair. Tim settled in front of Jack, dangling his legs off the ledge. Jack had found a cooler, likely left by the construction supervisor, and made himself comfortable with their beer supply. He held a can out to Tim.

Tim swallowed a mouthful of beer to buy himself time. He felt better, less likely to fly apart, but the memory of the kitchen, of his coworkers’ voices soured his stomach.

“Work, I guess,” Tim said. He could feel Jack’s gaze on the side of his face. He kept his eyes forward.

“Bullshit. You’re a piss-poor liar, Timmy. What was it really?”

Tim looked down, hunched his shoulders on instinct, feeling exposed again. There was no one else around for miles, but Jack’s gaze did the work of hundreds. He felt stripped. He felt like he’d fallen back in time, right back into that horrible moment outside the kitchen.

He didn’t want Jack to know. Jack never let other people’s opinions get to him. When people talked about Jack behind his back, it was out of jealousy, or fear. Jack wouldn’t understand. He’d only think Tim was being stupid.
Or worse—he might agree with them.

_Psycho psycho psycho—_

“I just…” Tim stopped, startled at the sound of his own voice. He looked over, half-hoping Jack might interrupt, but for once the other man sat silently, reclining in his chair and observing Tim like a benevolent king. He raised one pointed brow: a silent command to continue.

Tim did. “I just… Sometimes I get so sick of being like this.” He looked down at himself, the beer can crinkling in his tightened grip. “Sometimes I just wish I could be more… confident, I guess.”

He waited for Jack to speak, afraid to look over. He expected to be lectured, or ridiculed. Or both. When he finally worked up the courage to glance in Jack’s direction, he was surprised to see the man wearing a serious expression. When he spoke at last, his spoke slowly, ponderously.

“Do you ever wish you could become someone else?” he asked. Tim blinked, caught off guard.

“I— Maybe? When I was a kid, probably. I haven’t really thought about it recently.” Outside of the gnawing envy he felt when he thought of anyone other than himself, all those beautiful, graceful people who glided through the world like they belong there, like they were happy. He cleared his throat. Jack definitely didn’t need to know that.

“Why? Do you?” he asked instead.

Jack gave him a look.

“Right. Stupid question.” Tim turned away, flushing.

The sun had nearly set, the golden hour coming to an end. Jack reclined further in the foreman’s chair, throwing one long leg over the arm.

“I wish I didn’t have to deal with so much bullshit,” he said. “Idiots at work. No one’s got any kind of true vision ’round Hyperion. Everyone just wants to make a quick buck. What kind of future is that, for this company? For the universe? Everyone’s just so— so—”

“Myopic,” Tim suggested.

“Whatever. No one’s got a fucking clue what they’re doing. Everyone just wants to climb their way to the top of the crab bucket.”

“Sounds rough,” Tim said.

“It’s fucking cut-throat, is what it is. Fuck, I should’ve brought that scotch…”

The beer was doing Tim just fine. He leaned back on his hands.

“Next time,” Jack said decisively.

“You come out here a lot, Jack?” Tim asked.

“Sometimes. It feels good, you know? Especially after a long day.”

“Does it remind you of Pandora?” Tim leaned back further, consciously getting into Jack’s space. He felt loose-limbed, warm all over. The same feeling he’d gotten in Jack’s office, all those months ago.
Jack didn’t reply. When Tim looked back, he saw he was giving Tim another look, this one longer, more considering.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret, pumpkin. I’m not like the others. I’ve got a fuckin’ vision for the future, you understand? I’ve got plans for Hyperion. Fuck, not just Hyperion—the whole universe. I’m going to change everything,” he said. Tim’s eyebrows climbed.

“How?” he asked. Jack leaned forward, his fingers brushing against the back of Tim’s head.

“You believe me, cupcake? You think I can do it?”

If it were anyone else but Jack speaking, Tim might’ve said no.

“I’ve never met anyone like you, Jack,” he said. “If you say you’ll do it…” He shrugged, as if it were self-explanatory.

Tim thought he saw a flicker of surprise in Jack’s expression before it vanished, quick as the monsters below. He barked out a laugh and ruffled Tim’s hair.

“You’re somethin’ else, you know that, Timmy?” He eased back. Tim tried not to miss the contact.

“Well, when you make it to king of the galaxy, try to think of me,” Tim said.

“Oh, don’t worry about that, precious.” Tim looked back and saw Jack grinning at him wide enough to show off his canines. “I’ve got plans for you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who’s been readin and commentin. This is the first time in about ten years that I’ve posted my stuff for public consumption, so I’ve forgotten how good it feels to get positive feedback like this.

Next chapter: Rhys infiltrates one of his own factories. Tim confronts a long-time fear. Jack gives Tim an offer he should probably refuse.
Part I: Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Rhys meets Etna. Tim meets a monster.

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday. This chapter is Also Violent.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was kill or be killed. It always was. The bandit that hung off Rhys’ foot with a gun in his hand seemed to be interested in both.

Rhys kicked at him even while his ECHOeye accessed the rocket launcher. He tried to shout a warning to Tim, but with his attention split between the madman with a gun and the schematics and electronic systems he was attempting to tunnel through, he could barely manage to make a sound.

He got the directional targeting system, accessed the safety and the bypassed the trigger. It was loaded.

The man on his foot sunk his teeth into his ankle. The gun went off, loud and close enough to deafen Rhys to his own scream. He fired.

The explosion rocked the machine. Rhys’ world went white, and then red. He felt incredible heat on his face and neck. He felt the weight leave his leg. The next explosion nearly drowned out the sound of tortured metal and electronics, but Rhys could feel the machine’s systems failing. He felt split open, spread out across too many systems.

He barely felt it when he lost his grip, but he sure as hell noticed when he started to fall.

Everything snapped back in time for Rhys to see the yellow ooze approaching at speed—just enough time for him to slap the shield into life and pray it would be enough. He landed with a smack that knocked the breath out of him, sink like a stone dropped in honey. He struggled upright, only keeping track of where the open air was by virtue of luck, and kept his eyes closed. He could feel the shield flickering, running out of juice. He had seconds, if that.

Half-running, half-swimming, he made it to solid ground. His shield gave out just as he slapped his hand against the shore and he could smell the singed fabric of his clothes, hear the sizzle of burning thread. He staggered upright, shucking off his coat—double-breasted black with gold and red accents, professionally fitted and made from prototype fabric that breathed cool air in the desert—and tried not to cry. He’d get another. He tried not to think of how much the first one had cost.

Someone shoved past him, knocking him to the ground. Heavy footfalls followed behind, what sounded like an entire battalion. Rhys curled up instinctively, throwing his arms over his head. His shirt stank of blood and whatever the hell chemicals the bandits had dug up for the pit, a stench that
nearly made Rhys vomit.

“You!” Someone grabbed Rhys by his flesh arm, pulled him upright with such violence that it nearly gave him whiplash. “You were with the vault hunter!”

Rhys’ eyes focused. The bandit holding him wore a torn mask, and bore his yellowing teeth like a primitive threat. He had buddies, two of them, forming a phalanx behind him.

“What’s wrong with his eyes?” one asked.

“Look at his arm,” the other said.

Rhys wasn’t a seasoned killer. Violence wasn’t a second nature to him. He had to think about his pistol, remember he even had it, before he remembered that he should have it in his hand already. Too late for that now, he supposed. He tried talking instead.

“Look, we don’t have to resort to violence do we, fellas? We can work this out,” he said.

The bandit holding him snorted. He manhandled Rhys into a headlock, pinioning his metal arm awkwardly behind him.

“You’re gonna help us collect a bounty.” His arm pressed against Rhys’ windpipe, tight enough to restrict breathing without stopping it completely.

One of his pals laughed. “Yeah, he’s—”

A sound like thunder and the bandit dropped, like a switch had been flipped. Lights out.

The second one turned and the more familiar sound of a shotgun unloading filled the air before he jerked back, chest heavy with lead, and fell. The man holding Rhys gaped, his grip slacking. Rhys wriggled his arm free, turned around and slammed his metal fist into the man’s face. It still didn’t feel right, throwing a punch with his off-hand, but what it lacked in finesse it made up for in strength. The bandit dropped. Rhys barely felt it.

A hand grabbed him around the back of his neck and Rhys kicked out on instinct, too wound up to do much else. He heard a grunt of annoyance before he was yanked upright until he was face-to-face with a faceless man.

“Tim!” Rhys couldn’t have kept the relief out of his voice for all the nicest suits in Eden-4. “You—” He stopped, his ECHOeye telling him the truth in a flash of blue outline and data. Not Tim. One of the clones.

Not-Tim grunted again and jerked his head towards the exit. He kept his grip on Rhys’ neck and tried to guide him out. Rhys dug in his heels.

“No—not yet,” he said, shrugging out of the clone’s grip. “We have to get Etna.”

Rhys couldn’t see the clone’s expression—obviously—but he could read the way his shoulders tensed, the way his grip tightened on the stock of his shotgun (Hyperion? Was that a Hyperion gun?).

“Look, didn’t your boss explain it to you? The whole reason we got into this shit-show was to get to Etna. And I’m his boss, so what I say goes.” Rhys straightened to his considerable height.

The construct only tensed further and Rhys wondered if he was going to try to hit him, but another
spray of bullets and the clink of a bouncing grenade forestalled any further arguments. The clone grabbed Rhys by the back of the neck once again and forced his head down, nearly bending him in half, and opened fire.

“—hys?”

Rhys flicked to his ECHOcomm, wincing at the static. The comms had gone to shit shortly after the explosion knocked out whatever device they’d been using to suppress frequencies, but at least it worked now.

“Tim?”

“H—v you fo—d —struct?”

“Your clone is here, with me! He’s— Augh!” The clone forced Rhys to his knees, pushing him down until he was nearly face-down in the dirt. A boot on his spine kept him down without hurting him. “He’s not exactly gentle!”

“Just l— him do his j—b.”

Rhys opened his mouth to argue, but the definitive click of a line being switched off shut his mouth. Tim had hung up on him. Asshole!

He pushed himself up again, only to feel the boot press down between his shoulder blades. Not painfully, but firm enough to get a warning across.

“What are you bitching about, Timmy? I’m doing what you told me to!”

Rhys startled at the sound of the clone’s voice.

“How the fuck should I know? You told me to secure the stringbean, not go off on a scavenger hunt.” A pause. The clone snapped his shotgun shut and took aim. He fired, whatever he said next lost in the sound.

The boot vanished and a moment later, Rhys felt a now-familiar calloused hand grip his neck. He stood up before he could be pulled, smacking the clone’s wrist aside.

Even without seeing his face, Rhys got the distinct feeling he was on the receiving end of a murderous glare.

“Listen up, kitten, because I can only say this once: I’m going to help you get Etna but as soon as we’ve got her, the three of us are leaving. We’re to wait for Timmy by the bike. If I die before that happens, you make for the exit and don’t stop for nothing. Got it?”

“Fine. But—”

The clone made as if to reach for his neck again, but Rhys shrunk back, raising his arm in defense. He heard the construct sigh, as if Rhys were the one being unreasonable here, and gestured him to follow.

Rhys did. The clone didn’t say another word.

They didn’t find Etna in the announcer’s booth. They didn’t find anyone, actually, but a machine and the transmitter Rhys had scanned before. Rhys stood at the door in shock before he was shoved rudely inside.
The clone didn’t say anything to Rhys, but the cock and fire of a shotgun aimed outside felt like a reprimand. Rhys turned back to the transmitter and activated his ECHOeye again.

“It’s a direct connection, a limited-range frequency. Looks like someone was broadcasting from inside the factory,” he said.

The clone growled as he reloaded, strong hands moving steadily in a way that might’ve distracted Rhys at any other time.

“Can you get us inside?” Rhys asked. The clone jerked his head towards the exit, cocking the shotgun once more. Before Rhys could move, the clone took him by the back of his neck and pulled him outside, shoving him ahead.

The factory was in chaos. Rhys handled it the way he generally handled any situation where people were screaming and bullets were flying: by keeping his head low and running very quickly. His spindly legs really were good for keeping him out of trouble, if only over short distances. The clone kept pace with him, covering Rhys’ escape. Every so often, Rhys would hear the click-click roar of a shotgun’s blast, followed by a scream and something hitting the ground.

They made it inside, and Rhys saw up close just how badly the factory had been modified. It looked like they’d given the place the traditional Pandoran remodelling job by way of explosives. Rhys saw walls blown open, peppered with bullet holes. The ground under his feet bore scorch marks and suspicious stains. Many of them looked old.

Rhys could hear people running, screaming, cursing, and the familiar ringing of bullets ricocheting off metal and stone. Even without the clone’s hand on the back of his head, Rhys kept his head down. He kept his ECHO running, tracing the flow of data from the booth outside to the broadcasting station. It wasn’t much—a trickle of static, if that—but it told him he wanted to go several floors underground. He informed the clone, who grunted in response and pushed him against the wall before another spray of bullets flew past.

“We have to hurry,” Rhys said, a little breathlessly. The clone turned his head toward Rhys and then looked away with a shrug.

It couldn’t have taken more than a few minutes to find the emergency stairwell, but it felt longer. Rhys didn’t know why things had devolved to this point, why everyone was after blood. He couldn’t figure out what their goal. He spotted Malady’s boys by their chrome and the weeping red wounds where their skin attached to their cybernetics. Once or twice, they spotted him as well.

“Hey!” A bandit with cybernetic legs staggered to a stop several yards ahead, his buddies skidding into place behind him. “You’re—”

The clone dispatched them without pausing his stride, the buckshot sparking electricity as it landed, eating through shields and seizing the cybernetics. Rhys stayed behind the clone, crouching behind debris to avoid return fire. His shield hummed to life as a stray bullet whizzed past, causing Rhys to flinch. He thought he heard the clone snort.

Flushling, Rhys activated his ECHO once more as the clone finished up. He found the trail of data, thin and weak. Rhys pulled up old Atlas blueprints, ones he’d stored in his memories from factories he’d already reclaimed and tried to place where they might be, and where the broadcasting station might be.

As he worked, he saw something blue flicker in the corner of his eye. He looked over, bracing himself, but nothing but an empty hallway greeted him.
“I think I know where we’re going,” Rhys said when the clone had finished. “If this place is anything like my other factories, we have to follow the access hallway past the R&D levels to the—”

He squawked as the clone pulled him up and forced a pistol into his hands. He pointed sternly at the bodies of bad guys, at himself, and then at Rhys. Rhys scowled.

“I know, alright? Shoot anyone who doesn’t look like you.” Rhys held the pistol carefully with both hands, as he was taught, and tried not to wince at how warm it still felt. “Were you listening to me before? We have to—”

The clone ruffled his hair, like a man rewarding a dog for performing a clever trick, turned him around and pushed him forward. Rhys shot him a scowl over his shoulder, but took the hint. Pistol in hand, and digistruct at his back, he lead the way.

The lower levels were cool and dark, lit only by the orange-red emergency lights fixed to the wall. The air felt damp, smelled of oil and metal. Metal doors hung crookedly in their frames, revealing slices of darkness and empty space beyond. Rhys’ ECHO revealed abandoned equipment, dead computers, and—in one room—scattered chairs and tables. Dust covered everything. The sounds from above sounded faint.

Rhys swallowed, ran his thumb across the stock of his pistol, and pushed forward.

“Why can’t you talk to me, anyway?” he asked as they made their way. The clone looked at him, and Rhys realised how stupid the question sounded.

To his surprise, however, instead of ignoring him, the clone tapped on his ear, and pointed to the ceiling, presumably where Tim was fighting his way through the obstacle course.

“Tim told you to. Why would he do that?”

The clone gave him an expansive shrug.

“Is he—worried about something? Or hiding something?” Something clicked in Rhys’ mind. “Has this got something to do with his face?”

The clone shoved Rhys on the shoulder, forcing him around, and pointed firmly ahead of them. Rhys grumbled, but he got the message. No more talking.

Rhys kept his ECHO active as they navigated the halls. His readings gave him the empty rooms, the abandoned machines, the trail of data, but almost nothing else. The clone stayed close at his elbow, shotgun resting on his forearm. Rhys could hear the sounds of the conflict upstairs, but it came muffled and faint.

They were close when the building rumbled hard enough to shake dust down from the ceiling.

“What—” Rhys began.

Something above them roared, loud and long, a full bellowed cry from a throat the size of a bedroom, the cry tapering off into a low-pitched growl. Acting on animal instinct, Rhys’ muscles locked, his heart pounding. He clutched the pistol tightly in shaking hands.

“What the hell…” He swallowed. The clone had his neck craned back, his blank face turned towards the ceiling. He put one hand on Rhys’ arm and gave him a surprisingly gentle push forward.

“What about Tim?” Rhys asked. The clone pointed ahead, nudging Rhys in the back until the young
man turned around and resumed walking. Rhys tried to drown out the sounds coming from overhead.

They found the room at the end of the hall. The door gaped open, fully retracted into the wall. Light from within splashed yellow-blue on the floor and walls. Within, Rhys could see tall, black monoliths lining a large room. He could feel the cold air pumping out from a damaged, but functioning, ventilation system.

There was nowhere for them to hide, no side-approach or back door. Rhys swallowed and took a step forward, his ECHO flaring. The walls melted away and Rhys saw the stream of data, the hum of stacks of servers. Unlike the forgotten, dusty remains in the other rooms, these servers seemed well-cared for. He crept inside slowly, walking between the rows and rows of black monoliths, each stamped with the Atlas logo.

“There’s so many,” he mumbled. He touched his flesh hand to one and pulled back with a hiss. “Jesus, they’re running hot. What the hell are they for?”

The clone didn’t react. He kept his face trained on one of the monoliths, his grip tightening on the stock of his gun.

On the far end of the room, he spotted another open door, and a room lit by the green and blue glow of a massive monitor.

Rhys took a breath and stepped forward—only to find his way blocked with an outstretched arm. He looked over to the clone, whose face was pointed directly ahead. He gave a minute jerk of his head, and Rhys slunk back.

The monitor loomed large over the next room, casting tall shadows from the tower console and the lone seat within. A microphone sat beside the keyboard, the little red light on its base alight. Still broadcasting? Rhys flicked it off.

The clone whistled low. Rhys’ looked up at the monitor for the first time and nearly screamed. The little square images Rhys had ignored before were gone, replaced by a single feed. Projected large across the screen was a monster. Rhys saw teeth and fangs, too many eyes and too many arms (and tentacles). It had spines lining its back and flank. It had wings, although Rhys couldn’t imagine it becoming airborne. As Rhys watched, it reared back on its six hind legs, its segmented body curling with ease, and spat a mouthful of something viscous that smoked as it hit the ground. Bandits writhed and twitched, clawing at their faces and exposed skin with their mouths open.

For a heart-stopping moment, Rhys thought he spotted Tim amongst them.

“What the unholy hell…” Rhys swallowed and looked away as the creature lashed out with its tail, the whip-like appendage ending in a scythe-like blade that went through men’s legs like butter.

Rhys heard the click of a heel on the floor. He spun around, and found a tall, scarred man standing in the doorway, with a gun in his hand.

“We found it here,” he said. “An Atlas special. Something created and then forgotten, abandoned by its creators. Isn’t that always the way? Monsters sound so appealing on paper, but the reality is always too much for anyone to handle. It’s like an attack dog. Everyone wants to use them, but no one wants to care for them. What an embarrassment.” Rhys thought he saw something move in the shadows, but there was nothing there.

“Hello, Rhys,” the stranger said. “My name is Callum. Tell your friend to put his gun down.”
The clone stepped in front of Rhys, shotgun raised. Callum raised his as well, the sleek weapon gleaming blue and silver in the light. It was an Atlas, Rhys realised with a jolt.

Rhys crouched slightly behind the clone, and re-activated his ECHO.

“Where’s the doc?” the clone asked.

“Put down your weapon,” Callum said. His gun was new, Rhys saw—new enough that it had an onboard computer. And, he realised with a sinking stomach, an excellent firewall. He would need time.

The clone cocked the shotgun. “We’re not negotiating, here. Tell me where the doc is. I don’t care to repeat myself a third time,” he warned.

Rhys opened his metal palm, projected the firewall’s information, and set to work. The program (RHY5_WINZ2.0.EXE) clicked to life, and started running.

“What a fine specimen,” Callum said. “You’re projecting this far from your master? Impressive. You’re a Hyperion, aren’t you? You’re—” The voice cut out in an explosion of static, so sudden that Rhys thought for one confused moment that the man had opened fire.

“Wherrrrrrre is yyyyyyyyyyyyyour face?” The voice came out distorted, warped with enough outrage to make Rhys flinch back and the clone to stiffen.

The light changed, the monitor’s image flickering into static. Rhys saw Callum in a flash of blue. His breath caught.

“Whhho tookkkkkkkk your ffffface?”

The ECHO turned the room red and clearly Rhys could see the signals now.

“What the hell is that guy’s problem?” the clone muttered.

“He’s not a guy,” Rhys said, placing his hand on the clone’s arm. “He’s like you. A digistruct.”

“Yes, good catch. That clever eye of yours will take you far, Rhys. But you’ve made a mistake,” the man corrected in smooth, if stilted tones once more. “I’m not a ‘clone’, not quite. Some of us don’t need humans to exist. That’s why you’ve come, isn’t it? You’re here—” The man’s face twitched into a snarl. “Copprrrrrrrrrrry of a copy! You pathhhhhhhhhhnhetic, little—“ He broke off into static, white noise humming from his unmoving lips.

The screen in Rhys’ palm flickered. He looked down, but nothing was out of the ordinary. A friendly message informed him that his program had finished.

“What the hell is your problem, kiddo? You got a virus or something?” the clone asked.

The man clutched at half his face with a gleeful expression.

“You knowwwwwwwwwwww, you’re not far off from thhhhhhhhhhhhe truth! But llllllookie what I cannnnnnnnnnn do!”

Later, Rhys will try to piece together the next two seconds. He will remember the way the strange man waved his free hand like someone shooing away a cat from a windowsill. He will remember, in detail, how the clone’s arms slackened, how its posture sagged, how it erupted into pieces, scattering in the air like blue confetti.
(He will not remember what Callum said next. If he had, a lot of what came during the next few weeks could have been prevented.)

At that moment, Rhys could only see his bodyguard vanish into thin air. He reacted quickly, reflexes driven by panic, and accessed Callum’s gun.

Callum was talking again, but Rhys could only see the gun’s trigger and its targeting systems. The digistruct raised its hand. The weapon jerked forward.

Tim dodged a jet of flame, slamming his shoulder into the next bandit in his way, forcing him onto the curve of the sawblade. The other bandit (there’s always another bandit) swung a stolen machete at Tim’s face. Tim slipped back, falling to his knee. He caught the next swing, his shield shattering at the impact, and flattened the bandit’s nose. Another jet of flame licked at the side of Tim’s face. Tim flinched away to avoid the worst of it, but he felt pain bloom seconds later across his cheek and knew that he’d taken a hit. It wouldn’t be the first burn he’d gotten in the last thirty seconds.

Blow torches. Some maniac had set up blow torches on the course. When he found the person or persons behind this death machine, Tim vowed as he ducked his way past two more blasts, he would make them wish their grandparents had died 50 years before Tim had even been born. Make them wish—feint left to avoid gunfire, bounce bandit skull off of conveyor belt—wish Tim had died five years ago in that town, that he’d been buried deep. Wish—aim down scope, three shots for one body, starting to get worn out, huh, Timmy?—wish—

“You doin’ okay there, pumpkin?”

Tim snarled. Another bandit had gotten up close in personal, like that was a good idea, like he’d get lucky where dozens of his asshole friends had gotten killed. Tim jammed his gun into the bandit’s stomach and pulled the trigger, flung him aside and pulled it again, dropping the one coming up behind him.

He was close now. The artefact gleamed where it’d fallen, knocked loose by the first unfortunate winner of the course, whose brain matter now decorated the platform, joined by the three runners-up who’d come after him. His digistruct’s aim had been perfect.

Tim was close, which meant that he would have the artefact, which meant he had nothing left to do but secure Rhys and Etna and escape and then maybe shower for two hours and sleep for three days. The thought brought the first shiver of joy Tim’d felt in hours. Which is likely why the universe took notice.

“Vault hunter!”

A bullet bounced off his shield, electricity danced down from the back of his neck, to his spine, down his shoulder to where his hand gripped the metal guardrail, paralyzing his arm. Tim jerked to a stop, vision strobing, before he could lose his balance. He raised his gun with his good arm and took aim.

Malady approached him, striding through the bloody battlefield like a queen of war. Her long coat trailed like a white, silver and gold banner in her wake. She had her head lowered, her red lips pulled back to reveal golden teeth, all sharpened to a needle point. She strode across the ground, her white thigh-highs somehow remaining unstained from the blood and muck. Maybe they’d been treated with some kind of non-stick spray, Tim thought dazedly. He felt as if he’d been punched in the back
of the head.

“Vault hunter!” she said again, this time with glee. A bandit screamed towards her from the left, but she dispatched him with a snap-snap-snap of her sleek, silver pistol. Three bullets and the bandit wiped out on the ground, momentum carrying him farther than his legs ever would, ever again.

“We have a score to settle!” She raised her monstrous weapon again and Tim managed to pry his bad arm free and duck before she could fire. He heard the bullet sing past, inches from the top of his head, close enough that he could feel his hair stirring in the breeze. She had better aim than he’d previously thought.

A crack split the air, and when Tim managed to pull himself off of the busted conveyor belt, he saw Malady stumble backwards, her shield and multi-faceted outfit flickering. Tim could only imagine what she looked like through a scope. Maybe that was why his clone’s next shot went wide.

Malady pulled herself back together and ran full-tilt, her boots chewing up the dried out ground, towards Tim. He watched, head still aching, transfixed as she took a running leap towards the structure. She should have fallen into the yellow-orange ooze. She should have dissolved into whatever toxic garbage the bandit gang managed to dig up from the guts of the factory.

Instead, her boots flashed white-silver and she flung herself through the air, flying like a kite in a gale, until she nailed a three point landing two feet from where Tim still lay, dazed and only getting worse. Her hand snapped up, her pistol aimed straight for Tim’s head. This close, Tim could see the little blue-white screen projected above the barrel. He could see a smaller version of himself, drawn in white and red lines. He could see his injuries, displayed without fanfare in bright red over his arm, his left flank, part of his chest, and, worryingly, his spine. She smiled.

“Hello, vault hunter,” she said, her finger squeezing the trigger.

Not everyone could be a vault hunter, as many people quickly find out. Of course it took skill, which anyone could predict. An unskilled vault hunter had about as much longevity as a paper tea kettle.

But skill wasn't enough. It helped, but it wasn't always enough to save your life.

You needed luck, too.

Tim lurched as the structure shook. He let himself fall backwards, expecting another explosion, but the rumbling continued and there was no wave of heat, no flying debris, no roar of pure noise. The bandits clawing their way forward behind Malady’s lead stopped, holding onto the conveyor belt with the same thought as Tim. They looked around now, sharing Tim’s confusion.

Malady gripped the belt with one hand, her other still raised, gun aimed at Tim’s head.

One of the many skills a vault hunter needed to stay alive was the ability to compartmentalize. Tim forgot about whatever was shaking the obstacle course like a toddler shaking the wall of their playpen. He braced himself against the ground with his good arm and lashed out, kicking Malady in the hand. She screamed, more out of shock and anger than pain, and her gun went flying.

“No!” She scrambled towards the ledge, arm outstretched while her lovely gun fell in a graceful arc. The structure gave another shudder. Malady stumbled forward and her pistol slipped from the tips of her fingers and it fell, glittering and pure, into the muck below. She screamed again, but Tim had stopped paying attention.

It was a gate, he realised a moment later. What he previously assumed was a wall sank into the ground, revealing a cave-like interior, too dark to see anything within.
Things went quiet. Even Malady had stopped moving. Tim counted the seconds. He’d spent enough time as a vault hunter to recognize trouble before it tried to eat him. He had a feeling he knew what was coming next.

In a way, he was right. Something massive crawled out from the shadows, but it wasn’t the alpha monstrosity Tim had expected. Instead, what scuttled out on too many legs was unlike any creature Tim had ever seen. It opened its segmented jaw, revealing rows of crooked, sharp teeth. It looked like a thresher, and a stalker, and a skag. It caught the sunlight of its scales and spines, rearing back and twisting its face to the sky, and bellowed.

Tim and Malady clamped their hands over their ears. The bandits were less cavalier about their hearing. More than one picked up their weapon and fired.

The creature shook its massive head, aimed its face at the arena. It bore its teeth and let out a long, slow growl. It flicked one of its arms out, the tentacles curling under its chin unfurling with the movement, and struck a team of bandits, sending them flying through the air.

The digistruct’s hysterical laughter filled the ECHO frequency.

“Ho-ho-holy shit, Timmy! What am I even looking at here? Are those—tentacles? And like—like shooty spine things? Look at the teeth! Who even did this?”

Tim pulled himself onto his feet and ran. Malady shouted something behind him, but her words were lost in the thunderous noise of the creature and its victims. The air filled with bullets which bounced and pinged off of a web of static that shrouded the creature. Pipe bombs and grenades bounced off its face and flank like pebbles off a cliffside. It howled again, stomping its feet hard enough to bounce the servos and rattle the entire structure. People screamed.

The conveyor belt was falling apart. Tim’s foot slipped on the surface as the structure bent and buckled, metal breaking somewhere far below. Tim heard distant splashing and resolutely did not look down. The artifact was close, just a few… more... feet—

Something grabbed Tim by the ankle and he fell hard, his chin bouncing off of the rapidly collapsing conveyor belt. His mouth filled with the taste of salt and copper. He would’ve screamed, but the air had been forced from his lungs. He knew who had him. He could feel it when Malady’s nails dug into his skin. He didn’t waste time looking back. He scrambled at the ground, trying to pull himself back upright. The grip on his ankle wouldn’t let up. It yanked him back.

“Idiot!” he snarled and this time he did look back. Malady showed him her gem-encrusted golden teeth, stained red. He kicked at her as best he could, feeling it when his boot connected with something soft. “We’ll both—”

Explosions ripped through the arena, tore up the structure’s legs, and sent scraps of metal and burning rubber into the air. Malady screamed and Tim’s foot connected with her face, the cartilage of her nose crunched under his heel. She released him at last and the ground under them shook. He kicked her again, as hard as he could, until she slid back. Another explosion rocked the obstacle course and the incredible heat and light nearly burned Tim’s face from his head. He scrambled to his feet and forgot about Malady, lost as she was in the noise and fire.

He broke into a full-on sprint, building up as much speed as he could. The ground collapsed under Tim’s feet even as he tried to jump.

He slammed hard against the platform, sliding off before he could catch his grip. He flailed without dignity as the platform began to tip over.
“Ohshitohshitohshit—”

He caught his fingers into a divot and pulled. Fuelled partially by strength and partially by
desperation, Tim hauled himself semi-upright. He could see something in the corner of his eye whip
through the arena, leaving a trail of severed limbs in its wake. He scrambled in a crouch, arms
thrown over his head and ran.

The artifact was Eridian and that was all Tim could process. He shoved it in his jacket as the platform
gave another shudder, and lurched forward. Tim barely had time to shout before the ground tipped
from under his feet and he was left slipping, desperately scrabbling for something to hold on to. He
wedged his foot between the bars of the broken railing, slipped his fingers into the metal grating and
held on.

Naturally, this was when Tim felt the stab in his temple that signified a digistruct’s demise.

“Report!” The platform was nearly vertical now, and Tim saw the bubbling yellow trench below,
now streaked red with the losers and the still-losing below.

“Sniper still in position, kitten. Enjoying the show. No sign of any obvious weaknesses yet. Did you
see it spit slag before?” Thing One laughed.

Goddammit. Tim stared down at the fall waiting for him, his stomach turning. Goddammit, that
meant Rhys—

A rocket sang through the air. Tim didn’t see where it landed—couldn’t have turned his head away
from the distance between himself and the ground—but he saw the glow of the explosion, heard the
creature roar in anger, and saw something whip over the yellow trench, moving in a blur.

“Lost sight of the glitter queen, by the way. Think she went into the drink.”

The platform groaned again and began to slip. Tim knew that he would join Malady soon enough.
He could only hope his shield had regained its strength.

“Find and protect Rhys!” he shouted over the sound of tortured metal. “Don’t talk to him!”

Tim heard a final, “Whatever you say, kiddo.” before the rushing liquid opened up as the first pieces
hit. Yellow ooze arched high and swallowed Tim whole.

Tim didn’t consider for a minute that his digistruct might have no idea where to start looking for
Rhys. He didn’t consider this partially because he had a lot going on at the time, but also because
he’d long ago ceased questioning his digistructs’ abilities. Long gone were the flickering, barely
intelligent, elemental-slinging murder programs Jack had created for him before Elpis. They had
personalities now, and artificial intelligence, or something close enough that it could pass for it in the
right light. Some nights, Tim would lie awake in bed thinking about just how much personality they
had. They were the end goal of whatever ridiculous scheme Rhys was out to cash in on.

Thing One knew about Tim’s concerns, although the knowledge didn’t mean much to him. Thing
One—and really, that was the kindest thing Tim ever called him—carried this and other knowledge
with his brother. It wasn’t telepathy (although Tim worried about that too); easier to think of it as a
shared database. He knew where his brother died. He could access the memory of the event as if it
were his own.

(It wasn’t that they were ghosts or even AIs—that would be too easy. Thing One couldn’t sink or
float the way he might like to. He was trapped in the same hardlight world as everything else,
constricted to taking the long way, always.)

He followed his brother’s death to a server room, where he found another room nested inside like a tedious babushka doll. Inside the room he found the dumb kid splayed out on the floor, underneath a wall of static, the impressions of digital violence still heavy in the air (someone hacked a gun?), and a woman crouched beside a tower console. She looked up when Thing One entered, her glasses reflecting the monitor’s static.

She did that thing with her lungs and her mouth and her throat that humans did, where she wasn’t quite talking but she seemed like she wanted to.

“Is he dead?” Thing One asked, nudging the unconscious man with the tip of his rifle. He didn’t mind, really, but it would change the parameters of his orders if he was. She shook her head.

“I had a really great show goin’ upstairs, you know. You wouldn’t believe what they pulled out of the pit this time.” He chuckled. “Well, whatever. I’m here now. What’d I miss?”

She moved her throat in a swallow.

“There was a man,” she reported. “But he wasn’t a man. He was a digistruct. And then he did something to—to someone who looked just like you. And then his gun went off without him pulling the trigger. And then this man collapsed. And then I collapsed.”

Terrible story. Thing One dismissed his rifle. He knelt down and slipped his hands under the cyborg’s arms.

“Alright. So, what took you both out?” he asked, throwing the kid over his shoulder. She lifted and dropped her shoulders. “What happened to the digistruct guy after his gun went off?”

“I don’t know. I watched up until I collapsed. I don’t know where Callum went.”

He looked into his brother’s memory and found no sign of the strange little woman. She might’ve been there—his brother’s focus had been on Callum.

Thing One let a little frustration creep into his voice when he spoke next. “Okay then, let’s try little words. Have you got anything helpful for me or are you here to waste my time?”

People didn’t like hearing Thing One’s angry voice. It didn’t get the usual reaction on this one. She stood up in the same slow way she did everything, like she had the time to spare. She brushed down her pants.

“My name is Dr. Etna. The other one said you’d come here for me. Is that still true?”

Thing One stared hard at her. Another thing most people didn’t like, even with his face obscured. She only stared back with her weird glasses and her mouth all small and flat. He wanted to insult her, maybe take his time with it, but the ground shook and the walls shook and the creature above screamed.

Thing One didn’t care about much, but he cared about Tim. Or, to make it perfectly accurate, he cared about Tim’s continued existence, the odds of which didn’t look so great if he left him alone upstairs for too long.

He opened his frequency and listened for the frantic sound of Tim’s breathing.

“Everything alright up there, cupcake?” he asked.
“Tell me—urgh—” Tim broke off, breathing in sharply with a soft curse. “Tell me you’ve got Rhys.”

“And the doc.”

“Good. You’ve got the other one’s orders. Guide them outside and wait for me.”

Thing One wanted to tell Tim that he needed him more, but he was made to follow orders.

“Whatever you say, Timmy.”

Etna watched him during the exchange. Maybe she looked scared, or hungry, or something. The finer points of human expressions always slipped his memory. He restructured his rifle, jerked his head at Etna to follow, turned on his heel, and walked out.

Rhys dreamt of his school days. An old memory, an amalgamation of other memories just like it, of being menaced by people bigger and meaner than him, back when he’d still been a target for people like that. They found him outside of learning annexes, after the informational streams had finished, or they would find him outside the pool, while he waited for an empty drying station. Or maybe they found him in the cafeteria. They’d find places without authority, or without any authority that might care about a bunch of punk kids getting into a scuffle. They’d come for him, back when he was small in stature and in thought. They’d corner him and he’d make himself smaller instead of bigger, going against the instincts he might’ve possessed if he’d been born a bird or a bear.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked in the dream, not out of desperation and fear, but of genuine curiosity. “What is the point—?”

A bully grabbed him by the shoulders, lifted him off the ground, and shook him like a rag doll.

“The point, kitten, is that I’m big and you’re small. I’m strong and you’re weak. Because I can, and you can’t stop me.”

Rhys jerked awake but the shaking didn’t stop. Waking up was disorienting enough, but waking up with the world not the proper way up, with his feet off of the ground, and staring at what he realised after a few confused seconds was someone’s very nice ass, made things a lot worse. Except for the ass. That was alright.

Goddammit, Rhys. Focus.

He was hanging upside down, off of someone’s shoulder. That same someone was running, which explained the shaking.

And then the real world resumed, his memories of the last few hours hitting him like a train. He groaned and cursed.

“Put me down,” he said, pushing weakly against the stranger’s back.

Rhys’ vision blurred and he was on his feet, stumbling back and more confused than ever. He caught sight of Tim—alive! Not eaten!—before the faceless man pushed Rhys around and shoved him forward.

“Where are we? What happened?” he demanded. Tim(?) only shook his head and shoved Rhys again. Bullets bounced off the frame of the open door behind them and Rhys decided to save his argument for another time. He ground his teeth and ran.
His ECHO eye buzzed back to life, but all it did was spit out error signals, broken code, and other garbage. He sucked in a breath—what’d happened to his ECHO? He tried to switch it over to the comms, but all he got from that was more static. He flicked it off. He heard that thundercrack sound again, louder than ever. He flinched, ducking as he ran ahead.

An open gate loomed ahead, and Rhys recognized by the torso pole where they were. He looked back to find Tim—or the digistruct or whatever—fire off another round from his Hyperion rifle, producing that now-familiar thunder sound. He shot from the hip, an odd sight with such a large gun. His broad shoulders squared for the shot, he adopted a wide stance, opening his hips and conveniently pulling at the tight fabric of his jeans.

Goddammit, Rhys. Did he have a concussion or something?

Another shot, causing the digistruct (it must’ve been one of the digistructs—Tim would have yelled at him by now) to rock slightly with the kickback. One of the men barrelling down the hall fell with a scream. Another vanished.

Rhys stared. He’d vanished, flashing from existence as easy as if someone had changed the channel.

A pudgy hand caught Rhys’, a set of blunt but surprisingly sharp nails dug into his skin hand. A woman Rhys had never seen before ran ahead, dragging him behind her before he realised he’d even slowed down.

“Stopping would be ill-advised!” she shouted and Rhys realised he recognized her voice.

“Are you—are you Etna?” he asked.

“Of course!”

They made it through the gates, past the parked vehicles. Etna slowed down, and Rhys read her intention.

“What?” She veered towards an armoured car.

“I can try!” He hopped into the driver’s seat. His ECHO was still on the fritz, but he would be a piss-poor weapons manufacturer/codemonkey if he couldn’t strong arm his way past a bandit’s ignition systems. Etna ducked low in the passenger seat, gripping the back of her chair hard enough to crack the dried leather. A bullet pinged off the metal frame. Something inside the arena howled. All the hairs on the back of Rhys’ neck stood up.

“Oh my,” Etna murmured.

Rhys looked back.

“Oh god,” he said weakly.

The creature was larger than it seemed on the monitors. It reared above the arena, its scales shining in the sun and its multitude of arms spread wide. Rhys saw the tentacles under its chin writhe and, although he was too far away to be certain, it looked as if it had some poor bastard in its grip.

Not Tim, not Tim, please don’t be Tim.

The engine roared to life. Rhys’ foot slammed on the accelerator, and his back hit the seat.

The creature let out another, more complicated sound. It shuddered the landscape, a low roar that
bypassed every part of Rhys’ brain that handled logic and reason and burrowed directly into the part that felt animal terror and stayed there.

“Would you look at that!” Etna said. Rhys felt certain he couldn’t turn his head if someone offered him his own luxury vacation planet, but when she added a dreamy, “I didn’t think those would work.” Rhys knew he had to try.

He regretted it. The creature had taken to the air, its 12 wings fanned out in an iridescent blur on either side. Thick, black smoke rose in a column from its neck and Rhys thought he could smell it even from there. It screamed again, its head tossing from side to side as if trying to dislodge something. As Rhys watched it swung its massive body above the arena, twisted through the air like an eel in water, and flew away.

Good fucking riddance, Rhys thought fervently. He pressed hard on the accelerator.

By the time it occurred to Rhys that he should have introduced himself to Etna, they had already arrived at the rendezvous point. It seemed a bit awkward to bring up now, he supposed. What was more awkward, perhaps, was the fact that Etna hadn’t asked him about anything yet.

The first real thing Rhys said to her was, “Wait here. I’m gonna just…” He gestured behind him, towards the car.

She stared up at the sky, at the monster’s vanishing form, her expression not unlike the kind Rhys himself wore when he emerged himself in one of those vacation simulating ARs. She stared at it like she was staring at the river of stars pouring across an unknown galaxy, or a rare and beautiful bird she was about to eat. It made him uneasy.

Rhys thought about it as he stashed the car. Dr. Llewellyn Etna was the sort of person who dreamt about planet-wide computers and information stored in minerals. She was a genius, one of the pre-eminent AI architects in the galaxy. He supposed that sort of mind-set might lend itself to certain… eccentricities. Maybe he was being too judgemental.

He thought about Tim. That didn’t make him feel very good either.

Rhys had encountered a lot of different reactions from people after they heard he was responsible for Hyperion’s untimely (or not, depending on who you asked) demise. Thanks to Jack’s PA-magnified tantrum before the satellite crashed, and Yvette’s story telling after she and the others settled, every single surviving Hyperion employee knew what Rhys had done. Even if they didn’t know why.

Most thanked him for it. A few feared him (hilarious).

Very few actually got angry. And no one before Tim had gotten that angry. Rhys recalled the hangar with a shudder. Even without being able to see Tim’s face, he could feel it. Waves of malice had rolled from him like radiation from a core about to melt down.

And then it stopped. And Tim went quiet.

The walk back to the rendezvous took time and Rhys used it to think. His ECHO was still on the fritz, but the diagnostic and repair tools he’d installed months ago had gotten to work. He tried to access the visual stream, but a message informed him that higher functions had been put out of service and the eye had been locked into safe mode for the next 17 hours. Rhys sighed. At least he could still see out of it, although the landscape fuzzed every time he moved his gaze.

He spotted Etna before she saw him. She stood beside the ridiculous bike, head tilted back and hand outstretched to shield her gaze from the sun and it hit Rhys all at once that he did it.
This was it. This was Epimetheus. It was like falling, something in his chest that made his breath catch, his heart speed up. The last six months of staying up all nights and skipping meals to study like some kid in undergrad, of dreams that woke him in tears—this was it.

“Dr. Etna,” he began, a little breathlessly. “My name is Rhys. And I’m—”

“It’s not much of a war machine, is it?” Etna asked, cutting Rhys off.

“Um.”

“If Atlas intended to use it as a soldier—or a weapon, I suppose—then why did they make it so large? One must assume for the shock and awe value, but wouldn’t that make it too difficult to corral? Not to mention move and store. Perhaps that’s why they gave it wings. But then, what would stop it from flying away from its handlers?” Etna leaned her weight against the hill’s incline, lowering to her feet in such a way that reminded Rhys of her age.

“Right,” Rhys said, mystified. “Dr. Etna—”

“Fear. It must be fear,” she said. “A shock collar, maybe. Or a chip in its head, although that seems expensive and time-consuming. How much tranquilizer would a creature of that size require, do you think? I am no biologist, of course, but I should think it would be an incredible amount. What is your field, young man?”

“Um. Digital engineering?” Rhys didn’t mean it to come out as a question but something about Llewellyn Etna brought him back to his student days, to when everything felt like a question.

“Did you ever study Machiavelli? I didn’t, not as part of my education, but in my spare time I tried to read The Prince. Fascinating but very dry. He wondered about control, and the bonds that men and women make and break.” She tilted her head to the side, lips parting slightly. “Let’s see… ‘The question arises of whether it is better to be feared or to be loved? The answer of course is both, but…’ Hm. I forget the rest. But yes. Fear. It must’ve been fear. I doubt such a thing could love.” She looked over her shoulder again, where the creature had long vanished. “I wonder, then, if the thing was no longer afraid? Or perhaps it’d found something new to be frightened of.”

Rhys followed her gaze, half-expecting to see the monster weaving its way towards them. But there was nothing but blue sky.

“Dr. Etna, my name is Rhys. I’m the CEO of Atlas and I’d come out all this way to rescue you.” He felt silly almost immediately after he finished speaking. But he squared his shoulders and held her gaze firmly. Her glasses were smudged, he noticed, and the arms taped up.

“And why would you do that?” she asked, seemingly curious.

“Because it was the right thing to do,” he said. Her mouth pulled down at the corners but otherwise she made no reaction. “And because I know about Epimetheus.”

That, at least, seemed to get something out of her. She leaned back and nodded.

“Epimetheus, yes, of course,” she said, like they were picking up a conversation they’d dropped moments ago. “Of course. Of course it would take a classical education to appreciate the significance of the name. Did you know it used to be called Project Mercury? Communication, you see. But then we discovered that it wasn’t just information we could get, but projections as well. Tell me, then, young man.” She peered at him, her eyes magnified behind smudged lenses. Rhys felt like a specimen under a microscope. “Have you come to bring it back to life?”
“Yes. Is it possible?” he asked.

“I think so, yes. Yes, yes, I think so. Shall we wait for the faceless fellow or shall we just go?”

“We should wait,” Rhys said firmly.

“Are we certain he isn’t dead? Is he the one the digistructures came from? Were they clones? He might be dead, you know,” she said. Rhys clenched his hands.

“I don’t think he’s dead,” he said, with more confidence than he felt.

Etna looked up at the sky again and pursed her lips.

“Do you have evidence?”

Rhys didn’t want to think about taking the car and leaving without Tim. He didn’t want to think about Tim against that monster, about getting hit by its tail, or its claws, or caught in its tentacles, or impaled on its spines, or hit by whatever substance it spat out, or any of the ways that thing could’ve gotten to Tim that Rhys didn’t see. He didn’t want to think of the stupid bike, sitting here, abandoned, waiting for some asshole to steal it.

He’d burn the damn thing, if it came down to it, Rhys decided. A Viking funeral.

“He said he wouldn’t die,” was all Rhys could come up with. Not yet. Not here. And certainly not for you, stretch.

“God... I did say that, didn’t I?”

Rhys stood up in a slide of pebbles. Tim staggered towards them, dragging the stench of blood and ooze and whatever that monster produced with him, and carrying a bundle under his arm. He wasn’t wearing a shirt. Not even an undershirt. And his pants were torn, the fabric burned away.

“I suppose you wouldn’t pay me if I died, eh boss?” His voice sounded tight, pained. He dropped an empty syringe—Rhys would guess it wasn’t his first.

“That’s right,” Rhys said weakly. He stared at a pair of nicely formed gams. Tim wore boots, but they looked stolen, jammed on in a hurry.

“Are you Etna?” Tim asked. Dr. Etna stared more openly at his chest than Rhys.

“Yes, that’s right,” she said to his pecs. “You have no face? That seems inconvenient. Why not wear a mask? Or project another person’s face over your own?”

“Nice to meet you, too.” Tim stopped in front of Rhys—chest, shoulders, god help him arms—and held out the bundle. “Got you a present.”

Rhys took it gently. “This had better not be a severed head or something.”

“That’s nice. That’s what you think of me?” Tim asked as he fetched his sack. “Save the clothes, though, will you? I stole those off some dead people.”

“Right.” Rhys unwrapped the package until something the size of his fist rolled out. White stone glared in the sunlight, glowing blue veins just barely visible in the bright. “Holy crap. They really had an artefact.”

“I knew you’d like it.”
Rhys picked it up and held it in both hands. It felt warm to the touch. Rhys felt giddy.

“This is Eridian! I’m holding ancient alien tech in my hands!” He wrapped one hand around the stone’s surface, squeezing gently. He thought he saw the glow from the blue veins flare. He desperately wished his ECHO worked.

“Oh good, you found the artefact. I didn’t realise they’d taken it from my home, but I suppose that makes sense that they would have. I wonder what else they took. Regardless, I’m glad you were able to procure it. That will make everything a lot easier,” Etna said.

“Happy day.” Tim’s grave robbing had resulted in a mess of an outfit. The way the tank top stretched across his chest was borderline obscene. He tugged on the hem, trying to pull it over the dark trail of hair that lead from his navel down to the waistband of his stolen pants (which hung too loose for his slim hips, of course). It was a testament to the draw of Eridian tech that Rhys didn’t find himself staring too overtly at the sight.

“So, I take it you’re on board with this Epimetheus thing?” Tim asked, giving up.

“Are you referring to the project I dedicated the last 15 years of my life to?” Etna asked, without a hint of sarcasm.

“Uh, yeah?” Tim said when it became obvious she was waiting for a response.

“Then yes. I am very much on board. It will be nice to resume my life’s work. Which is not to say that I had abandoned it once the satellite crashed us all onto this planet, but it did provide me with a considerable set back.”

“I’ve got a lab you can use,” Rhys said. “And access to some of the Hyperion tech you were using before.”

“That is impressive. I suppose you’ve been thinking about this for a while,” Etna said.

Rhys traced a vein with his thumbnail and tried not to think of just how right she was.

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THEN

A lot of Tim’s fantasies began like this. With his door chiming late at night, a quick scan of the vidfeed showing him just who was waiting on the other side. Jack stood in the hall with his hands jammed in the pockets of that worn leather jacket. His hair in an artful disarray over his forehead. It looked like he’d been running his hand through it. Tim felt frozen to the spot at the sight. He wondered if he was still asleep. If it weren’t for his heart hammering in his chest and the rush of blood to his head, he might’ve believed it.

“What took you,” Jack grumbled as he brushed past Tim and into his apartment.

What had taken him was a change from his boxer shorts into clean pajamas (loose striped pants, worn yellow t-shirt) and a few seconds to run a comb through his hair, and then ruffling the locks with his hand when he realised how insane he might look with neat, groomed hair at 0300. He would sooner take a dive through the windows of his 54th floor apartment than admit this. His cheeks felt warm and he knew it would only get worse. He wished he’d taken the time to splash water on his face (and maybe brush his teeth?).

“I was asleep, Jack,” Tim lied.
Jack stood in the centre of his bachelor apartment, hands on his hips, looking the place over with a proprietary air. His gaze swept across Tim’s bed (a double, hastily remade and then more hastily messed up again before he’d opened the door), a look that sent Tim’s pulse spiking.

“Um. Is everything okay?”

The way Tim’s fantasies usually went was like this: Jack would give him a long look, maybe lick his lips, and tell Tim that everything was not okay. He would crowd Tim, walk him slowly backwards until the back of Tim’s knees hit the edge of his bed, and then he would lean right into Tim’s space.

“I’ve been thinking about you all night, Timmy.” His breath would feel warm, smell of cigarettes and maybe alcohol (but not too much). He would trace his fingers over Tim’s jaw, down his neck, leaving a trail of goosebumps in his wake. Tim would swallow, and ask why.

Jack would hook one finger around the collar of Tim’s shirt and pull, just a little. And when Tim would finally muster the courage to look into Jack’s face, he would find Jack looking at him like Tim was a four course meal and Jack had been starving all night.

In this reality, Jack glanced at Tim once and then away. He pushed his hand through his hair, a gesture that seemed to suggest uncertainty. This was unusual enough to pull Tim from his daydreams.

“Jack—” Tim tried, but Jack held up his hand and, ever obedient, Tim fell silent.

“Do you remember that first time I took you out to the quarry?” Jack said at last.

“Uh. Yeah, I think so. Why—?”

“Do you remember what I told you, after you killed all those lizards?” Jack asked. Tim took a moment before responding, something stirring in his stomach at the memory. The look on Jack’s face suggested he wouldn’t appreciate any flippancy.

“You told me you had a plan for Hyperion,” Tim said slowly.

Jack nodded. He stared at one of Tim’s posters, an original print he’d bought from an artist at EVECon almost ten years ago. An idealized map of the Progenisis Galaxy, drawn like an old-fashioned woodcut. Tim wrapped his arms around himself and cleared his throat.

“What about it?” Tim asked.

“I do have a plan,” Jack said, tracing a finger across the Hypnos Nebula. He turned to Tim, his eyes bright inside dark and heavy circles, the remnants of another series of all-nighters. Tim knew he’d been pulling them more and more often, lately.

“Not just for Hyperion. For everything. The whole damn universe,” Jack said. Tim fidgeted with the collar of his shirt.

“Jack, have you been drinking?” Tim asked. Jack laughed and brushed the hair out of his face.

“More or less constantly since that asshole Tassiter cut the deadline for the Greenwich Project in-fucking-half.”

“Jesus…” Jack didn’t tell Tim much about his work in engineering, but Tim knew about the late nights, about the missed family dinners, about Jack’s soon-to-be ex-wife bitching that he ruined their relationship, he picked work over his family. He knew these things, because Jack would message
him, sometimes, at 0200 or later, to tell him some stupid joke or to complain about his co-workers. And Tim would be awake.

“I’m sorry,” Tim said. Jack shook his head sharply and began to pace.

“I’m done. I’m fucking done, Tim. This fucking company is being run into the ground, no one cares about advancements, they all just want fat paycheques and they don’t care about who they’ve gotta hurt along the way.”

Tim raised an eyebrow. He knew for a fact that Hyperion was a rough game—one Tim was mostly exempt from, due to being unambitious and unimportant—but he knew that Jack played it better than most. More than one of Jack’s rivals found themselves with an empty bank account, or an accusation of embezzlement in their inbox, or compromising photos of themselves performing unspeakable acts with unspeakable creatures, or worse.

Jack caught the hint of Tim’s scepticism and scowled. “Look, it’s different for me, alright? All those corporate assholes deserved to get knocked down a few pegs.”

“And arrested? Or... dead?” Tim quailed under Jack’s glare. “Sorry. But, look, I don’t understand why this is worse than usual. Tassiter’s always pulling shit like this, isn’t he?”

“He’s sabotaging me. He knows I can’t complete the project in the insane amount of time he’s given me. He’s setting me up to fail. This is a big one, Tim.” He shook his head. “This could’ve made my career. It was part of the plan. This was Pandora.” He sucked in a sharp breath and let it out harshly. “And now it’s gone. Well, fuck him. If he thinks that’ll be enough to stop me, he’s got another thing coming.”

So, that’s what this was about. Jack was upset and needed someone to complain to. Normally, he’d just send Tim an ECHO.

Tim’s throat tightened. He felt stupid. What had he expected?

“Jack, why don’t you sit down? I can get you something to drink.”

He turned toward his mini kitchen, fully intending to share the bottle of nebula brandy, when a hand around his wrist stopped him, a force pulled him back. Tim stumbled a little, his cheeks heating. He was nearly face-to-face with Jack.

“Do you remember what you said to me, before?” Jack said. Tim could see the bloodshot in his eyes, could smell the night on his breath. When Tim said nothing, Jack gave him a shake. “When I told you I would change everything, do you remember what you said to me?” Jack wore a look on his face Tim had only seen him wear on when aiming down the sights. An intensity that made Tim feel exposed like copper wiring stripped of its casing.


“You meant it,” he said. It wasn’t a question, but Tim nodded anyway. “Okay. Okay. I’m gonna tell you some things I’ve never told anyone. About the plan, and everything. And what I want from you. And I want you to keep your trap shut until I’m finished, okay?”

Tim opened his mouth. He closed it at Jack’s glare. He nodded. Jack gave his shoulders a squeeze.

“Good boy.” He took a breath—such a vulnerable gesture that it made Tim’s heart clench—and told Tim.
Tim kept his mouth shut like the good boy he was until Jack finished. He kept his mouth shut even then.

Never, ever in his wildest fantasies had he imagined the night going this way.

“Well?” Jack said at last, when it became obvious Tim wasn’t going to speak. “Come on, Timmy, I just poured my freakin’ brains out here. Say something.”

You’re crazy, Tim wanted to say. You’re drunk. You’re out of your goddamn mind, Jack. He opened his mouth.

“You want… you want me to…” He struggled with a concept too ludicrous to get his head around. He looked into Jack’s face and the reality of it hit him. “My name—my face. You’re asking me to—You— You want me to—”

Tim didn’t he realise he was hyperventilating until his vision started to grey out. He heard Jack mutter something, although he couldn’t make out the words. A moment later, he was seated on the edge of his bed, bent over with one hand against the back of his neck.

“Take it easy, that’s it, babe. Just breathe, in and out. You’re good, you’re good. I got you, kitten, I got you.” Jack’s voice was a gentle murmur, a constant stream of soothing noise. The hand on the back of Tim’s neck stroked the skin above his collar, warm and heavy. Tim closed his eyes and breathed.

“I get it, okay?” Jack said at last, when Tim had settled. “I get it. It’s asking a lot, I know it, but Tim—” Jack tightened his grip on Tim’s neck. He pulled him close, until there were only a few inches between them, until Tim could feel the heat radiating off of Jack, even through all the layers of clothes. “You’re tough. I’ve known it all along. I’ve seen it. I’m not asking anything I don’t think you couldn’t handle. I wouldn’t do that to you. You know that, right?”

No, Tim thought. He thought of the first time in the so-called ‘danger room’, with the armed digistrates. He thought of the rifle in his hands, and the monsters screeching for flesh and blood, coming for him faster than he could count. He thought of bar fights he’d been dragged into, of the taste of blood in his mouth, the feel of a gun in his hand.

Too much, he thought. He looked down at his hands. He should say no. He should look Jack in the eyes and tell him no.

He looked Jack in the eyes. He couldn’t speak.

“You’re the only person I can trust with this,” Jack said.

Say no. Tell him you can’t. He’s insane, you can’t do this, you’ll lose everything—

Jack looked at him, expression intent and honest and open, unlike anything Tim had ever seen before. They were inches apart. Tim swallowed.

Say no.

“Can I think about it?” he asked.

Chapter End Notes
Etna didn't quite nail the famous Machiavelli quote: "Here a question arises: whether it is better to be loved than feared, or the reverse. The answer is, of course, that it would be best to be both loved and feared. But since the two rarely come together, anyone compelled to choose will find greater security in being feared than in being loved. . . . Love endures by a bond which men, being scoundrels, may break whenever it serves their advantage to do so; but fear is supported by the dread of pain, which is ever present."

Thank you all again (and again!) for reading, giving kudos, and especially for commenting. Every comment makes me smile and sometimes blush. If you caught any typos/errors, please feel free to let me know. Or don't. Do what you want, really.

Next chapter: Part II begins. Tim investigates a ghost town and his bad day gets worse. Rhys dreams big.
Part II: Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Tim's bad day gets worse. Rhys gets to know Etna. Two conwomen make the scene.

Chapter Notes

It is Tuesday my dudes.

This chapter might be a little less polished than usual because my monitor died this weekend and I'm having some problems.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Five years alone on Pandora had taught Tim a great deal. It taught him how long he could walk through the desert without water (not long, as it turned out), how to spot the signs when he was close to a rak'k nest, or a varkid hive, or a skag den, or a thresher enclave, or a bullymong cave, or so on. It taught him how to escape a bandit camp in the middle of the night with both arms tied and a knife in his mouth (very carefully). It taught him to recognize when a peaceful gathering was about to erupt into bloodsport. It taught him to only drink from moving water. Most importantly, however, is that it taught him how to let go of the things you loved.

They couldn’t take Tim’s bike. Tim didn’t need Rhys to point it out how impractical it would be with the three of them. Tim certainly didn’t need to be lectured about the safety concerns of riding something without doors or decent shocks or any sort of protection.

“It’s fine, alright? We’ll take the car. It’s all fine.” Tim patted the handlebars. “It’s not like I named her,” he muttered.

The car wasn’t far. Rhys insisted on driving and Tim was exhausted enough to let him.

“Don’t sulk,” Rhys said as Tim climbed in shotgun. “With the amount I’m paying you, you can buy yourself a whole fleet of bikes.”

“I’m not sulking,” Tim snapped. “I’m just… tired.”

Rhys eyed Tim before he activated the vehicle’s ignition and pulled out of the cluster of stone and bushes he’d stashed it in. They put the factory in the rear-view and drove.

Etna lay down in the back seat and closed her eyes. The landscape whipped past. Rhys kept them on the cracked road.

“‘This whole area used to be Atlas controlled,’” Rhys said. “‘Guess when they were destroyed, nobody bothered to make sure all their Pandoran investments didn’t fall into disrepair.’

“Shame for Crisis Ridge,’” Tim said.
“To hell with Crisis Ridge. Any people that watch some poor old woman get dragged out of her home in broad daylight deserve what they get.”

After barely exchanging two sentences with the woman, Tim could maybe understand why the people of Crisis Ridge weren’t all that bothered about Dr. Etna’s fate.


Rhys adjusted his grip on the steering wheel. “You’re right. But it’s not that easy. I can’t just come back here and fix the roads, fire up the mining facility and bring jobs back to the town. Especially not now that some maniacs shot the place up.”

“Plus that monster might come back.”


“It looked worse in person,” Tim said. “Count yourself lucky you got out of there in time.”

Rhys gave a choked laugh. “Lucky… Boy, I’ve really had to redefine the meaning of that word since coming to Pandora. Lucky used to mean getting the last slice of wood stove pizza from the Concourse of Heroes, or getting a headshot in Cry of Honour’s capture the flag, or getting laid.” Rhys glanced into the rear-view. “Now I guess it means chemical burns when I could’ve been eaten.”

“You got chemical burns?” Tim asked. Rhys scowled and gestured to his bare arm, which looked a little pinker than usual.

“I took a dip in that ooze, remember? What do you think happened to my coat?”

“Right. How could I have forgotten the most devastating casualty of all.”

“That coat cost a lot of money,” Rhys said, flushing.

“Well, look on the bright side, stretch. With all the money you supposedly stand to make from Epimetheus, you can buy yourself a whole new wardrobe.”

“I was planning on it!”

Tim chuckled and Rhys, still red in the face, grinned. They fell quiet for a while. Tim could sleep damn near anywhere, but the scenery was nice enough and the wind felt good that he wanted to stay up, just a little longer.

“You really think this thing can change the world?” Tim asked.

“What—Epimetheus? Absolutely. Pandora was a boondoggle, make no mistake. But there’s a reason why so many corporations poured so much money into the place. The eridium here’s not just valuable, it could change everything if we could just understand how to use it properly.”

“What’s eridium got to do with the project? I thought you wanted to make digistruct servants or whatever.”

“Right,” Rhys said quickly. “We have to use eridium. I thought I mentioned it before. Eridium’s the key to producing the ‘structs cheaply.”

“Eridium’s hardly cheap.”
It is on Pandora. Why do you think Hyperion and Atlas were so invested? It’s not just vaults. This planet’s basically a gold mine. Uh, so to speak.

Eridium-infused digistructs, huh? Tim rubbed the inside of his still-aching wrist. It would be sore for hours, he knew. He wondered what it would be like if it didn’t hurt at all.

Rhys went on, warming up to the subject. “Too many corporations poured their resources into the wrong places, looking for vaults or strip mining when they should have been taking a more surgical approach, and nurtured the planet’s environment. They should have tried harder to make this world a better place for human habitation.”

“I suppose you’ll be that benevolent capitalist,” Tim said. Rhys’ lips twitched.

“I might be! I don’t just want to change Pandora. I want to make it better. The people here deserve it.”

“The people…? Rhys, honey, have you hit your head? We just escaped an obstacle course of death, built by gang leaders for the express purpose of killing as many people as possible. And even once we got out of there, we had to fight our way through a mob of killers. And then the monster—someone made that thing. And you were just condemning the people of Crisis Ridge for not helping an old woman!”

“Yeah, I remember,” Rhys said, wincing. “But, look—that’s just a small portion of the population. Or, okay, maybe not so small,” he said when Tim’s head turned his way. “But there are good people here. I’ve met them.”

“Then you really have seen something I wouldn’t believe,” Tim said.

Rhys’ expression twisted in disgust. “Listen to yourself! Is it fun, being such a cynic? Do you get anything out of it?”

Tim flushed. “Well, what about you? Does this Pollyanna attitude of yours give you anything? Cause, from where I’m sitting, it just makes you sound naïve.”

Rhys laughed. “You know, you just might be the first person to accuse me of being a ‘Pollyanna’. ” He shook his head. “Anyway, I’d rather sound naïve than defeated. I might not be a big, strong vault hunter, but that doesn’t mean I can’t make a difference. There’s more to this planet than violence. I’m not ready to give up on it yet.”

Tim snorted. He wished he’d just gone to sleep.

Silence descended. Etna turned to her side and began to snore.

Given the way his luck had turned over the last few days, Tim fully expected to find an armed welcoming committee waiting for them upon their return to Crisis Ridge. It was to his surprise, then, that they drove through an empty street in a quiet town. The sun had nearly set by this point, but the only lights he could see were the automatic outdoor safety lights strung between buildings. The windows were blank.

“Huh,” he said. Rhys glanced over. “You’d think people might be out by now.”

“Maybe they’re all in bed already,” Rhys said.

“It’s barely sunset,” Tim said. Rhys shrugged, unconcerned. Etna grabbed the back of Tim’s seat and
pulled herself forward.

“Just there,” she said, pointing. Tim raised his eyebrows. Rhys leaned over the steering wheel, his lips parted in amazement.

The road lead them just outside of town, a path that would eventually lead them to a mountain. The mountains stood tall over the landscape, their colour gone blue and violet in the orange and gold sunset. The whole thing looked gaudy, the sort of thing a first-time painter might give to a friend for their birthday.

But that wasn’t the amazing thing. Leading down from the mountain, were trees. Enough of them that it could’ve been a forest. Tim had never seen enough trees gathered together to be considered a true forest on Pandora before.

“Whoa,” Rhys breathed.

“Yeah,” Tim agreed.

“It’s nice and quiet out here,” Etna said.

Etna lived on the edge of town, as was appropriate for a new comer and clear eccentric. She lived in a three-roomed home, which backed up against the range and surprisingly verdant forest.

“Has this always been here?” Rhys asked as the car rumbled to a stop.

“Not always, I think. Crisis Ridge doesn’t have much use for it anymore. No one wants to build things out of wood, you know. Too flashy for a place like this.”

“Maybe this was Atlas,” Rhys said. “Maybe they managed some successful terraforming.”

“Shouldn’t you know?” Tim asked. Rhys shrugged and grinned a little sheepishly.

“Atlas had a lot of fingers in a lot of different pies. There’s about 15 yottabytes worth of data, and most of it got corrupted…”

“That doesn’t sound like a lot,” Tim said as he stretched. Rhys gave him a look.

“One yottabyte is approximately two billion petabytes.”

“And… petabytes are big?” Tim asked. Rhys shook his head and left the car.

There weren’t that many trees, Tim realised upon a closer look. In a more prosperous planet, this would barely qualify as a copse. But after nearly three decades spent fenced in by city settlements, or in space, or on the wastes of Elpis, it was a welcome sight. If he weren’t so bone tired, he might’ve gone out exploring.

“Callum had mentioned something about Atlas working on this area. Experimenting with transplanting alien flora, I believe. Do either of you have anything to eat?” Etna asked.

Tim looked down at his stolen outfit and then back up into Etna’s lined face. She stared back at him, completely guileless.

“No,” he said.

“Me neither,” Rhys said. “Are you… okay? I mean, you were gone for quite a while. Did they… were you hurt? Or something?”
“No,” Etna said. Rhys waited, but nothing else came.

“Oh. Good,” he said.

Tim put some distance between himself and the others. His head hurt, a throbbing ache that would linger thanks to the ignoble deaths of his digistructs. He stared out at the dark carbuncle stuck to the horizon, man-made structures cutting blocky shapes out of the otherwise beautiful sky. Crisis Ridge was no gem, despite the beauty that seemed to surround it. The faint glitter of the emergency lights gave it some charm, but not much. And there were still no lights coming from the buildings.

Tim frowned.

He found the others inside the small home, digging through the kitchen cupboards for something to eat.

“Crisis Ridge’s still dark. Is that usual?” he asked. Etna leaned back on her heels and considered his question with a tilt of her head.

“No,” she said at last. She opened another cupboard and resumed her search.

“What are you thinking?” Rhys asked.

“Bandits, maybe, but they don’t usually leave things so spotless,” Tim said. He looked back out the window, where the blue-black sky cast a shroud over the dark settlement.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Rhys asked. Tim looked over, his eyebrows high under his mask. After everything he’d gone through in the last few days, Tim wouldn’t have expected such an offer.

Rhys tilted his chin under Tim’s gaze, as though sensing his disbelief. He might’ve looked defiant if he weren’t so pale, if his lower lip wasn’t trembling. Tim found it kind of charming.

“No. This is my job, remember?” Tim said. Rhys crossed his arms.

“If it’s dangerous, you shouldn’t go alone. You look like you’re going to fall over,” he said.

“I’ll be fine. I do this for a living. Besides,” Tim lowered his voice, nodding towards Etna, “I’d like you to stay here. Keep an eye on… things.”

Rhys chewed on his lip. He glanced over to where Etna had stacked the contents of her pantry on the floor in descending order by size.

“Yeah, okay. Maybe that’s not the worst idea you’ve ever had,” Rhys said.

Tim fought the urge to laugh bitterly. You have no idea, kid.

“I’ll be back in a few,” he said instead.

Rhys continued pawing through Etna’s kitchen, although he wasn’t focused on the task. Anxiety and giddiness bubbled in his stomach and his thoughts whirred through his head almost faster than he could follow. He worried about Tim, and he thought about Epimetheus.

The slip-up in the car had been close. He blamed it on exhaustion and elation at surviving another calamity. Maybe he should have taken that opportunity to come clean—after all, Tim had just saved his life again. Maybe he deserved a little honesty.
Then again, Rhys argued with himself, it wasn’t like he was completely lying. Part of Epimetheus’ goals were to create digistructs. That it had been an accidental discovery, a little bonus to the main goal, was neither here nor there.

“You haven’t said much,” Etna said. Rhys jumped, nearly dropping the box of ancient grains he was holding.

“Um,” he said.

“About the project. I thought you were very keen before but you’ve gotten quiet since. Are you thinking about the young man with no face? Is he your friend?”

“Sort of. I mean, no.” Rhys rubbed at his temple. “I’m not thinking about him. I’m thinking about…”

He looked down at the box. “Teff.”

“The smallest grain ever discovered in Terra.” Etna nodded, perfectly earnest. “Yes. I can understand. But it’s been a long time for me. I would like to talk to you about Epimetheus.”

Rhys’ grip tightened on the cardboard. “I would like that very much,” he said.

Etna lead him to what might have been her backyard, if it’d been better tended. Rhys had grown up in the East Megacity on Eden-4, and although he’d spent his entire life in apartment complexes, he knew what a proper yard should look like.

His friend Raavi’s family had a house in the walled-off lakeshore district. An actual house, with an actual yard, well-manicured and properly tended. It had trimmed bushes, ordered flower beds bursting with the colourful tropic flora. Rhys remembered the flowers best. Outside of the dome they would whither, but inside the artificially treated environment, they sprouted blooms as big as Rhys’ face.

Rhys had only seen a few flowers on Pandora, most of them grew in the Atlas biodome. And even in there, Rhys would hesitate before picking one. There was always something ready to bite your head off for the smallest reasons.

Etna’s backyard was rock and upturned dirt. A small garden huddled close to the house, sprouts of green struggling in dry earth. The forest looked less impressive out here, the sight of unhealthy trees and the gaps between them a little more obvious.

Etna strode up to the shed without waiting for Rhys.

“I wanted to give you some time,” Rhys said as he jogged up. “I don’t know what it was like with the bandits and everything. It couldn’t have been nice. I didn’t want to rush you.”

“I am not a delicate person,” Etna said. She kicked over a small rock at the base of the shed, revealing a key. “My experience at the Atlas facility wasn’t ideal, but I survived. Hyperion was hardly a picnic, after all.”

Rhys swallowed. He’d been at Hyperion of his own free will, but he knew that not everyone shared that designation. He’d heard stories about what Handsome Jack did to keep people loyal. Especially to keep scientists, especially those working on ethically questionable experiments, loyal.

He wondered if Jack resorted to such measures with Etna. He glanced back to the dark windows of the little house, and thought about the nearly empty cupboards, the single dish in the sink, the layer of dust over everything, and all the other signs of a life lived undisturbed, and alone.
“I had been working to rebuild after Helios crashed,” Etna said as she rattled the key in the old fashioned lock. The door, Rhys saw, had been dented and beaten. “I had to scavenge a lot of my old equipment from the wreck. But I couldn’t get everything. By the time I managed to get back to Helios, the bandits had been at it.”

“They weren’t all bandits,” Rhys said. “A lot of ex-Hyperion employees have set up camp in the wreck. They’ve got majority control over it. You could’ve joined them,” he added, maybe feeling a little annoyed that she’d been so close at one time and this whole thing could’ve been avoided.

Etna shrugged. “Here we are.” The door swung open.

Inside, Rhys found another wreck. A large console that appeared to have been made up from a few different computers all bolted together took up the centre of the room. Three monitors hung crookedly from the ceiling. Wires drooped down from the walls, hanging like moss and vines in a jungle. At the top of the console sat the remains of a broken glass dome, the sort of container, Rhys knew from seeing it in his own labs enough times, that was often used to store eridium. But there was no sign of the mineral.

Etna sighed. “They took the crystal, of course,” she said. “And the artefact. But at least we have managed to retrieve that.”

Rhys’ hand flew to his pocket, feeling the weight of the alien device press against his chest, as though she might try to grab it from him.

“Do you need it right now?” he asked.

Etna shook her head. She planted her hands on her hips and pursed her lips.

“We will need to bring some of this with us. Salvage. Yes. I’ll need an ECHOtablet. I can upload most of the data to that. A portable drive, if you have one, would be helpful.”

“I can get you a tablet,” Rhys said, trying not to sound too relieved. She nodded without turning her head from the dark screens. She had a distant, almost vacant, expression on her face.

Rhys cleared his throat. “So… I know I asked a lot out there, before. About your project. And with all the excitement, I wasn’t sure…” She didn’t turn her head. He pushed on. “I mean, you can do it, right? Finish Epimetheus?”

She stared without blinking for a few seconds of silence. Rhys tried not to fidget like an over-eager student waiting for his professor to grade his final.

At last, she said, “Do you know where the inspiration came from? For Epimetheus? I mentioned knowledge of the classics would help. It’s the foresight, you see. I got the idea from the sirens. Do you know much about sirens?”

Rhys shook his head, feeling a little at sea in this current conversational turn.

“The way they interact with eridium is remarkable. They have a connection to it. We thought perhaps the Eridians did as well, maybe something comparable to what the sirens could do. Did you hear about what happened on Elpis five years ago?”

“Um.” Rhys searched his memory, fighting whiplash at the sudden swerve in topics. “You mean DAHL’s attack? The Lost Legion?”

“Yes. There was a vault on the moon. The CEO of Hyperion opened it. Inside he found an artefact
that gave him knowledge. It showed him things, as though by telepathy, inside his own head.”

Rhys said nothing. He felt cold, shocked as he sometimes was, by the mention of Handsome Jack. Something spiked painfully at his temple and the sight from his still-glitching eye went fuzzy. He rubbed absently at the port.

“I never heard anything about that,” he said.

“I don’t think he told anyone but me. And he only told me because of the project. Eridium as a memory container, as a storage for the Eridian’s cultural memory. It’s where the idea was born. He wanted to access it without the mental trauma he endured.”

One of the monitors flickered. Rhys flinched and when he looked, the monitor was black and dead. Rhys swallowed hard. Cold sweat pricked at the back of his neck.

“To see into the past,” Etna said. She touched her fingers to the edge of the console. “To commune directly with the memories of the Eridians via the medium of eridium, to see what they left behind and what we can still learn from them.”

Rhys shivered and drew his arms tightly against his chest. The scent of burnt dust and hot rubber hung thickly in the air. He missed his jacket. He very badly wanted to leave this shed.

“Right.” He cleared his throat. “So, should we…?”

“You should be careful,” Etna said as they walked back towards the house. Rhys shot her a curious look. “Epimetheus is dangerous. You might not like what you find.”

Out in the open air, away from the strange monitors and heavy industrial scent, Rhys’ mood had lightened considerably. He grinned at her.

“Maybe. But, considering what the Eridians were capable of and what we’re still learning from them, what I—what we find could change the universe. Just one vault alone was enough to change this corner of the galaxy.” His gaze flicked up to the sky, where Elpis’ cracked surface glowed a gentle orange. He frowned. The memory of what they’d dug up in the factory rising to the fore of his mind. “Just so long as it’s not another monster.”

Etna stared at the port on the side of Rhys’ head, her expression too fleeting to make out.

“Hmm,” she said.

Tim kept waiting for the lights to come on, to see movement, for any sign of life, as he approached Crisis Ridge by foot. The main street remained silent. The doors remained closed. The windows remained dark. Tim unholstered his pistol.

The streets looked just as clean as they had before. There was no sign that any heavily armed vehicles had been on the road. There were no bullet holes or fist-sized dents on the wall. The windows were intact. Hell, there was barely a bent blade of grass or an upturned stone.

So why the hell did Tim feel nervous?

This wasn’t the bandit style. Even the more ‘civilized’ gangs, the ones who wore poorly stitched suits and shiny rings on their fingers, wouldn’t be so tidy with an extraction.

Tim found the public house and pressed his ear against the door. Silence. He placed his hand on the
knob, adjusted his earwidget and called up the night vision function, and went inside.

The door opened easily. Tim kept his pistol up. He scanned the room, but the tables, the chairs, the bar—all of it was empty. There were still drinks on the table, and on the bar. He picked one up, gave its contents a sniff. Vodka, probably. Or some equally cheap still-to-bottle liquor. He took a sip and found it lukewarm, and heavily watered down, enough to suggest melted ice.

He found the old man’s game of solitaire, each card still in place. The Jack of Clubs sat where Tim had last seen it. He felt a chill settle into his stomach at the sight.

Tim found the old man’s private quarters upstairs, unlocked. There was no one inside. The bed was made. There were dishes in the sink, food in the pantry, and another game on the go. Backgammon, this time. An ECHOtab sat on a table beside the game, projecting the computer player’s next move in soft green and blue light.

Tim shut the door behind him firmly. Night had completely fallen by now, leaving him illuminated only by emergency lights. He dimmed the intensity of his night vision and went on with his search.

He found a few empty cars, and one bike. He stared at the bike for a little while, but left it where it sat.

None of the doors seemed locked. Tim investigated a private residence, found the same sort of things he’d found in the old man’s home, the signs of recent life, but without any people. Like everyone had gone up in smoke. He tried the house beside the first and found it unlocked, empty. On the floor of the third home, he found a stuffed animal. A bullymog with button eyes and soft, white teeth.

The door creaked behind him. Tim turned, gun out—

Nothing. He released a breath, but didn’t lower his gun.

“Anyone there?” he asked gruffly. More nothing. Not surprising. Tim wished he had Rhys’ ECHOeye to let him see through the damn wall, see if there was anyone waiting in ambush.

He crept forward and told himself that this wasn’t scary. Nothing wasn’t scary. A giant hellbeast on wings, that was scary. An empty town was… unnerving. But not scary. He hesitated at the door, gun held level. He thought about calling out again, but it wouldn’t help. He thought about trying to threaten, but if a bandit waited for him on the other side, they weren’t going to listen. Better to save his breath.

He stuck close to the wall and tried to peek to the opposite side of the door. There didn’t appear to be anyone waiting. He stepped outside.

The street appeared empty. The house appeared quiet and uninhabited. The shadows beside the door appeared…

Tim inhaled sharply. He pointed his gun into the dark.

“I see you,” he said. The grainy figure flinched, the action caught with his night vision. “Come out now. Let me take a look at you.”

“I’m not looking to start trouble.” A woman stepped out from the shadows with her hands raised. She didn’t dress like a settler, or a bandit, though her outfit bore that familiar road-worn look. She wore jewellery made from bone in her ears and had a machine gun strapped to her back.

“You don’t dress like someone looking to avoid trouble. Nice gun.” Tim approached her cautiously,
keeping his pistol level with her face.

“I could say the same to you. That a Hyperion pistol? I didn’t even know you could still get those. And a Maliwan shield? You got some nice gear for a bandit.” She took in a sharp breath when Tim stepped into the faint light. “What—what happened to your face?”

“I asked the doc for a face-lift. Guess she was a literal-minded sort.”

“That’s funny.” She didn’t smile. She stood still as Tim unlatched the strap that held her machine gun. The gun fell with a clatter, making them both tense.

“Got anything else I should know about?” Tim asked, relaxing. The smile she gave him looked sweet, practiced, and completely fake.

“Just a double deuce.” With her hands still up, she flipped him off.

“Really?” Tim asked, unimpressed. She shrugged.

“Sue me. It’s hard to be witty when you’ve got a gun in your face.”

That was definitely true, which is why Tim usually didn’t bother. He wanted to pat her down, but he couldn’t search her for weapons and hold a gun on her at the same time. It was asking for trouble.

He stepped back, wishing again that he’d brought Rhys along, and got as far as, “What’s your—” before an electrified bullet slammed into his shield.

Tim did have nice gear, which is why he managed to keep the shield up long enough to run for cover. He just managed to duck around the corner before a machine gun spray peppered the wall. He thought he heard the woman shouting, but it was difficult to make out over the sound of gunfire. He’d run himself into a wedge between two neighbour buildings. A stack of boxes blocked off the other end. Tim flattened himself against the wall and waited for his shield to recharge.

Two people, at least. His shoulder ached where the bullet had hit him like a hammer. A pistol, probably.

Tim eyed the boxes. He could try to scale them, but it would take a while and it would leave his back exposed and take up both his hands. It’d be easy for Machine Gun Betty and her pal to pick him off. No, his best option was to wait for the mag to run out and try to hit her while she reloaded and hope her friend wasn’t waiting for him. Best option didn’t always mean a good option.

The machine gun stopped. Tim peered around the corner, keeping close to the wall. He spotted his former hostage, reloading as expected. He took aim.

A gun pressed against the back of his skull.

“Drop it.”

Tim froze. The woman on the street looked at him with a smile. The gun pressed harder.

“Drop. It.”

The pistol clattered to the ground. Tim held his hands up.

“Come on, handsome. On your feet and into the street. And don’t try anything stupid.” Another woman’s voice, this one a little more sultry than the other’s. Not quite up to Moxxi’s level, but on its way.
Tim did as he was told. He stood face-to-barrel-to-face with a derringer and the woman in a hat that held it. Machine Gun Betty patted him down, and began to dissemble his impressive armoury.

“The others’ll come looking for me, you know,” Tim said conversationally. The hat woman snorted.

“Please. You’re here alone. Otherwise you would’ve had someone help you when you had Sash at gunpoint.”

“They were too far to call on before,” Tim said.

“Oh my god, look at this Maliwan shotgun. It’s got slag damage!”

“That’s mine,” Tim snapped.

Neither woman even bothered dignifying that with an answer. God, it’d been a long time since he’d been robbed at gunpoint.

“Eyes on me, handsome,” sultry hat said.

“Stop calling me that.”

“Where are your eyes, anyway? You even got some under that thing on your face? Cause you seemed pretty blind in that alley over there,” she said. Tim ground his teeth.

“Can you just finish robbing me so I can get on with my incredibly shitty night?”

“Sorry, we have some questions for you. You about done, Sash?”

“Two shotguns! A Maliwan with slag and a Tediore with corrosive. Nice haul, Fi,” came the response.

“I’m happy for us both. Alright.” Sultry hat was no amateur, Tim realised. Even as she spoke to the other one (Sash?), she didn’t take her eyes off of Tim, kept her little derringer steady. “What happened to this place? Where is everyone?”

This was the second time in less than 24 hours that he’d been interrogated at gunpoint. Tim felt more depressed than angry.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Really? You don’t know. Someone with this kind of firepower comes poking through an empty city with no back-up, you know what that says to me?” Sultry hat (Fi?) asked. Tim suspected this was a rhetorical question and decided to stay quiet. “It says trouble.”

“I don’t know what happened here,” he said.

“You were in someone’s house before,” Sash said.

“I was investigating.”

“Really? Not looting?”

“Aw, you caught me. I’m a fence for used children’s toys and shitty ECHOtabs.”

“You could’ve gotten these guns from any one of these houses,” Sash said.
Tim laughed in her face. “Really? You think the fine people of Crisis Ridge armed themselves with a $700 shotgun?”

“What do you know about the fine people of Crisis Ridge?” Fi asked.

“Not much. I’d never even been here before today,” Tim said.

“Then why did you come here?” Sash asked.

Tim wished he could think a little faster on his feet, but Sash had been right earlier: it was really hard to think of anything when you had a gun in your face. He knew his silence told them more than he would like. Told them he might have something to hide.

“I was looking for information,” he said at last. The two women exchanged glances.

“Keep going,” Fi said.

“There’s an old Atlas factory up north. I’d... heard some things about a contest of some kind being held there. Big payout. Thought I’d go and take a look.”

“And you needed to speak to people in Crisis Ridge about a bandit rally?” Sash asked, crossing her arms.

Tim shrugged. “Needed ammo.”

The women examined him in silence for a moment. Tim kept his mouth shut and prayed they’d believe him.

“What do you think?” Fi asked without turning her head.

“I think his gear’s too nice. And he asked me questions instead of shooting me before. I don’t think he’s a bandit,” Sash replied.

“His face is weird,” Fi said.

“Yeah, but it’s not the weirdest we’ve ever seen. At least it hasn’t been pulled from someone’s skull.”

Fi glared at Tim while she sucked on her lower lip.

“Alright,” she said at last. “You’re suspicious as hell, but you’re probably not a bloodthirsty, brainless killer.”

Wrong, Tim thought.

“Thanks,” he said.

“But we’ve got one more question for you. When you went through town earlier, you didn’t happen to see some skinny, tall dope with a cyborg arm and a yellow eye, did you?”

Tim stared at her. “You mean Rhys?”

They both stared back.

Somewhere in the night, a rakk screamed. Tim cleared his throat and lowered his hands slowly.
“Do you... want me to call him?” he asked.

He called Rhys. Fi—whose name, if Rhys’ surprised greeting was anything to go by, was actually ‘Fiona’—kept her gun pointed at Tim’s head the whole time. A brief conversation cleared things up.

“Vaughn told me it’d take you guys a few days to come out,” Rhys said.

“Yeah, well, we got a little lucky and made good time. Vaughn mentioned he’d hired another vault hunter, but he didn’t mention the whole... face situation,” Fiona said, lowering her gun with some reluctance.

‘Another’ vault hunter, huh? Tim lowered his hands.

“Yeah, it takes some getting used to. But Tim’s a useful guy to have around.”

“There’s a vault hunter named ‘Tim’?” Sash—full name ‘Sasha’—muttered under her breath.

“Where are you now?” Fiona asked.

“They’re at the house outside of town,” Tim replied.

“What he said. We’ll wait for you here. Try not to kill each other, okay?”

“No promises,” Tim said.

“We’ll see,” Fiona said at the same time. They glared at each other.

“So!” Sasha said once they’d hung up on Rhys. “Guess, ah, we’ll just be... travelling together. Sorry about the whole... stripping you of your weapons thing. They’re really nice.”

“Thanks.” Tim began the methodical process of reholstering his weapons, strapping his shotguns onto his back, his first pistol on his thigh, his second pistol on his hip, slipping the bandolier around his shoulder, and so on. It took a while, which was for the best, as it gave Tim time to let some of the tension bleed out of him. By the time he’d snapped the last buckle, he felt a little better.

“I scavenged most of them from crates bandits couldn’t figure out how to open,” he said. “The rest I bought.”

“Yeah, we get most of ours from the field too,” Sasha said. She threw a glance to her partner. “Right, Fi?”

Fiona looked like she’d just eaten a lemon. “Seriously, what’s wrong with your face?”

Tim shouldered past her. “The house is this way.”

He got into their 4-wheeler. No one spoke the entire ride back.

Rhys still felt a little rattled by the time the others arrived, although the sight of Fiona and Sasha did calm him down a little. Which, if he ever needed a sign that living on Pandora these last few years had ruined him in almost every way, then being soothed by the two gun-toting conwomen was a good one.

Still, as Sasha grinned and threw one arm around his neck, he couldn’t deny that it felt damn good to see them.
“Looking good, Hyperion!” she said. Rhys looked down at his stained waistcoat, torn shirt, and dust-streaked trousers.

“Uh. Thanks?”

“Nice to see you, dummy.” Fiona stood behind her sister, arms crossed, one hip cocked, and a reluctant smile tugging on the corner of her lip. She wouldn’t hug him, he knew. He might’ve found that a little disappointing, if it were anyone but her.

“Fiona. What took you so long?”

“Oh, you know. Bandits, wandering packs of murderous monsters, more bandits… the usual,” she said.

“We were in The Dusts when we got the call.” Sasha said. She peered over Rhys’ shoulder, standing on the tips of her toes, and pursed her lips. “So, uh. Whose place is this again? And what are we doing here?”

“Oh, more people. And the man with no face is still alive. We found food.”

Both Rhys and Sasha flinched at the voice, Sasha dropping into a defensive stance. Etna stood behind Rhys, blocking the entrance to the kitchen. The dim light inside didn’t do her too-big features any favours. Her eyes looked shadowed and the lines around her mouth looked more pronounced.

Fiona arched her brow. “Sorry, what’s this now?”

“This is Dr. Etna. She was at Hyperion.” Rhys hesitated.

“I was being held hostage by bandits,” Etna said, filling his silence. “I believe they wanted to know what I knew. They had me working for them for a while. Mostly making repairs. Not exactly my ‘wheel house’. I tried to explain this but Callum didn’t seem to notice.” She dried her hands with a tea towel.

Fiona’s eyebrows shot up. She exchanged a look with her sister.

“Callum? Out here?” she said. “You’re sure?” Rhys nodded, a little taken aback by the sisters’ response. “Did you see him? His face?”

“Uh, briefly. Why—?”

The sisters had another silent exchange, and Rhys tried not to get petulant about it. They could read each other with such ease, pulling stacks of information from the way their sisters’ lips twitched, or their eyebrows quirked.

“We ran into him ourselves, out in The Dusts,” Fiona said, turning back to face Rhys. “Him and his bandits. They were escorting a caravan.”

“We killed them. Blew each one up,” Sasha said.

“What? When?” Rhys demanded. Sasha eased her weight on the balls of her feet. Rhys thought he could see something moving in the shadows of the doorway behind her. He blinked hard.

“A few months back, must’ve been. Are you sure—?”

“How do you know it was him?” Rhys asked. His head began to pound.
“We intercepted their ECHOs using your tech,” Fiona said. She glanced over to her little sister. “He talked to us.”

“What did he say?” Rhys asked.

Fiona shrugged. “Just threats. He was going to murder our family in their beds, peel our faces off our skulls, feed our toes to skags. The usual stuff.” She frowned at Rhys. “You okay, Rhys? You look…”

“He must’ve been lying. It couldn’t have been the real Callum,” Rhys said. Pain stabbed behind his malfunctioning eye, like a needle in his sinuses. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something was moving in the corner of his eyes. A hand landed on his shoulder, nearly giving Rhys a heart attack.

“Callum was with us in the factory,” Etna said, giving his shoulder a firm squeeze. “Whoever these girls ran into, it wasn’t him.”

Her words sank in, past the pain and the strange sights in his eye. Right. It couldn’t have been the real Callum. The real one had Etna in the factory. The real one had been with Rhys. Rhys sniffed and rubbed at his face.

“You alright, Rhys?” Sasha asked.

“I’m fine. Just… took a bit of a funny hit earlier. I’ll be okay by tomorrow,” he said. Etna didn’t smile, but the lines around her mouth loosened. She patted him on the shoulder and vanished into the kitchen.

“What’s our next steps?” Fiona asked.

“Our next step should be getting the hell out of here,” Tim said, stomping dirt into the house. The door swung shut behind him, bringing with it a gust of chilled air. “Crisis Ridge was a ghost town. There’s no one there.”

“Where’ve you been?” Rhys demanded. Tim turned his face towards Rhys and once again, Rhys got the feeling he was being looked at like he was an idiot.

“Outside,” he said, ripping open a fresh nutribar.

“Sulking,” Fiona added.

“Not sulking. I was checking out the vehicle. By my figuring, we’ve got enough stored energy to get us through to the next catch-a-ride in about two hours. If we top up there, we can be back to Helios by sunrise.” Tim jammed the rest of the bar into his mouth and gave a soft moan. “Cookies and cream. Thought they didn’t make these anymore. Thank you, Maya.”

“You’re kidding,” Fiona said. “We just got here. Do you know how long we’ve been travelling?”

“Are those nutribars?” Sasha asked. “Do you have any more? We ran out of supplies a few hours ago.”

“Which is exactly why we can’t just pack up and go. We’ve barely had time to take a breather.”

“We can’t even pack,” Sasha said through a mouthful of chocolate and coconut nutribar. “We didn’t even get the chance to unpack.”

“An entire settlement has gone missing,” Tim said. “You really want to stick around and find out
what took care of them? Cause I’ve had my fill life-or-death fights today.”

“You think you’re the only one who’s had a hard day? That we haven’t been using up all our ammo?” Fiona’s voice had that venom sting, the one Rhys knew meant she was about thirty seconds from pulling her spring-loaded gun. She must’ve had a long day; it usually took an awful lot to push her to that edge.

“Okay, let’s just all calm down.” He held his hands up placatingly as both Fiona and Tim whirled on him. “We can all agree that we’ve had a long day and we’re all tired and we’ve all been out in the sun for a long time and maybe some of us lost some parts of their really nice wardrobe and maybe it’s made us all a little cranky.”

“I’m not cranky,” Tim snapped. “I’m stressed. Big difference.”

“Semantics,” Fiona said.

“Look, Fiona’s right,” Rhys said before things could escalate. “We’ve all been travelling for a long time and today has been... well, maybe not as bad as yesterday, but it was pretty bad. We could all do with a decent night’s rest.”

Fiona and Sasha looked relieved. Tim’s fingers clenched, unclenched. He took in a breath, let it out. Rhys recalled that moment in the hangar, remembered how Tim had gotten them through that obstacle course with brutal efficiency. Killing people as easy as chewing sticks of gum.

“Tim,” Rhys said. He touched Tim gently on the arm and pretended not to notice when the other man flinched. “Let’s take a walk, okay?”

“They’re gone, boss,” Tim said as they stepped outside. “Every single person. They left all their things behind, even their cars. But there was no sign of violence, not even a drop of blood, or a spent casing. Nothing.”

Elpis hung above the mountains, its cracked surface spewing an orange glow into the atmosphere. Rhys found his gaze pulled to it, as it always was. He hadn’t been on Pandora long enough before he killed Hyperion to get used to the sight of Helios in the sky, but he still felt its absence.

He thought about the empty town, filled with all the signs of people but without the people. He wondered what it felt like, walking through that place with only the sound of your own breathing to keep you company.

Some animal cried out. Tim’s fingers twitched. Rhys sent him a sympathetic look.

“I get that you’re... Nervous? Scared? He’d known Tim for less than 36 hours, but he got the feeling the vault hunter wouldn’t appreciate being accused of being either. “...upset about this. But, look, I meant what I said inside. We’re all worn out.”

Tim kept his face pointed straight ahead, watching the forest. His hand rested on his holster, thumb light against the strap.

Rhys sighed. “What do you think will happen if we drive all night? What if we run into trouble? What if that monster comes back? Do you think any of us would be in any shape to fight if we don’t sleep?”

“We could take turns driving,” Tim said, but Rhys thought he could hear the note of uncertainty in his voice.
“Tim. Let’s just... Let’s just rest for a bit, okay? The girls could use food. You could probably use something in your stomach that isn’t processed garbage—”

“They’re nutritionally balanced,” Tim muttered.

“—and some decent sleep. Christ, we’ve been at it since…” Rhys rubbed the bridge of his nose with a wince. “I don’t even remember. Too long.”

Tim didn’t turn. Rhys could read the lines of tension in his stance, the tendons in his neck standing out like cords from his sun-browned skin. He swallowed, and Rhys tracked the movement of his adam’s apple.

“I guess I could use a change of clothes,” Tim said at last.

Rhys pulled his gaze away and thought longingly of his own wardrobe back home. He’d packed a spare suit, in case the first one become filthy beyond what the fabric’s natural cleaning agents could handle, but of course he’d lost it after getting captured.

And then he thought about what Tim was wearing. And what he might look like in something tailored.

“Are you boys looking for the hot springs?”

Rhys flinched. Etna stood in the doorway, framed against the blaring lights inside. She had a dish towel slung over her shoulder and Rhys thought he could smell grilled meat from within.

“Dinner might take some time. The meat will be fine. I’ll look after it. Would you like to use the hot springs? The ladies are napping in the living room. Now might be a good time.”

“You have hot springs?” Tim asked.

“Oh my god yes please,” Rhys said quickly.

“Through the trees. Can you see that grey cloud? That’s steam. When in doubt, follow the smell of rotten eggs. There’s towels somewhere, maybe.” She shrugged, as if that statement stood well enough on its own, and went back inside.

Rhys looked into Tim’s empty face and raised his brows.

“See? Staying is good.”

Tim ran a hand down his face and sighed.

“I’ll look for towels.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: the obligatory hot springs episode.

I don't know what I did to deserve such thoughtful commentators but I'm glad for it. Thanks everyone again for reading and being great and making me feel great.
Part II: Chapter 2

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Things get Sweaty.
(tw for... let's call it 'dubcon body modification'.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN

No one knew just how bad Rhys had it. Vaughn had an inkling, probably the best out of everyone. Because he’d seen the posters (motivational! Company issued!), and he’d caught Rhys watching the propaganda vids more than once (not… not like that. He was always fully clothed, and his hands in sight. He wasn’t a complete pervert). And because Rhys had drunkenly admitted, more than once, just the sort of esteem he held Handsome Jack in. A lot of it really was admiration. Some of it… wasn’t. He could admit it. At least to himself. Rhys wasn’t an honest man by nature, but he tried to be honest when he was alone.

Although these days, even that was hard. Because he wasn’t alone anymore.

They’d stopped for the night and he should have been asleep. He stared up at the night sky, and thought about the way Jack took over his arm. How easy it’d been. His jaw still ached.

Jack appeared, as he always did, at the worst possible time.

“You still awake?”

Rhys hated that he still flinched at the sound of Jack’s voice. An old habit; Jack’s voice booming over the PA promised a world of pain for someone. The number of on-air executions more than tripled after Jack rose to power.

He was a blue flicker in the corner of Rhys’ eye. When Rhys risked a look (because ignoring Jack was useless), he saw Jack had stretched out across the roof beside him.

“Having a hard time settling down,” Rhys admitted. He kept his voice soft and low, cautious of Vaughn. His bro snored peacefully away, oblivious.

“Anything in particular on your mind?” Jack’s voice, on the other hand, was like a gunshot in the quiet night. Rhys couldn’t help his wince, although he knew no one else could hear.

“Do you care?” Rhys asked, more surprised than annoyed. Jack shrugged, the folds of his jacket
clipping through the van.

“Give me a break, I’m frickin’ bored over here. You don’t even have any games loaded in that eye of yours.”

“They wouldn’t let me,” Rhys muttered, rubbing at his brow.


Rhys watched as Jack grabbed at his hair in frustration, the blue strands moving with the gesture. Whoever built the AI had done a really nice job. Taken a lot of care with the nuances of Jack’s body language.

“Fine,” he said. “But not here.”

They left the caravan. Rhys followed Jack like a beacon in the night, blue and bright against his surroundings. Too unreal to even look like a hallucination. Jack found them an abandoned refueling station, half buried under the sand.

“Nice spot.” Jack appeared, leaning against the empty doorframe, like he’d always been there. Like he’d been waiting for Rhys to catch up. “Private. Cozy.” Jack smiled and really, Rhys should have known better. He should’ve known just what that look on Jack’s face meant for him.

Rhys flinched back as his arm raised without his input, his hand wrapping around his neck. He yelped, stumbling backwards in a rush to escape an attack from his own body. The back of his head bounced against the wall, sending a cloud of dust cascading down from the roof.

“Jack!” He tugged at his wrist, without much success. The hand around his throat wasn’t tight enough to restrict his breathing, but it was firm enough that he couldn’t move it. Rhys didn’t find this too comforting.

Jack’s laughter rang out through the night, burning Rhys’ ears. “Boy, I’da thought the last few days on Pandora might’ve toughened you up. You realise that I’m not actually hurting you, right?” His tone sharpened into something dangerous, although Rhys couldn’t understand why.

“Right. Right, I know.” Rhys tried to control his breathing, tried to calm his racing heart. So Jack had his arm. So what? It wasn’t as if Jack would actually try to kill him. He needed him. Rhys’ breathing began to even out.

“There you go,” Jack cooed. He dropped down to a crouch in front of Rhys, his own right hand locked around his throat. Rhys’ chest fluttered at the sight. His lips parted. Jack’s grin widened.


Jack trailed his fingers down the inside of Rhys’ thigh. Rhys swallowed hard. He couldn’t feel it, of course, but he had a good imagination and it had a lot of practice with this particular scenario.

“Whaddya say, Rhysie?”

Jack took his time with Rhys. He strangled him slow, loosening up just enough to let Rhys catch his breath, before resuming. Jack wasn’t getting anything physical out of it—the only pleasure he got
was in watching Rhys. Winding him up, pulling him to the edge, and then edging back.

Rhys begged. It was the first time he’d ever done it. He always imagined doing it for Jack.

After Jack had finished with him and Rhys was left thoroughly debauched, Jack spread himself out on the ground, his head by Rhys’ feet. He looked thoughtful, at ease.

“That was fun,” Jack said. He made it sound like an observation, or an estimation. He sounded like he had something else on his mind. “You know, if you let me in a little deeper, I could probably start making you feel stuff.”

His words pierced through the fog of a pleasant after-glow. Rhys stiffened.

“We’ll get you a body soon,” he said, pulling his legs up protectively. “And then we’ll get you back on top.”

Jack watched Rhys’ face, his expression hard to read. “You still afraid of me, huh? Well, I suppose I earned it. But if we’re in this together, Rhys—if you’re really serious about helping me—then you’ll need to start trustin’ me.”

Rhys said nothing, his fingers brushing against his abused throat.

“And hey. If you stay good to me, I’ll remember it.”

Rhys dropped his hand. “Yeah?”

It was strange, looking at Jack. He was so bright, easily the brightest thing around for miles, but he cast no shadows, gave off no light.

“Of course. Once I’m back on top, I’ll save a piece of the pie for ya,” Jack said, perfectly confident, like dying had been an unscheduled detour on his path to glory. Rhys smothered a smile behind his hand, but not quickly enough. Jack shot him a narrow-eyed look. “You don’t think I can do it?”

“No, of course I know you’ll do it,” Rhys said.

“Then what’s so funny?”

“Nothing. Just… I don’t know. I guess…” Rhys’ smile grew, even as he realised what he was doing. How dangerous it could be. “I’m just… I’m still not over it. You’re really here.” He could hear the alarms going off in his head, but he didn’t mind. He was sticking his head inside the lion’s mouth and Rhys really was stupid, because he didn’t care. Jack’s expression was hard to read, but Rhys went on regardless.

“I’ve always liked looking at you,” he admitted.

“Of course you have,” Jack said. “Used to beat off to my PA announcements, I bet.”

Rhys flushed. “I never did.”

“The posters, then.”

Rhys looked away and ran a finger under his loosened collar, an exaggerated gesture that made Jack laugh. And it wasn’t what Rhys was used to hearing. It wasn’t that sharp laugh, the mocking laugh. It almost sounded genuine. The feeling it gave Rhys could’ve competed with the post-orgasm haze he’d been feeling.
“Knew it,” Jack crowed. “What else? Ah, I bet you liked the company-wide vids. What better way to start your morning than with a little inspiration?”

“I don’t know if I’d call them inspirational,” Rhys said. “But I liked those planet-side vids.”

Jack’s expression flickered. “What are you talkin’ about, cupcake?”

“The ones where you’d, ah. Take care of some bandits. The violent ones.” Rhys swallowed, shame and excitement blooming in equal measures inside his chest. Jack’s gaze snapped up to the sky, his smile vanished.

“Yeah. I liked those too.” He sounded strange. Almost distant. Rhys chewed his lip, and tried to figure out what he’d done wrong. “Can I tell you a secret, kiddo?”

“Of course,” Rhys said, surprised. “I mean, we’re getting to know each other pretty well, anyway…”

Jack gave him a side-long, considering look. “You want the top, don’t you, kid? The throne? CEO and Beloved Eternal President and all the other titles you can grab, am I right?”

Rhys didn’t respond. Jack didn’t carry on the way he usually did. He stared at Rhys, waiting. Rhys squirmed a little.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do,” he mumbled, more ashamed of that than of any of his previous admissions for some reason. “But I’m still going to help you.”

“Of course you are. Well, I’ll tell you something, Rhysie,” Jack said, turning his gaze skyward once more. “The higher you go, the fewer friends you have. Your nerdy pal? Those sisters? Sure, they’re your buds now but as soon as you’re worth something? Soon as they see you as someone they can exploit? You better believe they will. And they’ll love you as long as you’re useful, but as soon as you do something they don’t like—POW.” Jack smacked his thigh. “They’ll jam that knife in so fast it’ll make your head spin.”

“Vaughn wouldn’t do that,” Rhys said.

Jack smiled without humour. “Oh, right. Sure. But, uh. Correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t that your little buddy that sold you out to Wallethead? Or am I getting Vaughn mixed up with the other short stack of muscles.”

“He didn’t— He was trying to protect me,” Rhys said. He curled his legs up tight, shivering in the night air. Had it always been this cold?

“Yeah, sure. That’s nice that you believe that. Next time though, you might find his story harder to swallow. And those sisters, the ones who tried to con you and then kill you? Do you trust them, too?”

Rhys said nothing.

“I hope not. It’d hurt my feelings if you trusted them and not me. ‘Specially not when you and me’ve got such a nice thing goin’.” Jack sighed.

He was watching Helios, Rhys realised. He wondered what he was thinking about. He wondered about the people who’d stuck their knives in Jack. Stupid he might be, but he knew better than to ask.

The horizon had begun to turn, the black sky going soft navy blue and grey. Sunrise wasn’t far off.
Rhys knew he shouldn’t dawdle, although he wasn’t in a rush to head back and try to come up with a decent excuse for his current state.

“We should…” Rhys pushed himself up, wincing at the way pins and needles feeling in his legs. Jack didn’t even look over.

Rhys turned to leave when Jack’s voice stopped him. “Just remember what I said, alright?” Rhys looked over his shoulder and found Jack staring intently at him. Rhys fought the urge to look away.

“You be careful who you let get close,” Jack said. “They can only hurt you if you let them.”

NOW

Rhys wanted to go on ahead without Tim, but Tim vetoed the notion.

“That forest is probably crawling with things waiting to kill and eat pretty boys like yourself. Seriously, how long have you been on this planet?”

Rhys huffed and put on a good show of being annoyed, trying not to dwell on the fact that Tim had called him ‘pretty’. He knew he was pretty. Not enough people on Pandora noticed.

Well, if his bodyguard wanted to earn his keep, Rhys wasn’t going to stop him. He decided not to bring up the fact that Etna presumably used the springs herself all the time, and had yet to be eaten.

They found the springs easily, only a few minutes’ walk from the house. The smell of rotten eggs was overpowering and unpleasant but not enough to deter Rhys from stripping down immediately.

He sank into the steaming water with a groan.

“Ooooh I’m gonna take back some of the things I said about Pandora. This is nice.” He let his head fall back with a sigh. The water was almost too hot, just on the right side of painful. He could feel the tension in his muscles melt away.

He felt the water lap at his neck and heard faint splashing. He cracked an eye open and spotted Tim on the opposite side, sitting on a stone outcropping, up to his hips in the spring. It was hardly the first time Rhys had seen that chest—hell, it wasn’t even the first time today—but somehow none of the novelty had worn off.

Tim splashed his face. He rubbed handfuls of water on the back of his neck, his shoulders, under his arms, washing off the accumulated grime, dust, and blood.

Really, now, Rhys thought. If he’s just going to put it on display like that, he’s asking for a little ogle. Etna’s home had fallen out of sight, and the only light they had to go by was the glow of the perpetually full Elpis. The light did Tim a lot of favours. If he’d been really considerate, he might’ve picked a higher outcropping…

God. Rhys let his eyes close with some reluctance. He really needed to get laid.

“Feel better?” Rhys asked when he heard Tim sigh.

“Yeah.”

Rhys heard more splashing and when he opened his eye again, he saw that Tim had pushed away from the outcropping, further into the spring. The water lapped against his ridiculous lantern jaw. He sighed again, almost too soft to be heard. Rhys would have really liked to know what his face looked
like at that moment.

“You know, I lived in a place like this once,” Rhys blurted. Tim didn’t move, but Rhys pushed on regardless. “Not for long. I grew up in one of the megacities on Eden-4. But there was a time in university, where I spent a semester in a place like this, at one of the freshly terraformed planets. It was the first time I’d ever been outside Eden. I remember how quiet it was. How dark. I couldn’t even sleep, at first…” Rhys fell quiet, feeling a little silly. It’d been a long time since he talked about his youth. He didn’t usually get this far. People usually interrupted after hearing he’d come from Eden-4.

“I grew up in a place like this,” Tim said at last. “On Menoetius.”

Rhys knew what a crush felt like; that feeling like you had a sparkler in your chest, the fluttering of a million things you want to say in your throat, a dizziness, giddiness. It was like being sick and feeling happy about it, a wonderful helplessness. Maybe there were people who got good at handling it. Rhys had never been one of them.

Still, he tried to play it cool.

“I’ve never been to Menoetius,” he said, brushing a hand through his hair. He adjusted his position, pulled his long legs close in a way he knew (hoped) look alluring. “Is it nice?”

Tim turned his face down. He splashed the odd-smelling water onto his face once again, rubbing it back through his thick hair.

“Yeah,” he said at last. “I think—yeah, it was nice.” Rhys waited, resting his chin on one knee. Tim glanced at him, and then away. When he spoke again, it was in a slow, ponderous voice.

“The sunrise would last ages where I lived. Almost two hours during the cold months, and sometimes three during warm months.” Tim’s voice gained strength and he spoke more quickly. “There’d be a handful of days where it wouldn’t set at all—it’d just curve in the sky, skim the horizon, and start climbing again. There’d be a festival on those days. The adults’d booze it up and the kids would stay up for hours, lose their minds, sun drunk.”

Rhys thought he heard the smile, even if he couldn’t see it. “Sounds nice,” he said. Tim stared at the water. “Where I lived, the days were almost always nearly the same length. We only had two seasons—dry and wet. During the wet season, it’d rain almost every single day, and almost always around the same time of day, like it’d been programmed into the atmosphere. The river’d swell up to twice its size and all the street stalls would have to move to new blocks. Dry seasons’ were when we’d get all the tourists, although they almost always stayed in the walled-off citadel in the centre of the city.”

“I think I’ve heard of that. That was a Hyperion-run citadel, wasn’t it?”

“Half the planet was Hyperion-run,” Rhys said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been to Eden-4.”

“You don’t think you have?” Rhys repeated. Tim worked his fingers into the meat where his shoulder met his neck, his face tilted away in profile. The odd mask smoothed out all his features into olive-skinned nothing, but Rhys could see the hawkish shape of his nose.

“I’ve got a bad memory,” he said at last. There was a strained note in his voice that gave Rhys some pause.
“Guess that’s what happens when you turn 70,” Rhys said with a grin. Tim laughed, a soft exhalation of a sound.

“Guess so.”

The night filled with small sounds made by (Rhys hoped) small creatures. Rhys rubbed his legs, splashing quietly, just to fill the space. He wanted to hear more from Tim. He wanted to know more about Menoetius, to hear more about the place where the sun wouldn’t set. He wanted to know what that did to Tim as a child, if Tim missed being home, if he’d go back if he could. He tried to imagine Tim running through the forest—this forest—with the other kids, dodging through the trees, avoiding the call to go home. He tried to imagine what his face might look like.

“I left home as fast as I could,” Rhys said. Talking about himself had worked last time. “Went away to university on Hermes. Didn’t look back. I didn’t think I’d ever go back but…” Rhys looked up at Elpis. “I think after Pandora, I’d like to pay Eden a visit. Maybe see my parents again.”

“‘Maybe’ see them?”

Rhys shrugged, creating ripples. “It’s complicated.”

“Fair enough. Well, if you get Epimetheus up and running, you’ll have more than enough to charter a space ship. You can pay it a visit.”

“Maybe. That’s not a bad idea,” he said. He waited for Tim. The vault hunter had turned away again, his left hand working at his right shoulder, giving Rhys uninterrupted view of the curve of his neck. He considered asking Tim if he wanted help.

“I went to Orion University on Eden-2, close to the magnetic pole,” Tim said. His voice had taken on that ponderous quality again, like he was recounting a story he’d read as a child. Uncertain about the details.

Rhys blinked. “You went to university?”

Tim’s hand stilled. “Yeah…? That a problem?” he asked.

“Nothing, it’s just—” Rhys hid a smile. “I never imagined a vault hunter going to university. Attending lectures, talking to professors, going to parties, pulling an all-nighter to write a paper the day before it was due…”

Tim shook his head, his fingers resuming their work.

“I didn’t always want to be a vault hunter,” he said and Rhys wasn’t sure, but he thought he could see a hint of a flush on his neck. It could’ve been from the heat. But…

Rhys tried to quell the pleased smile threatening to over-take his face. Was Tim… shy? He schooled his features and leaned back on the rocks, playing it cool once more.

“So. What was your major?”

“Creative writing.”

Rhys pushed out a breath, fighting the sting of disappointment.

“Fine, don’t tell me.”

He heard Tim sigh. “Put the lip away, will you? I’m not trying to antagonize you.”
“I’m not pouting,” Rhys snapped. It was hardly his fault his lower lip tended to stick out when he frowned.

Tim chuckled, bowing his head slightly to give his hand access to the back of his neck. Rhys found his gaze pulled back as Tim worked. This was practically pornographic. Was Tim doing this on purpose? Was he trying to send Rhys a message? If he was, why couldn’t he just be honest with his intentions and ask Rhys if he wanted to sleep with him (yes yes yes please).

Unless he wasn’t interested in Rhys and he just wanted to relieve the pressure in his muscles and Rhys was making this weird. Rhys gnawed on his lip.

Tim groaned quietly.

Fuck it.


“I don’t want to trouble you, boss,” Tim said and that wasn’t a ‘no’. Rhys’ lips trembled with the effort to keep from grinning.

(Would Tim call him boss all the time? Forever? Maybe Rhys would keep him on the payroll, just for that…)

“It’s no trouble at all,” Rhys said, moving closer through the water. Tim didn’t move away, which Rhys counted as another minor victory. “Plus this arm’s got to be good for something, right?” He flexed his metal fingers. Tim watched him as he approached and Rhys couldn’t say what expression he wore, but he thought he recognized the way his shoulders tensed.

“I mean… If it’s not a bother,” Tim said. Rhys tried not to stare too openly at the way his adam’s apple moved when he swallowed. “That thing’s not gonna be too hot, is it?”

Rhys thought ‘neck, chest, muscles, nice’ and said, “Hm?”

“Your arm? Water might’ve heated it up. I don’t want to get burned.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” Rhys slid behind Tim, the other man turning to watch him, yes, Rhys suspected, warily. Like Rhys was the dangerous one here. As if Tim couldn’t choke Rhys out with one arm. He settled behind Tim, folding his legs underneath him. “It’s fine. See?” He pressed the tip of one metal finger against the knot of Tim’s spine. Tim flinched.

“A little warning next time?” Tim snapped while Rhys laughed.

“Don’t be a baby. Now, relax, and just let Dr. Rhys work his magic.” Tim’s expansive back was quite the tempting target. This close, Rhys could see the scars, a long and jagged knife wound, a discoloration in a splatter pattern across his left shoulder, probably from acid or some kind of corrosive, and some smaller ones Rhys couldn’t easily place. Signs of times when Anshins weren’t within easy reach.

Freckles, too, Rhys realised. Faint but definitely present, thickest across the back of his neck and the tops of his shoulders. Rhys indulged himself, letting his hands work gently at first, feeling out the knots with his left hand. His right hand, he knew, would be useless for feedback until all his systems were back online.

Tim snorted. “I would love to see your diploma, doc.”
“I have a PhD in shutting the hell up and being grateful.”

“Wait, wouldn’t that mean that you’re the one who should— ngh.” Rhys dug his fingers into a particularly nasty knot in the meat behind Tim’s right shoulder blade. Tim hissed at the pressure, his body tensing under Rhys’ hands. Rhys pressed harder, metal thumb rubbing across the muscle until he could feel it soften. Tim drew in a shaking breath and slowly, almost reluctantly, began to relax.

“You were saying?” Rhys said, not bothering to hide how smug he felt.

“That hurt.” Tim turned his head slightly, treating Rhys to the view of his jawline. Locks of chestnut hair fell across his forehead, curling in the damp. Rhys clucked his tongue and found another knot.

“What’d I say about being a baby? You’re fine. Haven’t you ever gotten a massage before?”

“Not from— ng!— a cyborg.” The last word came out through grit teeth. Rhys massaged the spot, thrilling at the feeling of those muscles going soft under his hands. He massaged another knot, one that felt about the size and density of a golf ball, pulling it loose with effort.

“Damn.” He pressed both thumbs in hard, ignoring the way Tim grunted. “You carry a lot of tension in your back, you know that?”

“I carry a lot of guns around. And your skinny ass, from time to time.”

“One time,” Rhys corrected.

“Maybe, but it was a hell of a time. Shame you slept— ah— through it. I may have jumped off a two-storey railing and— fuck— caught you mid-air.”

Rhys’ hands stilled. “You didn’t.”

Now Tim sounded smug. “I sure as hell did. You were strung up like a piñata. I broke the chain, caught you before you fell and then… um. Then we both fell. And I cracked my ribs.”

Rhys shook his head. “That I believe. You make a habit of pulling stupid stunts like that?”

“Isn’t that what you pay me for?”

Tim let out a soft sigh as Rhys worked his way to his neck. Rhys smiled as Tim relaxed back into his grip. He brushed his thumb across the spot where the freckles were thickest, a dense galaxy just under his hairline. He did it again, rubbing a small, gentle circle over the skin.

“Hey.” Tim sounded sleepy.

“Sorry,” Rhys said, unrepentant. He took a breath, heart pounding. “These are cute.”

“Hm…?” Definitely falling asleep.

“Your freckles. I like them.” Tim inhaled sharply, tensing under Rhys’ hands. “Tim?”

“Sorry!” Tim pulled away, hot water slopping against the stones with the sudden movement. Tim waded to shore, babbling as he went. “I should— We should probably head back. Dinner’s probably ready.”

“Right.” Rhys sank lower into the water, disappointment like a lead weight in his guts. “Can I just —?”
“Yeah.” Tim had wrapped himself in his towel, his lovely back to Rhys. He gathered his clothes. “I’ll, uh. I’ll just be within shouting distance, okay?”

Rhys nodded, only his eyes visible above the water. He stared at his feet until he heard the rustle of grass and the snap of tree branches. Tim made no effort to hide his get-away.

Fine, Rhys decided, raising his eyes only when he was sure Tim was gone. At least he had an answer now.

Tim jammed his leg through his stolen pants, breathing hard like he’d just outrun another hideous monster. Two words repeating over and over, a loop without end.

Too close too close too close—

It was only when he’d pulled the too-small undershirt over his head that his breathing began to slow.

This was his fault, he decided. He’d done this to Rhys, lead him on when he shouldn’t have. Gave him mixed signals. He should’ve been more aware. Fuck, wasn’t that his whole job? Tim gripped his hair hard enough to rip out strands.

All because he’d liked Rhys.

This was just typical. Of course, of-fucking-course the first time someone he’d liked actually expressed interest back—the first time in years!—it’d have to be one of Handsome fucking Jack’s exes.

You getting desperate now, Timtam? Miss me so much, you want to reheat my leftovers?

Tim squeezed his eyes shut and sighed.

Liking someone was nothing. This? This was nothing. He’d get over it. Rhys’d get over it too. (Probably faster than Tim would.)

“You can’t have this,” Tim told himself firmly. He bent down and picked up one of his discarded boots.

—Rhys’ hands on his back, one warm and soft, the other hot, unyeilding—

“What do you think will happen, dummy?” He pulled the laces taut, knotting them efficiently.

—amused and smug and maybe fond, “Don’t be a baby.”—

“What do you think will happen when he sees your face?”

—"Your freckles. I like them."—

Tim’s heart gave a painful squeeze, the traitor.

“This is nothing.” He stood up, slinging his damp towel over his shoulder. He looked back through the clearing, where he could just make out the curl of steam rising over the spring. Where he’d left Rhys, wearing a look of naked disappointment. Whoever let that kid into the corporate world, with a face like that?

“Finish the job and then move on,” he whispered. And then, louder: “Rhys?”
Dinner was half-gone by the time they returned, something which neither the guests nor the hostess seemed to be bothered by. Most of the meat was gone, leaving Rhys and Tim a wilted herb salad and the bitter yam they grew in these parts. Someone had gone to the trouble of boiling and mashing it, which was the only way to make it palatable.

The sisters had already run off to the spring, the eldest bitching about having to use their dirty bathwater.

Tim took one look at the spread and sighed.

“I think I’ll just pack it in,” he said.

“You’re not hungry?” Rhys asked. It was the first complete sentence he’d said to him since Tim left him in the springs.

“Nah. I had a bunch of nutribars earlier. Besides, you need the protein more than I do, boss.”

Rhys’ mouth twisted, his face reddening. He turned away. Tim frowned.

Etna nodded, unconcerned, and pointed him to the room he’d be sharing with the others upstairs.

“Uh.” Tim hesitated. “You want us to share a room with those women?”

Etna pointed those bug eyes at him and frowned. “We only have two rooms. I will sleep down here, and you and the others will sleep up there.”

“I shared a caravan with them once,” Rhys said, settling down at the table. “Fiona snores.”

Tim rubbed the back of his neck, feeling some of the tension he’d only just managed to get rid of creeping back into his body. “Maybe I should sleep outside.”

“No,” Rhys said. Tim dropped his hand in surprise.

“Uh. Wasn’t actually asking—”

Rhys rolled his eyes. “You’re not sleeping alone outside. It’s ridiculous and, as you pointed out to me earlier, dangerous.”

You could join me. Tim clamped on the words before they could form. Instead he said, “I’ve slept outside, alone plenty of times.”

Rhys speared a piece of meat with a little more force than necessary. “Yeah, I’ve seen your scars. Look, we’ll all behave ourselves, okay? They’ll be good, we’ll be good, it’ll be fine. Okay?”

Tim felt cornered. The sharpness in Rhys’ tone, the jerkiness of his movements—he did this. It was his fault Rhys was pissed. His shoulders pulled in.

He should fight, he knew. What the hell did Rhys know about Tim’s scars? But he looked at Rhys—who hadn’t looked at him once since Tim fled the spring—and couldn’t find the defiance in him.

He went upstairs without a word. The room was small enough to make his throat tighten. He kept the door open. He pulled a blanket and pillow as close to the window as possible, pried it open, and settled in.

The sisters returned an hour later, after Etna had retired behind the strung up blanket. Sasha swanned
in, wreathed in the chilly evening air, with a dreamy look on her face.

“How much do you think it would cost to get something like that installed in Helios? Or maybe the Atlas HQ?” she asked. Rhys dismissed the display on his palm.

“It’s a natural phenomenon. I don’t think it’s something we can install,” Rhys said. He’d been thinking it over too.

“Maybe just a big tub with hot water would be nice,” Sasha said. Condensation clung to her hair like jewels, glittering under the artificial light. Rhys was struck again by just how lovely she looked. Fiona entered behind her, shutting the door with a quiet click. She looked considerably better too, although not quite as enamoured as her little sister. The lines around her eyes and mouth had lost their tightness, and her brown skin looked soft and clean.

“Where is everyone?” she asked, pitching her voice low. Rhys jerked his thumb towards the blanket fort.

“Dr. Etna’s asleep. Tim’s in bed upstairs.”

“You didn’t join him?” Sasha grinned as she walked past. Rhys scowled and called his palm screen back to life.

“I’ve been working,” he said.

“Well, I’m going to sleep. We’re upstairs, right?”

“Right. Thanks for leaving your scraps for us, by the way,” Rhys said.

Sasha stretched her arms, yawning. “You’re welcome. Goodnight.”

“I forgot what a brat she could be,” Rhys muttered, flushing. Fiona gave him a sharp look.

“She’s my sister.” Fiona set her hat on the scrubbed table. She pushed her damp hair out of her forehead, fussing with the style while Rhys scrolled through another page of data. With his ECHO down, he was stuck using the last databurst he’d received more than 36 hours before. Atlas stuff, encrypted information about new shield prototypes, the surveying information from Thousand Cuts, the latest finds from their salvage team sent to the Southern Plateau, and other such things. He’d put a note in to put more time into researching local aquifers and underground lakes.

“Working on something?” she asked, flicking a strand of hair back.

“The job of a CEO is never done,” Rhys said.

She glanced over to the blanket fort. “Epimetheus?”

“Some.”

Dr. Peel, an ex-Hyperion and former Child of Helios, had been assigned the head of the revitalized project. She was dependable, and doing her best, but clearly in over her head. The latest she’d sent him had been more pattern-holding. She grasped the theory (sort of) and was able to piece together what data they’d managed to recover from the scattered Hyperion debris, but Rhys could tell it would take her years to catch up to where the original project had left off.
Fiona stopped in front of him, her arms folded. He looked up to find her looking at him with narrowed eyes.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“Let’s talk outside,” she said. Rhys dismissed the screen and stood up.

The temperature had dropped like a stone over the last hour. Rhys mourned the loss of his coat as he pulled his sleeve down.

“So. This Epimetheus thing. You’re still going ahead with it?” Fiona asked.

Rhys frowned at her. “Um. Yeah? I’ve spent the last six months chasing whatever scraps I could find.”

Fiona pursed her lips and cast her gaze over the forest, unaffected. Rhys recognized the assessing look, a search for movement. An instinctive awareness of potential threats that seemed ingrained in people like Fiona, Sasha. Tim. One that Rhys hadn’t yet developed.

“And this Dr. Etna of yours. She’s the real deal?” she asked.

“Yes,” Rhys replied without hesitation. “She’ll get Epimetheus up and running again but I don’t know how long it’ll take. Etna seems confident she can pick up where she left off, and the tech we’ve recovered from Atlas and Hyperion is good stuff, but it’s all still a far cry from a state of the art Helios lab.” Rhys crossed his arms tightly, bouncing a little on his heels with a shiver. Fiona only nodded, her expression troubled. “Look, what’s this about, Fiona?”

“I’ve been talking to Yvette,” she said, surprising Rhys.

“Uh, since when?”

“Recently.” Fiona cleared her throat. “That’s not important. She’s told me about this project of yours.”

“So what? I’ve told you all about Epimetheus—”

“*She*’s told me a few things you left out. Like the cost. She said you didn’t have enough to cover the materials you’ve used to build this contraption.”

Rhys stiffened. “That’s— She shouldn’t have said anything to you about that. That’s Atlas’ business, not yours. And anyway,” he added, face heating, “it’s practically already built.”

“It’s not just the money, Rhys. It’s you. She’s worried.”

Rhys stared, baffled. “About what? I’m fine.”

Fiona turned to him for the first time since they stepped outside. She looked him up and down and didn’t immediately speak. Rhys kept his mouth shut and didn’t look away from Fiona’s hard stare. He wouldn’t be the first to break the silence. He didn’t know what Fiona was getting at, but he thought he recognized that look in her eye. She was about to force herself to have a capital-t Talk with him.

They’d gotten a little closer, since opening the vault together, or so he’d thought. Fiona wasn’t one who trusted easily, but he liked to think (hoped, really) that their experiences together had given her reason to trust him, the way he trusted her.
But his brief relationship with Sasha had strained things between them, and the break-up, amicable as it may have been, had only furthered the distance between them. They hadn’t talked, Rhys realised with a small start, in a very long time.

“I’m fine,” he said at last, resolve crumbling.

“She’s worried you’re pushing yourself too hard,” Fiona said. “She thinks you might be getting… obsessed.”

“That’s nice,” Rhys muttered. “Look, this project is important. It could change everything, Fi. If we actually succeed in connecting with the Eridians through Epimetheus, there’s no telling what we might find. Forget the vaults—the knowledge hidden in Pandora could open up the secrets of the galaxy. Stuff we’ve been trying to figure out since we discovered the sirens.”

“A step closer to what we saw,” Fiona murmured. Rhys didn’t know if she intended for him to hear, but the word sent a spark down his spine, brought the memory of the bright light, the taste of eridium on his tongue. What they’d seen in the vault. He shivered again, nodding. “But Rhys. Are you sure you’re alright? We…” She opened her mouth, as if intending to continue, but a look of discomfort passed over her face. He knew she was struggling out of her element with this topic. Fiona was a born and bred Pandoran. Everyone was fine or they were dead. The murky in-between wasn’t usually her concern, unless you were her sister.

Rhys patted her on the shoulder. “I’m fine, Fiona.”

“The reason Yvette—the reason we worry is because you’re a liar,” she said. Rhys’ eyebrows shot up. “It’s not like it’s a secret,” she said with a shrug.

He looked away, tried not to let her words sting.

“I’m not trying to insult you, Rhys. It’d be pretty hypocritical of me. But you do lie to us. You tell us you’re okay when you’re not, and that’s just the start of it. If you’re in deep, you know you can just tell us. We’ll help.”

Rhys said nothing. Fiona sighed. She removed her hat and pushed her hand through her short hair.

“We just don’t want to lose you again,” she said.

Rhys sputtered. “Lose me to what? I’m not going anywhere.”

She looked at him, at the port in his temple. He flushed, the realisation hitting him like a punch to the stomach.

This again. Always the same. It’d been two years since—since Helios. Since everything. And he still caught his friends looking at him like he was liable to shatter. Or worse. He crossed his arms and curled his shoulders inwards.

“Stop that,” he said. “Nothing like that’s ever going to happen again. Alright? I’m not going anywhere.”

Fiona didn’t look entirely convinced, but she only shook her head.

“Do you want to see what Sasha and I found out in the wastes?” she asked as she reached into her jacket and withdrew her old ECHOtab. Relieved, Rhys nodded.

“You find anything good?” he asked. While his thirst for Eridian knowledge had pushed him
towards old science experiments and deep into the core of the planet, Fiona’s had taken her to wandering across the land, looking for the lost and forgotten pieces of their civilization.

They huddled together as she went through her findings and Rhys felt something inside of him reacting at the sight of the lost things. That strange connection, almost bone-deep, to the long-dead race that preceded their footsteps across the galaxy. It’d been almost six months, and he’d expected those half-remembered things to fade away like a dream upon waking, but every day he spent on the outside, he felt it more keenly. It felt like giving up his arm again. Like a hum that filled his head.

“Do you still have those dreams?” he asked.

Fiona nodded. The light of the screen shone blue-yellow in her eyes.

“Do you think it’s like this for the others?” she asked. “For anyone who’s ever opened a vault?”

He recalled what Etna had said, about Jack on Elpis. What he’d seen in the vault, what birthed the theory that gave Epimetheus life. A chill ran down his spine at the realisation that he was following in Jack’s footsteps. Again.

They both stared at the image until the screen went dark. Like a spell had been broken, Rhys blinked and looked away. His head cleared. He rubbed his face with a sigh.

“I’ve told Tim about Epimetheus. But... maybe not the full story,” Rhys said. Fiona quirked a brow. “I told him it can be used to create animate digistructs—which is true,” he said quickly.

“Is he coming with us to Atlas?” she asked. Rhys hesitated before nodding. Fiona’s eyes narrowed. “What’s wrong?”

“I may have... promised him a little more than I can afford. It was the only way I could keep him around,” Rhys said defensively.

“Well, I hope it was worth it,” Fiona said. “He’s a vault hunter. They’re—we’re not the sort of people you can just mess around with.”

‘Mess around’. That hit closer to home than Rhys would like to admit, the scene from the springs still a thorn in his chest he hadn’t worked through.

He scowled and pushed his hand through his hair. “It’s fine. I’ll think of something.”

“Maybe you can talk him down again,” Fiona said as she stood up. “He seemed to listen to you before. Although that was before he knew you were lying to him...”

Rhys sighed again. “I’ll worry about that tomorrow.”

Rhys worried about it that night, as they stepped back inside. He didn’t want to think what Tim would do, when he discovered Rhys had been lying. Maybe it was for the best Rhys’ gambit earlier had failed. Then again, maybe a post-orgasmic haze would have been just the thing to smooth over a tense situation like the one he had ahead of him.

Oh well, Rhys decided as he settled into his bedroll. He’d have to tell Tim the truth and hope for the best. Maybe he’d find the whole situation humourous.

Rhys snorted quietly. Yes, and maybe Rhys would sprout wings and fly to the moon.

Tim closed his eyes out of habit when he heard the door open, keeping his breathing even, feigning
sleep just as he had when Sasha’s earlier arrival had woken him up. She’d been quiet enough, but a
decade of this life had left Tim a light sleeper. He’d been about to drop off again when he heard
voices drifting in from the open window.

As close as he was, it wasn’t difficult to listen.

Tim wasn’t too surprised at Rhys’ confession. Disappointed, maybe, but not surprised. His cynicism
might not benefit him, as Rhys had pointed out earlier, but it did prepare him for shit like this.

So. The little twerp thought he could get away with pulling a fast one on a vault hunter, huh? Tim
would wait ‘till morning, maybe even wait ‘till Rhys let him into Atlas—if he was dumb enough to do
so—and then ask for his money. Play dumb until he heard whatever half-baked nonsense the haircut
could cook up and then let him know exactly why people don’t mess around with vault hunters
(thank you for that image, Fiona).

And nobody lied to Timothy goddamn Lawrence.

THEN

Tim had a bad memory, but that wasn’t always the case.

He could remember going to Dr. Autohn’s office, coming face to face with his attractive secretary,
stumbling over his words, being handed a stack of papers as thick as his thumb that the secretary
informed him was the contract he was supposed to sign. He remembered how novel it was to even
get something on paper. He remembered trying to read it (something neither the secretary nor the
doctor seemed pleased about). He remembered words crawling across the white, swarming like ants
under his increasingly panicked gaze.

Words like ‘dissolution of previous identity’. And ‘surrender of all documentation of previous
identity’. And ‘hereby agrees to a minimum of twenty (20) years as secondary holder of new
identity’. The doctor talked at him while the papers shook in his hands. The doctor’s voice rose with
impatience. He tapped his fingers against his knee, looked over his glasses at Tim like Tim was one
of his disappointing sons. He pushed a pen into Tim’s hand (a real one! A ball point!) and told him to
stop wasting time.

“This isn’t right,” Tim said.

The doctor sighed. The secretary frowned. He was the greatest disappointment to ever grace their
shiny office.

“Can I make a call?” Tim asked.

And then…

Tim woke up. Possibly.

It took him a moment to realise his eyes were open. And then another moment to realise the sounds
he could hear (a soft beep, a soothing hum) were coming from the machines stationed next to his
bed. Tall screens glowed like angels at his side, displaying information in soothing blue and violet.
Tim watched a line rise and fall, several numbers changing by the split-second beside it.

And then, pain.

It came slowly, and it seemed to come from inside, crawling out of his bones like insects from an
overturned stone. Someone groaned. The machine beeped once, almost like a reprimand.

“You’re up.” Jack’s face appeared above him, the gentle light casting his usually severe features in soft shadow. “How are you feeling?”

Someone groaned again when Tim tried to speak. He frowned and the pull of muscles on his face brought a fresh wave of soreness. That voice groaned again, weakly this time, and Tim raised his hands to touch his face, to try to soothe away the pain.

But his hands—

Tim stared. His brain worked sluggishly. Why was someone holding their hands in front of his face like that?

“Still in pain, huh? The doc mentioned it’d be pretty bad for a while, but you’re tough.”

Tim wiggled his fingers. The fingers in front of him moved. Thoughts struggled to form. He felt like he was trying to solve a difficult crossword puzzle. The clues were there, but they were too cryptic to understand. He tried again. The hand moved again. His heart began to pound.

“Wh—” he started but stopped at the sound of someone’s voice. His chest moved with his wheezing breath. “What—“

The hand moved closer, towards his face as though Tim had called it. Jack caught it by the wrist.


Tim stared at Jack’s hand, his thick fingers holding the wrist with ease.

“No,” Tim said. “No. No no no. I didn’t— I wasn’t—“ He gasped short, shallow breaths. His vision went grey, like he was staring down a tunnel to an alternate reality. Someone was talking for him. Someone had moved their hands when he should’ve moved his. “This isn’t—“ He broke off with a whimper.

The machines squawked and Jack turned to them with a frown on his handsome features.

“Okay, you really need to calm down, Tim.”

Twenty years. Tim struggled to get up. This was a mistake. He would have to tell them this was a mistake. He had come only to sign the papers, to talk about the procedure. Not—

“O-kay. Looks like you’re in a lot of pain.” Jack picked up a tablet and thumbed at the display. “I’m gonna up your dosage a bit—or a lot—and then everything’s gonna be fine. You’re gonna calm the hell down and lie back and let me take care of you. This is the good stuff, too, so it should kick in quick.”

No no no no no no, this was a mistake, they’d made a mistake, he had to tell them—

Tim rolled to his side, struggling to pull the sheets off. Jack put his hands on his shoulders and guided him onto his back. Tim whimpered and tried to push against him, but a wave of something warm and lovely rolled through his head, clearing out his thoughts, his pains, replacing it with a fuzziness.

“There we go, baby.” Jack tucked the sheets back around him. His miscoloured eyes seemed to glitter in the light of the machines. “That’s it. Just take it easy. I got you.”
Tim sighed, his eyelids listing closed. He felt good. Almost weightless, the way you were supposed to feel during sleep. Like a cloud. Tim imagined clouds, imagined his body made of vapour, and then imagined a Tim-shaped cloud standing above Hyperion.

“What are you giggling about?” Jack asked, a smile evident in his voice.

Tim turned his head towards the sound, opening one eye. “Nothin’.” He sighed into his pillow. “What’d… what… what’s happenin’?”

Jack grinned at him, eyes twinkling like weird constellations. A blue star and a green star. Those existed. Tim read about them.

“They’ve really got you on the good stuff, don’t they? Good. Nothin’ but the best for my Timmy,” Jack said. A lock of hair fell loose from his style, and Tim tried to reach out to correct it. His arm flopped against the bed and didn’t go further.

His arm. He looked at it. A tendril of fear worked its way through the haze in his head like a drop of ink in a calm lagoon.

“What…” Tim struggled, blinking slowly. Something was wrong. He could feel his face muscles move into a frown, which still hurt.

“Take it easy, now. We’ve just got you back on track.”

Jack moved the tablet to his lap, but didn’t bring up the display. Tim stared at him, trying to piece everything together. Jack sighed.

“Geez, with the puppy dog eyes… Okay. Listen, we had to move things ahead of schedule. This procedure is a little on the, uh, grey market side. And Autohn took a real risk here, and he had a pretty specific time-frame that didn’t line up with what we’d originally talked about.”

Tim blinked and tried to understand. He felt like someone was reading him a familiar story in a foreign language.

Jack leaned over him, resting his arms against the mattress. He touched Tim’s hair, fingers brushing against his scalp. Tim hummed, pushing himself against Jack’s soft, warm palm like a dog starved for his master’s attention.

“I didn’t tell you because you were already freaking out and I didn’t want to worry you,” Jack said. “You were going to go through with this anyway, weren’t you?” Jack’s hand stilled. Tim whined at the loss of sensation.

“Yeah… yeah, of course… But—“

Jack’s hand resumed its actions, running his fingers through Tim’s hair. “Then there’s no problem, is there? We’ve just moved up our schedule, that’s all. This is for the best. You were just gonna make yourself crazy with the wait. Honestly, pumpkin, I could see how freaked out you were getting. And now the worst is over.” Jack smiled at him. “And I gotta say, you look incredible. I mean… They really did an amazing job with you.”

The words sounded warm. The tone sounded nice. Tim smiled back and it didn’t hurt so much.

For a while, Tim lay like that, with Jack’s hand tangled in his hair and Jack’s arms inches from Tim’s body.
“But…” The smile faded as another memory surfaced. “Twenty years…”

Jack furrowed his brow. “Twenty…? Oh! You’re talking about the contract.”

Tim nodded. “You… you said that…” Tim swallowed, trying to corral his thoughts. “You said I could stop…”

“Right. You could stop whenever you wanted, and we’d go back. I remember our agreement, Tim.” Jack’s voice sharpened. Tim flinched, crushing his face against the pillow with a whimper. “Oh. Hey, hey, it’s okay. Hey, look at me. Come on, babe, look at me, it’s okay.”

Tim looked. Jack brought his other hand up to cup Tim’s cheek.

“Boy, you are sensitive right now, ain’tcha?” Jack chuckled. “Relax, kitten. Everything’s fine.”

Jack’s hands were warm and soft. Tim relaxed into his touch.

“I remember what I said, and it still stands. Forget about the contract, okay? That was the only way we could get Autohn to do the procedure. But listen, as soon as you want out, just say the word. I’ll go to Autohn and we’ll work it out. Just leave it to me, okay? Okay, precious?”

Tim’s eyes were closed. The weightlessness of his body felt wonderful, but nothing quite as nice as Jack’s hands on his face, in his hair. He could probably die like this, and it would be fine. Jack wasn’t angry. He’d take care of things.

“Timmy?” Jack’s thumb swept across his cheek. “You still with me?”

Tim mumbled a response, an attempt at words he forgot almost immediately. Jack huffed.

“Alright. Get some rest, cupcake. You’ve earned it.”

“Will you…” Tim’s voice was a surprise even to himself. He managed to crack one eye open. “Will you… still be here…?”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “You want me to stay?” he asked.

Tim could have laughed. Sleep nipped at the heels of every thought, every memory. No longer weightless, he felt impossibly heavy, a leaden black dragging at his limbs, pulling him under. He let his eyes drift closed.

“I always… want you…” he mumbled.

Through the rising black tide, he felt Jack’s lips against his forehead.

“Then you’ve got me, precious.”

Chapter End Notes

I never once considered cutting out the hot springs sequence, btw. A lot of scenes ended up in Scrivener's trash, but that was never on the chopping block.

Next chapter: Tim just don’t need none of that Mad Max bullshit.
Thank you all for reading and hopefully enjoying it. Please feel free to let me know if I've made any typos or errors.
Part II: Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Tim will never catch a break. Rhys drives dangerously.

Chapter Notes

psst you kids want a playlist? https://8tracks.com/wheatfromchaff/come-back-kid

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN

“Hey, handsome.”

Tim licked the taste of blue sugar from his lips carefully. A woman had slipped into the stool beside him. She wore her hair down, wore a dress that looked good, and stared at Tim like she was talking to him.

“Me?” Tim straightened from his slouch. The woman’s lips twitched.

“Uh, yeah? Do you see any other devastatingly handsome men at this bar?”

Tim looked around. The woman laughed.

“You’re cute too, huh?” She turned the face the bar, leaned her chin onto one hand and gave him a look through her thick lashes that would have set Tim on fire a year ago. “Why don’t you buy me a drink?”

Tim’s chest swelled and his shoulders straightened out of their habitual slouch. He caught the bartender’s eye on the first try and ordered her a drink. When he turned to give her a smile, she returned it with a light flush painting her cheeks.

It took some getting used to, this new affect he had on people. He drew stares. People started buying him drinks. People fought to catch his eye, and they smiled when they succeeded. Tim almost never drank alone anymore. Someone, sometimes more than one person, would come and join him within minutes of taking his seat at the bar.

He’d been in this new body for almost four months, but the way people treated him was still a novelty. Partially because four months isn’t really that long to get used to looking like a completely different person, but also partially because he didn’t get out much to enjoy it.

Jack had rules. Tim’s role as Jack’s double was meant to be a secret, after all. Which meant that if Jack was out and about, Tim had to stay in, lest one of them gets spotted being somewhere they shouldn’t be. And Jack was often out and about, schmoozing his way through the board members, and their significant others. Jack explained this was part of his plan to get to the top, and Tim didn’t doubt it. Especially when it seemed to be working. Jack had been promoted once again, put in
charge of the entire engineering department. And now there were rumours the board was considering him to take over the yet-to-be-built, new state of the art satellite.

But occasionally, Jack would stay in, and he’d send Tim out to play. Which was fine, except… Well, Tim kind of preferred it when Jack stayed in and asked Tim to stick around as well.

Jack warned Tim that they’d be seeing a lot of each other from now on (as if that were a hardship). After all, if Tim was going to be a convincing doppelganger, he had to learn to walk the walk and talk the talk. Tim had gotten good at the former, but struggled with the latter. Even with his (Jack’s) nice voice, it was hard to capture the exact quality and rhythm of Jack’s speech. It didn’t help that neither of them could tell if Tim’s voice was too high or not.

“I don’t know, it doesn’t sound right to me,” Jack had said one night.

“Everyone’s voice sounds different in their own head, Jack,” Tim had replied with a shrug. “Maybe you’re just… hearing things?”

Over the last three months (Tim having spent one month in recovery), Jack would come over to Tim’s new quarters (bought and paid for by Jack) and help Tim train.

Training meant something different almost every day. Sometimes training meant nothing more than Jack making him stand, walk, run, again and again. Those days were mind-numbing, and Jack was never happy. If Tim got the walk right (swing hips, take up space), then he screwed up the stance (hips and shoulders squared, feet apart, head up). If he managed to deliver a convincing line, then he stumbled over his feet. Those days were the worst for both of them, and lead to most of their fights.

("This is ridiculous. My daughter learned to walk when she was 18 months!")

“I know how to walk, Jack. It’s— you’re asking me to unlearn a lot of things here and it’s not going to—gonna happen overnight!”

“It’s walking and talking, not digital engineering. Stop acting like a drama queen and just get it right.")

Sometimes, though, training meant sneaking Tim out to the special shooting range Jack designed for him. The range had come a long way since that first time Jack set Tim loose on his digistructs. The AI had grown more intelligent, and their builds more agile and human-like. Tim enjoyed these days, even though Jack made it clear that his digistructs could kill him. Compared to the complications of his new body, relearning how to stand, how to walk, how to eat, how to talk—compared to all of that, Tim preferred the range. Liked the gun in his hand, Hyperion smooth and sleek. It felt simple.

Jack almost never picked at Tim’s performance on those days.

Sometimes… sometimes training meant hand-to-hand. Those were simultaneously the worst and best days. Because, while Jack knew how to throw a decent punch, his real talents lay in grappling. On those days, Jack would push all of Tim’s furniture to the wall, strip down to a pair of sweats and, if Tim were lucky/unlucky, a thread-worn t-shirt. Some days, however, Jack skipped the shirt all together.

And then things would get a whole lot worse for Tim, because Jack would spend the next two hours manhandling Tim into various positions, explaining in a breezy voice just how he’d managed to disable Tim, while Tim silently combusted. And then he would make Tim try to replicate the moves.

“Is this all really necessary?” Tim asked. He was kneeling on the floor, sweat dripping from his
extremely red face, panting hard. He’d just spent the last ten minutes trying and failing to pull Jack into a submission hold that would put Jack’s neck between his thighs. He failed for the same reason he’d failed to escape Jack’s earlier hold: he had been desperately trying to name every star, and then trying to recall each detail about his Aunt Carmella’s doll collection, and then listing every item in her spoon collection, and then… Well.

Jack spread out like a starfish on the ground. He picked his teeth, as cool and unaffected as anything.

“Yes, it’s necessary. Why would I waste my precious time with something I didn’t think was necessary?”

Tim drew his knees against his chest. He could not make himself stop blushing. “It’s just… isn’t the whole point of having a gun to avoid physical altercations?”

Jack sighed heavily, rubbing at his temple with one hand. “Okay, first of all, princess? Did you just hear yourself?”

Tim’s head sank to his knees. “Yeah.”

“And what do we say…?”

“No five dollar words when a 50 cent word can work just as well,” Tim mumbled.


“Sorry, Jack.”

“Second of all, yeah, a gun is a good way to avoid a fist fight but it’s not a guarantee. Especially not in the, shall we say, less civilized planets in our lovely galaxy. Sometimes you’ll run into people who just want to wrestle. And sometimes those people will be armed with a pipe bomb about to explode.”

Tim finally stopped blushing. “That’s… a joke, right?”

Jack chuckled. “You wish. Ah, you’ll see for yourself when you get out there. Hey, cheer up,” Jack said as Tim buried his face into his arms. “You’ll get the hang of it. Just, you know. Maybe work harder. Get better. Hey, come on, I’m serious.” Tim knew that even with his face hidden, his ears were glowing like a beacon. He heard Jack shuffle around but he didn’t raise his head. He flinched when he felt a hand at the back of his head, tugging gently at his hair. “Come on, look at me.”

With great reluctance, Tim did. The corner of Jack’s lips twitched.

“Boy, I’m not sure this’ll ever stop being weird,” he said, his gaze sweeping across Tim’s burning face. “I don’t think I’ve ever looked so adorable and pathetic in my life. You’re like a puppy left outside in the rain.”

“Jaaaaack.” Tim curled up, hiding again. Jack snickered and ruffled the hairs on the back of his neck.

“Alright, alright.” Jack dropped next to him with a rush of air. He leaned against Tim, resting his chin on the back of Tim’s shoulder. “You seem wound up. Why don’t you go out tonight? Take this body for a spin.”

Tim peeked out from under his hair. Jack sighed.

“Laid, Tim. I’m telling you to go out and get laid.”

“Oh.” Tim relaxed his legs. “Really? I thought you said you had plans tonight.”
Jack waved him off. “Yeah, with some corporate d-bag I didn’t really want to see anyway. She’s got a laugh like a donkey and thinks drinking white wine with an ice cube in it is classy.”

Tim snickered. “But… won’t she be mad?”

“You let me worry about the corporate stuff. That’s my job, remember? Your job is to kill bad guys and look amazing doing it.” Jack’s fingers had found their way to Tim’s ear. He drew the tip of his index finger down the soft curve. His other hand found its way to Tim’s waist. “And you’ve already got half of that down.” He squeezed.

Tim didn’t move. Jack had been doing this… thing lately. Where he’d touch Tim for no reason. Jack had always been kind of a tactile guy, but what he’d been doing lately went beyond his usual teasing of boundaries. It was like he’d decided their boundaries didn’t exist anymore.

And then he would pull away, brush Tim off, act like he’d done nothing out of the ordinary, leaving Tim more wound up than ever.

“Come on.” Jack withdrew, standing with a stretch. “Go get prettied up and call one of your side pieces. Tell ‘em you’re taking ‘em out for a special night and then send them those emojis I gave you.”

“I don’t have any side pieces, Jack,” Tim said, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice. Jack’s absence left him feeling cold. “And those emojis aren’t fit for human consumption.”

“‘Human consumption’… What did I just tell you, pumpkin? What did we just talk about? And anyway, what do you mean, you don’t have any booty calls? You’ve had my body for four months! Granted, you spent that first month drugged to the gills and drooling in the very expensive private clinic, but you’re all better now!”

Tim ignored him, stalking into his bedroom. Jack followed him, still talking. “And I know I’ve been a little bit of an evil step-mother with the keys to the kingdom lately, but I’ve definitely let you take the pumpkin carriage out for a spin a couple times.” Jack leaned against the door jamb while Tim stood in the middle of the room, fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. “In this metaphor, the pumpkin carriage is your dick.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “Got it. Can you leave?”

Jack arched a brow. “Uh. Why? Eager to get rid of me?”

“I’m going t—gonna change. So…”

Jack arched his other brow. “Sooo…? What’s with the modesty? It was a full body procedure, cupcake,” he added with a leer.

Tim had been trying very, very hard over the last four months to forget that little detail (or… not so little, as it turned out). He didn’t know what his face looked like at that moment, but given the way Jack started cracking up, Tim could guess. He stomped up and shoved Jack out the door.

“Get out, will you? God, you’re insufferable!”

“Nah-ah, no five dollar words, pumpkin! Just call me an asshole like everyone else.”

Tim slammed the door in his face. He pressed his overheated forehead against the cool surface and tried to regain control of his breathing. He could hear Jack shuffling around on the other side.
“Alright, if you don’t need anything else, I’m gonna take off. You go and put on something tight and find yourself a nice piece of stress relief for the night, alright, princess? Remember, you’re the hottest person in this dump. You’ll have the pick of the litter!”

“Goodbye, Jack,” Tim said. Jack sang out a farewell and Tim didn’t move until he heard his front door close and the lock reengage.

And then, like the good boy he was, he did exactly as Jack told him to. He went to a bar, and a beautiful woman called him handsome. And when she tilted her head and said, “What’s your name?” Tim stumbled.

“It’s, uh. Jack.” Tim tried to smile, but Jack was like the demons of old, summoned by the sound of his name. He didn’t appear in person (although Tim half-expected, half-hoped he would), but he took up space regardless. Tim could feel him between himself and this woman. He could feel Jack’s breath against the side of his face, the warmth of his body sprawled across his back. The tip of his finger drawing down Tim’s ear lobe. A hand finding its way under Tim’s shirt, spreading across his thigh, over his arm, squeezing at the meat like a man in a butcher shop. Fingers running through his hair, breath warm against his ear.

“Everything okay?” she asked. Tim looked down to where his (Jack’s?) hand squeezed his thigh and felt that familiar warmth pooling low in his stomach. He swallowed hard and pushed the hand away.

“Jack?” The woman raised her eyebrows at him and she was so lovely, and her hair looked so nice, and she looked soft but it wasn’t what he wanted.

NOW

Tim rose earlier than the rest, setting out just as the sky turned from navy to steel. He returned to Crisis Ridge, and was not terribly surprised to discover it still abandoned. He helped himself to a few supplies, and a new change of clothes. By the time he returned, the sun had risen and the doors to the little house were open. Sasha sat on the front step, a hose in one hand and what looked like one of her boots in the other.

“A-ha!” She shaded her eyes at his approach, grinning when she caught sight of his outfit. “We were right about you last night. Looter.”

“Waste not, want not,” Tim said as he passed.

“Did you find any good weapons?” Sasha held her boot under the weak stream of water.

“Nah. Nothin’ but Tediore peashooters,” Tim said. He watched as the clay-coloured gunk on her soles softened and wiped the sweat from his forehead. The night’s chill had already vanished, the morning’s heat only an overture to what the sun had in store for them for the rest of the day. “Just about the sort of armoury I expected from a bunch of settlers with nothing of value around to defend.”

“Well. The forest is nice.” Sasha knocked her boots against the wall, shaking off splatters of orange. “But I see what you mean.”

Tim leaned against the house, tilting his head to the sun. Through the thin wall, he could hear the murmur of voices inside. After the excitement of the past few days, he felt content to sit outside in the sun, watch a woman clean her boots. Felt nice. Soothing.

“The others awake?” he asked.
“Fi’s dragging Rhys out of bed now. Etna was awake when I came downstairs. She’s gonna fix breakfast, I think, and then we’re gonna leave.”

Tim would rather they left and then ate on the road, but he supposed it wasn’t an argument worth having. If whatever took the people of Crisis Ridge away didn’t come for them last night, it was unlikely to make an appearance in the next few hours.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Sasha asked suddenly. Tim patted down his shirt, searching for some of his looted goods.

“What is?” he asked.

“The forest. I had a book about trees and flowers and stuff when I was a kid.”

“A book?” Tim found the pack of jerky. He tore open the foil and offered her one.

“Thanks. Yeah, our—um. Fi and I were taken in by this guy when we were little. He was a bit of an eccentric. Had a lot of weird books. Like, books about semaphore and stuff. I think he didn’t always care what was in them, he just liked having an office full of books.”

Tim noted the past tense without comment. They chewed through what Tim assumed was spiced skag meat in silence.

“I think I recognize these trees,” Sasha said, her voice slurring slightly around her mouthful. “And if I’m right, then they’re not actually trees at all—they’re just one tree.”

“Uh. Come again?”

“It’s a type of tree that’s got, like, one giant root system——” Sasha’s hands outlined a wobbly shape through the air. “—but multiple trunks and branches and stuff. So it looks like a forest, but all the trees share the same roots, making them one tree with, like, multiple heads.”

Tim stared out at the forest, gaze drawn to the ground. He tried to imagine the sort of root system that would nurture a forest of this size. It wasn’t as if it was large, but something about the image of those roots, tangled up just under the surface... As though sensing his gaze, the trees stirred in the breeze.

“Eugh,” he said. Sasha laughed and stood.

“I think it’s cool,” she said, dusting her pants off. Inside, the sounds of raised voices and clanging could be heard. “Sounds like Fiona got Rhys up. I’m gonna head back in. See what those idiots are up to. Thanks for the jerky. And, uh.” She hesitated at the door. “Sorry again about last night.”

Tim lifted one shoulder. “It happens,” he said, because it did.

Sasha nodded and went inside. Tim watched the sky change colour and tried hard not to look at the waving trees.

Whatever guilt Tim still carried from last night burned away like fog in the morning sun. If Rhys was the sort of person who would lie to a man who’d put his own skin at risk to save his life, then Tim knew he’d get over his little crush a lot sooner than he anticipated.

The door opened a moment later, spoiling Tim’s brief tranquillity. Rhys stepped out, cradling a mug of steaming coffee. Even though it was the freeze-dried instant stuff, the scent of it hit Tim like a love tap straight to the pleasure centre of his brain, reminding him that it’d been a few days since his last taste of (shitty, instant) coffee.
To his surprise, Rhys held the mug out to him. Tim took it with a muttered ‘thanks’ and took a sip. Black, with sugar. Not a bad guess, Atlas.

To his even greater surprise, Rhys sat down on the front step, beside the abandoned hose, and stared out at the forest. Tim felt a little uneasy. He snuck a glance at the kid’s face, but Rhys’ expression didn’t tell him anything. His sleeves were pushed up past his elbows, and a fine sheen of sweat had already formed on his forehead. He licked his lips, the light in his right eye flickering.

Tim felt caught off-guard, although Rhys hadn’t done anything. The sight of him like this—and the coffee in Tim’s hand—did a little to chip away at Tim’s resentment and anger.

Rhys surprised him for a third time in less than ten minutes, when he spoke at last.

“I owe you an apology.”

Tim stalled with a mouthful of coffee. Would Rhys actually admit to lying to him out here? Away from guards and friends?

“Oh yeah?”

“About last night.”

Ah. “Don’t worry about it.”

“No, I—“ Rhys hunched over his folded arms, jutting his chin out with a pout. “—I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable. I mean, I don’t really regret it because I think you’re hot as hell, but I didn’t want to—want to make you feel uncomfortable.”

Tim stared down at the remains in his mug in lieu of thinking up a response. The morning had taken a decidedly awkward turn, and despite his best efforts, the guilt he’d thought he’d buried before began to shift under the dirt.

Worse than the guilt though, was that fluttering in his stomach.

He swallowed again, tapping his fingers against his tin mug. “It’s fine. You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m sorry I ran off.”

Rhys looked at him then, blinking. “You don’t owe me an apology,” he said.

Tim wondered if he would ever catch his footing in this conversation. He felt like an understudy with the wrong script. Before he could even hope to get to the right page, Rhys stood.

“But that’s what I wanted to say. I hope I got your coffee right—“

“Uh, pretty close,” Tim said.

“And I hope we can continue to work together. I mean, last night was just—physical, you know? After the bandits and everything… I just thought it would be nice. I like you, but not like that.”

Ah. Right. Tim did know the script, after all. The fluttering died, and the coffee settled like acid.

He pushed away from the wall. “It’s fine, boss. What time do you want to head out?”

They split their group between the two cars, the ladies having brought their own. Tim agreed to stay with Rhys, and Rhys agreed to drive.
They set out on the open road, cars laden with the supplies in Etna’s stash. Tim suggested they go back to Crisis Ridge and grab what they could, but none of the others seemed comfortable with the idea.

“It’s not as if anyone there’s going to use it,” Tim said, slinging his bag into the back seat. “And if we don’t take it, someone else sure as hell will.”

“It’s not a long trip,” Rhys said as he tightened the straps holding the bundled contents of Etna’s home down. “We won’t need much before we’re there. And besides, we’ve got plenty to eat and drink at Atlas.”

“Great. And if we’re waylaid, or stranded?” Tim asked while Rhys climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Well. Don’t let that happen,” Rhys said, adjusting the mirror. Tim shot him a look he dearly wished Rhys could see.

“Whatsoever you say, boss.” He slammed the car door. Rhys glanced at him, brow furrowing. He started the car.

The open road usually put Tim in a decent mood, the wide space and the lack of people always made him slightly happier. Today, however, he found it didn’t help. He leaned his chin onto his palm and stared out at the horizon, watching the landscape change from green to the scrubland, and then to the yellow and white desert. Pandora changed biomes the way some people changed outfits. Pieces of the previous environment—long grass, rolling hills—fell away behind them, leaving them looking at the barren desert, eye-searing under the sun.

Maybe it was riding shotgun that was the problem. Or maybe it was the poor sleep he’d gotten the night before. Tim rubbed his stinging eyes and sighed. Or maybe it was the idiot behind the wheel. Tim hadn’t felt right since he’d met Rhys. He felt like he was walking across uneven ground, or wearing a suit that didn’t fit right. He felt disjointed, like he’d been pulled out of socket.

What was Rhys, anyway? Safe behind his mask, Tim examined Rhys from the sides of his eyes. Attractive, sure. A bit of a goof, and maybe kind. But a little vain, and a lot arrogant. And a liar.

And then it clicked. Tim could have screamed.

Fucking goddammit that was it. Tim had a type. Handsome, asshole, arrogant liars. He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his jaw hard enough to make the joints creak.

“You okay?” Rhys asked, a little nervously.

“Perfect,” Tim spat. Rhys shot him a worried look that Tim absolutely wasn’t going to respond to.

It would be fine. He’d take the little weasel and the looney tunes back to Atlas, collect his pound of flesh, and get the fuck out and never think about any of them ever again. This time tomorrow, he’d be on his own again, enjoying the open road properly. Maybe he’d even get himself another bike. A nicer one, this time. Tim breathed out and forced himself to relax.

The trouble with the desert was how easily sound travelled. Miles and miles of open landscape meant a gunshot could be heard from one day to the next. It meant that when two vehicles roared down the half-submerged road, the sound of the engine could alert any scavengers in the region about the potential meal on wheels.

It meant that when a choir of voices hollered and whooped on the other side of the dune, both Rhys and Tim could hear it on the wind. Both froze.
“Is that—“ Rhys began as Tim levered himself carefully up from his seat. Tim shielded his eyes and stared out across the rolling landscape. A plume of dust bloomed to the west, growing in size like an approaching storm. He spotted Sasha, leaning across the divide between front and back seats of their 4-wheeler, peering at the same cloud. She yelled something, but her words were nearly as indistinct as the shouting over the roar of the engine.

“What is it?” Rhys asked as Tim flipped his rifle over his shoulder and into his hands. He tightened the zoom, and saw the dark shapes of the type of technical the bandits favoured glittering like stones in a riverbed.

“Bandits,” he said, checking his ammo.

“How many?”

Tim’s ECHO rang, the monotone voice informing him that one UNKNOWN was calling him. He thumbed the connection open.

“You see them?” It was Sasha.

“Yeah. Looks like there’s a lot of ‘em.”

“Fi’s gonna try to out-run them.”

“How far are we from this Atlas base of yours?” Tim asked, pulling away from his scope. Rhys’ left hand was white against the wheel.

“We’ve only just hit the half-way mark. Four hours, maybe?”

Not great. Tim fiddled with the scope, but between the dust and the desert haze that baked the air to shift in his sight, he couldn’t see how many there were.

“Hey, can that ECHOeye of yours scan the area? I need a head count.”

Rhys glanced to the side, biting his lip. “I haven’t got a program uploaded that’ll let me use the eye like that.”

Tim cursed. Of course not.

“But…” Rhys glanced over again, grip flexing on the wheel. “Maybe… I can get the eye to pick out their ECHO signatures.”

“What if they don’t have ECHO?”

Rhys shook his head. “The cars will. Every car’s got an uplink—it’s how the Catch-A-Ride service keeps track of them. I won’t get an exact headcount, but I can at least get you a rough estimate. But I’ll need your scope and we’ll need to switch positions.”

“Sounds good to me,” Tim said. Rhys nodded, easing up on the acceleration, when Tim caught his hand. “Whoa-ho there, what are you doing?”

Rhys raised an eyebrow. “Uh, pulling over?”

“No no no, those guys are on our tail. No slowing down, and no pulling over. You take this—“ Tim held out the rifle. “—I’ll take the wheel.”

Rhys sputtered but allowed Tim to muscle him out of the way, clambering over the seats and shoving
the Atlas CEO perhaps a little harder than the situation warranted to the other side of the car. Rhys scowled (pouted), cradling the rifle to his chest.

“Time’s a-wastin’, stretch,” Tim said, unmoved.

Rhys stood like a newborn fawn, gripping the back of his seat with his metal arm, hard enough to spit the seam. He gasped and cursed when Tim hit a rough spot, nearly sending him ass-over-teakettle.

“Watch it!” he snapped.

“I’m doing the best I can,” Tim said.

“Yeah, right… I remember taking a ride on that bike of yours… you drive like the whole world’s going to come after you…” Tim tuned out Rhys’ muttering. Rhys balanced the stock carefully against his arm and shoulder and peered down the sights. Tim kept his attention on the road, mindful of any potholes. The other car pulled up alongside theirs, trailing a grey cloud in their wake. Fiona gave him a funny look as they passed. She jerked her chin at Rhys and mouthed something Tim didn’t bother to make out. He shrugged.

“Well?” Tim asked. Rhys didn’t reply. His mouth was pressed into a thin, white line. “C’mon, Rhys. What’s the damage?”

“Six,” Rhys said hoarsely.

Tim pressed his back into the seat, stretching his arms out as far as they would go. “Okay,” he said. “Okay, that’s not great, but between all of us, I think we can—“

“Six vehicles, and two buzzards. All of them modified.”

Tim stared at the road. “Alright. Alright, that’s…”

“Really, really, catastrophically bad?”

Tim’s ear buzzed before he could respond.

“What’s happening?” Fiona asked.

Tim gave her the bad news and she turned the air blue in response. Tim winced and muted the connection.

“Alright, here’s what we’re gonna do. Step one, we are going to keep calm. You hear me, Atlas? Hey. Look at me.”

Tim tugged on Rhys’ pantleg and Rhys dropped like a stone into the passenger seat. He looked like someone who’d died in the car 50 years earlier, coming back on the anniversary of his death. He clutched the rifle to his chest. Tim squared his shoulders, lowered his head slightly, doing his best to communicate confidence without the help of his face.

“We’re gonna be fine. You and me? We’ve gotten through worse than this in the last 48 hours alone.”

“I wish that wasn’t true,” Rhys mumbled. Tim laughed and Rhys seemed to perk up a little at the sound.

“Okay.” Rhys took a deep breath. “Okay. What’s step two?”
Tim grinned at him, and flipped the connection back on. “Atta boy. Alright, Fiona, we’ve gotta collaborate on this. First—you and me, Rhys, we’re gonna trade places again. Your friend’s got a machine gun on their car, which is lucky for them but also unlucky, you know why?” Rhys shook his head.

“Because it means they’re gonna come after us first,” Fiona said, resigned.

“Exactly. They’ve got a big fat target on their backs, which means while the convoy wastes bullets and energy trying to cut them down, we can take them out. You following me?” Tim asked. Rhys nodded, his gaze lowering to Tim’s covered wrist.

“Good thing we’ve got two empty seats,” Rhys said with a weak smile.

Fiona bit back another litany of curses that would’ve gotten her wrist slapped by Felix, if he’d stuck around. He’d tell her that her wit and intelligence should be her greatest weapon, and there was no intelligence in drawing a gun or cursing. Maybe that’s why she did so much of both, these days.

“Bad news?” Sasha asked. She’d taken up behind the gunner, a position she’d gotten comfortable with during their travels.

“We’ve got an entire goddamn army of bandits on our tails. Six cars, two buzzards.”

Sasha winced, her fingers flexing against the handles. “Okay, well… We can do this. We’ve done worse.”

“What the hell are they even doing out here?” Fiona asked.

The doctor sat in the back seat, crouched low but her eyes were wide and clear. She watched the world around her like a woman on safari. Her lips moved restlessly, her voice low but Sasha could just hear her over the wind.

“...strong arm him, weak enough to mould and break. Bend and snap. Copy of a copy. The past is never far from where we stand. We’ve not left anything behind—” Her voice went on, a low, persistent sound, like the scratch of a nail from the inside of a coffin. Sasha and Fiona exchanged alarmed glances.

“Are you okay?” Sasha asked

“Oh dear. I’m fine. Trauma.” Etna reached into the small sack of personal items and withdrew a small case. “From the kidnapping I endured.” Etna fiddled with an ECHOtablet, the screen turned away from the sisters’ view. Her eyes seemed to regain focus. “Is there anything you’d like me to do?” she asked without looking up.

Fiona and Sasha exchanged another glance.

“Um. Just stay low,” Fiona said.

“Yeah, try to keep out—holy crap!” Sasha jerked in the gunner seat, the sudden displacement of weight causing their 4-wheeler to veer to the left.

“What’s happening? Are you hit?” Fiona asked as she wrestled with the wheel.

“No, I’m fine, it’s just—there’s three of them!”

“What?” Fiona looked to the sky, expecting to see a swarm of buzzards bearing down on them.
“Three Tims! There was only one before, right?” Sasha pointed. Fiona followed her gaze and sure enough, three faceless men now occupied the other vehicle.

“Huh,” she said.

Rhys couldn’t help it. The digistructs impressed him. He wondered what would happen when Tim summoned them in a speeding vehicle, if he would get the chance to watch them flail to find their footing, but to his slight disappointment, they appeared in the backseats in a shower of blue, reclining like they’d been there the whole time.

The first word out of Tim’s mouth was “Quiet!” The rest were instructions. Both clones—Thing One and Thing Two, amusingly—got sniper rifles and both were put on buzzard-killing duty.

“Leave the cars to me,” Tim said. And then, “Keep our driver alive.”

Rhys shot Tim a glance, but Tim’s face was pointed behind them, where the bandit cars could now be seen by human eyes. Rhys could hear the roar of their engines, and the sound of the buzzards humming through the air. He risked a quick look and could just see the choppers materializing from the sun-bleached sky, as if summoned by some asshole wizard. A hand grabbed him by the top of the head and turned him to face forward.

“Eyes on the road,” Tim said, nestling a scoped machine gun against his shoulder (a Dahl he’d pulled from his bag). He sunk down to a crouch, bracing one foot against the vehicle floor, and resting his weight against the back of his seat. The digistructs had their rifles out, their hidden eyes pressed against their scopes and their barrels pointed at the sky.

Rhys felt sweat bead at his temple. He could hear voices now, could make out the words they were screaming.

“Look at the meat!”

“Break the skin, crack the bones, drink the marrow!”

“Come on, yuh cowards! Gonna bury you with the rest!”

“Blah, blah, blah…” Tim disabled the safety. “You ready?”

“Yeah. I—It always sounds like they want to eat us.” Rhys laughed nervously. Tim said nothing. Rhys tried to swallow against rising panic. “They aren’t… They wouldn’t actually…”

One of the constructs chuckled.

“They aren’t gonna get the chance,” Tim said and squeezed the trigger.

Rhys would remember the next few, busy minutes as a blur of colour and sound, a sensory disorienting explosion that would return to him in waves for days to come, mostly when he was trying to sleep.

There was a lot of screaming, he would later recall. Only some of it his own. There was the sound of tires screeching, the roar of an engine breaking into a stutter, the shriek of metal against asphalt and sand. The blue-white sky ahead of them, draped across the yellow-white humps and curves of the desert, broken up only by rocky cliffs and outcroppings as they neared the edge of the dust. And bullets.
Rhys adopted the zig-zag maneuver he’d learned over the last few months, swerving them off of the road and into the roughs, kicking up great clouds of sand. Bullets pinged off the metal frame, exploded into the soft material of the seats. Rhys crouched so low he could barely see over the dash. He gripped the wheel like a lifeline, pressed his face close and tried to keep his stinging eyes open. The spiderweb cracks across the windshield made the landscape ahead difficult to read.

Something exploded behind them. A piece of flaming metal skimmed through the air. Sasha’s gun screamed retribution, bullets ripping through metal. Rhys caught a quick glance of her, over the rising dust and through the wind and speed, he thought he saw the white of her teeth.

“How many left?” Rhys shouted. Tim held up three fingers without turning his head. “And the buzzards?”

If Rhys thought sniper rifles sounded loud before, it was nothing compared to having one go off less than four feet behind him. Even with all the fancy Hyperion tech, it sounded like a god snapping their fingers. He heard the buzzard’s blades slice through the air, a buzz like a million hornets right above his head. He could smell the smoke, burning animal hide and scorched metal and plastic, before another rifle shot sounded off, followed by the howl of Sasha’s mounted gun.

The buzzard exploded. Flaming shrapnel fell from the sky, bouncing off of Rhys’ hood like heavy rain.

Bullets dented their right side, two of them catching the driver-side mirror and a third knocking it clean off. Rhys yelped and swerved hard to the left, knocking Tim and his clones against the side. The mag Tim’d been trying to load slipped out of his hands, landed with a clatter onto the ground.

The whole shitshow was a blur in Rhys’ mind, but what happened next was perhaps the worst of it all. The memories are snapshots, or a clips from a corrupted file. The closest he can recall is this:

Tim fell. More bullets. One of the clones shouted, the other pushed Tim down. Took a hit meant for Tim. It died bloodlessly, wordlessly.

Tim sprawled against the dash. Rhys saw he had a fresh mag in his hand. (Had the clone given him…?)

Time resumed. Tim snapped the mag back into place, pressed his heels against the seat and fired.

A series of bullets punched holes through the safety glass, knocking the windshield from its frame at last. Dust and wind rushed in, half-blinding Rhys. The ECHOeye spat out a worldview in shades of blue, projecting what the landscape should have looked like. Hopefully still did.

He heard Sasha’s scream and thought his heart might stop. He saw the sparks from the corner of his eye and when he looked over, he saw Sasha had fallen back. Their mounted gun spat black smoke, tailing the car’s wake like a streamer.

“Oh shit!” Rhys switched to Fiona’s frequency. “Fiona! Is Sasha—?”

“She’s okay! She’s got an Anshin, but the gun’s no good! Are you—?”

“We’re okay!” Rhys glanced at Tim, who was practically on his back, aiming at a 45 degree angle towards the sky. “The mounted gun’s out!”

Tim cursed and unleashed another stream of gunfire. Rhys heard the bandits screaming above them, answering fire peppering the backseat.
“I have an idea!” Tim said. “Patch me in to the call!”

Rhys switched the frequency to conference and Tim’s voice came at him in stereo.

“Fiona, do you guys still have a boost?”

“Yeah!”

“Do you think you can lure the remaining cars a little closer?”

“That depends on—” A buzz of static and bullets. “—on how close you’re asking for!”

“Close as you can get ‘em without getting killed!”

Fiona muttered a curse under her breath. “Alright. And then what?”

As plans went, it wasn’t Tim’s greatest, but it was far from his worst.

Fiona and Sasha did as they were asked. Sasha, freshly healed and with an SMG in her hands, did an excellent job getting the bandits’ attention. Fiona let their car slow, playing the role of wounded animal, pulling the predators within biting range.

Which just left Tim to get the remaining buzzard close. He aimed carefully, trying to hit the blades. Predictably, the buzzard dipped altitude. Rhys swerved, avoiding another round of enemy fire and Tim held on as best he could.

Tim baited the buzzard, pulling it closer until he could practically see the expression on the pilot’s stupid face.

Thing Two braced himself against the back seat, his rifle vanishing in a cascade of blue. He glanced over to Tim, who nodded. Thing Two tensed, leapt—

It snagged the buzzard’s leg, hooking both arms around, legs kicking as the buzzard struggled to rise with the added weight. Tim heard shouting, and then a man fell from the sky. When he looked back, his clone had pulled itself onto the deck and was reaching for another bandit’s ankles.

“Now?” Fiona asked. Their car swerved behind them, trailing bandit technicals like tin cans on strings.

Tim watched through the scope as his digistruct punched a man in the jaw, shot another with his pistol.

Bullets winged off the side of their badly damaged car. Rhys yelped as one lucky stray nicked the steering wheel, inches from his thumb.

“Now?!?” he shouted.

Thing Two locked his arms around the pilot in a choke hold, hauling him from the chair. A bandit came up behind him and Tim cursed, unloaded another mag into the buzzard. It didn’t drop the bandit, but it gave Thing Two some warning.

Someone screamed in the distance. Bandits hollered and a shotgun blast exploded the sand beside them, close enough to catch Rhys in the face. Rhys ducked his head behind his metal arm, scrubbing desperately at his eyes.
Thing Two staggered to the pilot’s seat, a man’s arms wrapped around his neck, and grabbed the stick with one hand, his other hand going to the present Tim had given him before he jumped. The buzzard sliced through the air, dropping dangerously close behind the bandit convoy.

“Now!” Tim said.

Thing Two pulled the pin from the grenade with his teeth. Fiona hit the boost.

Rhys had his head hidden, blinded still.

“Rhys! N—”

The explosion ripped through the sky, turning the world behind them red and orange. Tim got Rhys low in time, just as Rhys hit the boost.

Both their eyes were burning. Wind howled over their heads. Tim held himself against Rhys, forcing him down, and Rhys held the wheel with his metal hand, his flesh hand gripping Tim’s arm.

After what felt like a long, long time but was, in all likelihood, only a few seconds, the car slowed and a voice sounded over the conference ECHO.

“It’s... over?”

Tim really hoped so.

He raised his head cautiously. The wind tore at his hair. Rhys rose a moment later, his grip still tight on the wheel. Tim spotted the grooves Rhys’ metal hand had made in the plastic.

Behind them there was nothing but sand and wreckage. Tim laughed. His hand rested against the back of Rhys’ neck and Rhys didn’t pull away. For a moment, their mismatched gazes met and Tim felt…

He didn’t want to think about how he felt.

“You okay?” Rhys asked.

“Fine. You?”

Rhys’ smile widened. He pressed his forehead against Tim’s and murmured, “Let me take you someplace quiet next time.”

Tim laughed again, drunk on adrenaline and escaping certain death once more with barely a scratch to show for it. Rhys laughed with him, leaning forward until Tim could feel the tickle of his long lashes against his cheek.

He wanted to kiss Rhys. Very badly.

The air split. A roar sounded across the plains, sounding out from lungs bigger than Tim could even imagine. It froze him. It froze Rhys.

It sounded familiar.

Fiona’s hands slipped on the wheel at the sound of that massive roar. It sounded like thunder—like something worse than thunder. It sounded like the thing that scared rain out of clouds, a childhood nightmare come back to haunt them. When Fiona turned, she found she wasn’t far from the reality.
A monster approached, twisting through the sky.

It looked like something out of a vault, or that same childhood nightmare. It was long and its wings blurred like an insect’s and it had big teeth and sharp claws and wide eyes, too many eyes, and it was coming for them, barrelling down, right for them. Like something had called for it.

It opened its mouth and made a sound that reverberated through the car, the land, their bones. It was a sound with a rhythm, waves that bashed against Fiona’s eardrums.

She looked to her sister, who met her gaze with wide eyes. Sasha’s mouth lifted at one corner, almost in disbelief.

“Well… It’s still not the worst thing we’ve ever faced?” Sasha said. Fiona supposed that was true, but she didn’t think it mattered for much. Not when their mounted gun was busted, not when they had a useless passenger in the backseat, and not when their car engine spat black smoke.

The next Catch-A-Ride was still ten miles out. They lost ground, lost speed, even as Fiona pressed the accelerator down to the floor.

The monster made that sound again, a complicated reverberation that rattled Fiona’s teeth.

It opened its mouth and spat forth something that landed beside them with a heavy thump, that stank of poison and sent sand and steam into the air. The gears clicked and groaned under the strain of a sharp turn, and Fiona felt the shocks rattle under her feet.

The Catch-A-Ride was nine miles away.

They weren’t going to make it.

“How did it find us?” Rhys’ eyes were wide. “How did it even know…?”

Tim didn’t reply. Rhys hadn’t expected him to, but he wanted to hear his reassurances. He wanted to hear his voice. Tim could take care of this, certainly. He could fix this.

Tim sat beside him, crouched and pressing his weight against the shredded seat. His empty face was pointed at the sky. Rhys wished he knew what expression he wore. He wished he would say something. The mounted gun was gone. The clones were gone. But this wasn’t the end. It couldn’t be.

“What do we do?” Rhys asked, because he needed to know. He needed a plan, he needed something.

Tim gave him nothing. The monster roared.

“I’m... open to suggestions, boss,” Tim said. He sounded faint.

Rhys breathed out. That was fine, too. Rhys could come up with something. Admittedly, his schemes were better suited for non-violent situations, but he could work with what he was given.

“Can you bring your clones back?” he asked.

“I—maybe. My head—” Tim took a breath so deep, Rhys could hear it. “I can do it. Just say the word.”

The monster spat slag between Rhys’ and Fiona’s cars. Both of them swerved away from the poison,
tires screeching as they both entered the desert. The terrain grew rocky under the tires, pebbles shooting up against the undercarriage.

“Maybe—” Rhys began, but another explosion whited out the sky and killed the rest of his words.

The now-familiar sound of buzzard wings rang out over the borderlands. Rhys could’ve screamed. Really? After all that, more bandits?

“How many?” Rhys asked, one eye on the boost gauge. They had ten minutes, maybe longer, before the damn thing would refill.

Tim didn’t reply. Rhys asked again.

“Five,” Tim said and that time, Rhys did scream. Just a little.

The monster let out a cry that seemed to shake the ground, which Rhys didn’t think would be possible. It twisted through the air, its body flashing in the sunlight. It opened its jaws and screamed again, just as another volley of missiles slammed into its side.

“Boss,” Tim said. “It’s not bandits.”

The monster screamed again, twisting desperately midair. Its wings blurred with movement and soon its massive form was shrinking. Even while watching it, it took Rhys a moment to realise what he was seeing. The monster was running away.

But not fast enough. The buzzards came into view. There were five of them.

Another volley ripped through the creature’s hindquarters, showering the desert below with a violet-black substance that spat and glowed on the ground. The creature screamed, but it lacked the force it once had. The buzzards descended, and Rhys could see armoured people leaning out of the carriage with missile launchers and rocket launchers.

The creature flew in a drunken circle. The next round of shots whistled through the air and found their home in the creature’s chest and head. Rhys thought he could hear it screech over the sound of explosions.

The smoke cleared, and the creature was down, its massive corpse stretched out across the white and yellow sand.

Rhys’ ECHO buzzed and a monotonous voice informed him that CAPTAIN HARRIET VERMONT OF THE CRIMSON RAIDERS was calling on a conference line.

Chapter End Notes

I have written more action scenes than I have sex scenes for this and I'm sorry.

Thank you all for the lovely comments and the kudos and just for reading in general. I hope everyone is at least enjoying themselves.

Next chapter: The Raiders have a bounty out for the man with no face. Rhys makes a gamble. Jack teaches Tim a very important lesson.
Part II: Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Captain Vermont asks some questions. Rhys deals with his debt. Tim deals with his phobias. Jack deals with Tim.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is very long and the reason I need to bump the rating up to E. Thanks to scootsaboot for beta’ing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THEN

The next few hours were a blur to Tim. He could remember ordering another drink, and making friends who ordered him more drinks.

Tim found it was easier to pretend with alcohol in his system, so he drank. He told dirty jokes that made him blush and everyone else laugh. He yelled music requests across the bar, and they listened. He took up space, and people accommodated. He dropped the five dollar words from his vocabulary with ease. At one point, he spilled a drink (maybe his?) and no one cared.

It was like a party trick, as if Tim could summon Jack from thin air and let him live in his skin for a while. His Jack impression was good. People liked it.

The woman he’d blown off before, whose name was Cerise, slipped him her contact details and left a smear of lipstick across his cheek that Tim didn’t wipe off immediately. When he stumbled from the bar a few hours later, stinking and sticky from complicated cocktails, he looked at her contact info, pursed his lips, and considered it.

It’s what Jack would do. Wasn’t it?

What would Tim do? Tim leaned against the wall and waited for the world to steady itself. Tim would probably stagger home, alone. Tim would have already gone home an hour ago. Maybe he had. Maybe he really was Jack now.

The back of his head thumped against the wall, but he barely noticed. He closed his eyes because the world wasn’t cooperating with his wishes and for the first time, he felt like it should have. He was tired of being small, of the nagging feeling that he owed the world an explanation for existing, like he was perpetually in someone else’s seat. He took a breath. Jack wouldn’t give anyone an explanation if you paid him.

He took another breath, filling his head with the scent of other people’s cologne and perfume that clung to his jacket. He called Cerise.
She took Jack home.

Tim left before the sunrise. He considered flagging down a cab, but the night’s decisions weighed down his thoughts. His body thrummed with the fading effects of a fuck load of alcohol. He wasn’t entirely drunk anymore, but the hangover hadn’t hit yet either. He existed in between those two states and maybe there was something meaningful about that, but he couldn’t pick apart the metaphor. He started walking.

Tim was still in bed when Jack arrived a few hours later, entering the apartment without so much as a knock. He had remarkably little sympathy for Tim’s state and laughed when Tim told him to leave.

“Had a good night, pumpkin?” Tim felt his mattress dip. Jack making himself at home, as usual. Tim buried his face in his pillow and grumbled a response. “So, what happened? You obviously got drunk, but that better not be the whole story.”

Tim considered ignoring Jack until he left, but he knew it wouldn’t work. Jack was as persistent as a five year old getting into the cookie jar when he wanted something. Tim fixed Jack with a bleary gaze.

“I met a girl. She took me home,” he said. “End of story.”

Something flickered in Jack’s expression, there and gone before Tim could really process he’d seen it in the first place. Jack leaned forward with a leer.

“Oh, I doubt that. Come on, give us some details. Did she suck you off? How big were her tits?”

Tim threw a pillow, which Jack easily dodged. “Fuck off, I’m not talking about that stuff.”

“What? Why not?” Jack demanded. Tim turned to face the wall. Jack sighed and flopped over, sprawling across Tim’s legs. “Come onnn. I gave up my evening for you. The least you could do is give me some juicy details.”

Tim was too hungover for this. “No.”

Jack groaned theatrically. “You’re so boring,” he complained. Tim said nothing, determined not to rise to Jack’s bait. After a while, Jack sighed. “At least tell me you enjoyed yourself.”

Tim tried to curl up, but his legs were pinned under Jack’s weight and Jack didn’t seem interested in moving. He sighed.

“It was… weird.”

“Weird like kinky or…?”

Like having a threesome with a phantom. Like being a voyeur in his own skin. Cerise touched his face and told him how good he looked, how she’d wanted him since she laid eyes on him, and Tim tried to take it as a compliment.

“I barely said two words to her,” Tim admitted. “But she wanted me anyway.”


“Yeah. I guess. I just… kind of wished we had talked a little more.”

Jack didn’t say anything immediately, which was reason enough to be concerned. Tim hoped in vain that the silence signalled the end of the conversation.
“Wait, wait, wait. You had no-strings attached sex with a hot stranger, and you’re sulking because she didn’t bore you with all the details of her boring life story?”

Tim tried to tug his legs loose, but Jack wouldn’t budge. He sighed again, and pulled the blankets up as best he could.

“Never mind,” he said.

“No, no, no, hang on here. I think I’m getting this. You don’t want random hook-ups, do you? You want romance.” Jack sounded delighted. “You want flowers and kittens and soulmates.”

Something more horrible than pain splintered in his chest at Jack’s words. Tim wanted to sleep and pretend this was a terrible nightmare. He would rather eat a jeep than admit Jack was right.

“Go away,” he said instead, because he could never lie to Jack.

Jack clucked his tongue. “Sorry, pumpkin. But you know that as long as you’re me, you can’t have your romance. It’s too risky.”

The horrible pain in Tim’s chest grew thorns. It spread out and up his throat, into his mouth and pressed against his sinuses. He closed his eyes against the sting.

“I know that,” he said. He wanted to sound angry, but the thing in his chest shredded his voice, made him sound hoarse.

“But hey, look on the bright side. Once you’re finished with this, you’ll be so damn rich, you’ll have yourself the pick of the litter.”

Tim said nothing. He hid his face and breathed through his mouth to prevent himself from sniffling.

It was easy to forget, under all the bravado and crude jokes and pet names and posturing, that Jack wasn’t someone you turned your back on. That he was dangerous.

He had Tim pinned under him before Tim could even shout.

“What the hell—!” Tim began to struggle but stopped at Jack’s quelling look.

Jack tisked under his breath. He leaned forward. Tim flinched when Jack reached for his face, but all he did was brush away a tear.

“Don’t pout, precious,” he said, his voice gone quiet. “I know you’re doing a lot for me. I know that, and I’m not gonna forget it.” There was no hint of humour in Jack’s expression, no mockery, no ridicule. He looked at Tim as intently and intensely as he had that late night visit, all those months ago, when he’d asked Tim to give up everything for him.

Tim wanted to squirm away. He wanted to hide. He felt pinned open like a worm on a wax slab, ready for live dissection. He wanted to beg for mercy, for just once for Jack to leave him alone, to give him an inch, a chance to breathe.

“It means a lot to me, Tim,” Jack said.

And Tim realised, with startling clarity, just how profoundly fucked he was. How stupid he’d been.

He knew why he’d done this. He could tell himself it’d been for Jack, but really it’d been for himself. Because he loved Jack, because he wanted Jack to love him back and he thought this would do it. This would tie them together. Even if Jack didn’t love him back the way Tim wanted, at least Jack
would be forced to think about Tim, to look at him, spend time with him. He might not have love, but he would have something.

And now he had it. And he would never be free. Even if Jack left him now, he would never get a moment, because Jack was under his skin.

And this was it. This was his life now. He was always going to be this, like this, with Jack’s face and his body and he would never, ever get a moment away from this thing growing between them, inside him. Jack had him. Even if he never loved Tim back.

Tim’s plan, ill-conceived as it had been, had backfired. Tim belonged to Jack now. Nothing else mattered.

Tim sniffed, and nodded. A sense of melancholy relief washed over him. Admitting defeat made things simple, in a way. He could stop struggling.

Jack’s thumb traced the sharp edge of his cheek, down to the corner of his lips. He leaned down and told Tim the most honest thing he would ever say to him.

“Don’t go thinking you’re alone in this. You’ve got me. Remember? I’m not going anywhere.”

NOW

The Crimson Raiders stood out from the scum of the borderlands by virtue of being an armed militia with a logo and uniforms and a flying city to call their very own. They were built up from the ruins of Atlas’ corporate army, the Crimson Lance, to become the peace-bringers and -keepers of Pandora’s downtrodden masses, what few of them you could find.

In theory, they were meant to bring order and justice to a lawless waste. In practice, as far as Tim was concerned, they were just another gang.

Maybe Roland had bigger things in mind for them when he’d begun his resistance movement against Hyperion and Jack all those years ago. Maybe they were only meant to be a temporary force, supposed to disband once the reign of Handsome Jack came to an end. Maybe he never wanted them to act as enforcers for a grief-struck, angry siren with a murder-on for the whole stinking planet. It didn’t matter now. Roland got himself killed, and Lilith took to the Raiders like an alcoholic to an open bar.

Captain Vermont ‘requested’ they pull over. Rhys and Fiona exchanged a few words, and, under the shadow of five buzzards, they decided to acquiesce.

They hadn’t consulted Tim. If they’d had, he probably would’ve voted to risk the fire fight.

Really, Tim supposed as the buzzards kicked up sandstorms during their descent, he probably wasn’t being very fair. Lilith was, according to rumour, occasionally level-headed and able to mete out justice like a proper law-bringer. But more persistent rumours suggested she was far more prone to violence, vengeance, and violence again.

Tim had met her once before. The last time he’d seen her in person had been in the vault on Elpis. The shard of alien tech embedded in his wrist ached at the memory.

Captain Vermont stepped from the buzzard, flanked on either side by low-level soldiers. She cast a wide shadow across the landscape, wide-shouldered and round-hipped. Her sleeves were pushed up to her elbows, revealing a set of forearms that could crush a man’s head with a flex. Her hairstyle was
no-nonsense. Her eyes were narrowed. Her mouth was a flat line in her face. She looked to be older than Tim.

“Which one of you is in charge?” she asked. Rhys and Fiona exchanged looks.

“We’re… kind of in this together,” Fiona said slowly. “Although it’s this dope’s fault we were out here in the first place.”

“Nice,” Rhys grumbled.

“Either of you know anything about that thing we shot at before?” she asked. Tim had a hard time not staring at her mouth. She spoke like she was chewing on each word.

“Uh. No more than you, Captain,” Rhys said. “We were fighting off bandits and then that thing appeared.”

“It just appeared? You didn’t see where it came from?” the captain asked. Rhys shook his head.

“We were a little preoccupied,” Fiona offered.

Captain Vermont eyed her. “Too busy to notice a giant monster coming towards you?”

“Well, things were pretty hectic,” Fiona said with a shrug. “I didn’t see a thing. Sash? How about you?”

Sasha slid down from their 4-wheeler. “Nope. But I got pretty busy with the gun exploding in my face.”

“I didn’t see where it came from, either. Looked like you took care of it, though,” Rhys supplied helpfully.

The captain shifted her stance, widening the line of her shoulders, and crossed her arms. “What about you, sir?” Her gaze landed on Tim, her mouth pulling at the corners. “Or maybe you can’t see anything.”

“I can see fine,” Tim said. “But I didn’t see your monster until it was damn near on top of us.”

The captain’s gaze flicked from Tim’s boots to the top of his head. Her mouth pursed. She gave the others a similar once-over.

“Funny lookin’ bunch, aren’t you. You guys vault hunters?”

Fiona laughed, a light and charming sound. “Us? That’s really sweet of you. No, no, we’re just a pack of mercenaries. Hard luck losers, trying to make our way in this crazy, mixed up world.”

“Even him?” Vermont asked, jabbing her thumb at Rhys.

“No, I’m the guy who hired them,” Rhys said.

“So you are in charge,” Vermont said.

“No—I mean, I guess, but—” Rhys shook his head. “Fiona and Sasha are friends of mine.”

“Friends you put on the payroll?”

“Haven’t you ever heard of nepotism?” Rhys shot back.
“What about him?” The captain jerked her chin at Tim. “He not a friend of yours?”

“Nope. Our relationship is purely transactional,” Tim said before Rhys could answer.

The captain’s jaw flexed and her eyes narrowed. She said nothing for a while, and Tim recognized the tactic for what it was. She was trying to use her silence like a weapon, trying to press Tim into filling it.

Tim kept his mouth shut.

“You look familiar,” she said at last.

“That’s funny.”

“No, no, I mean it. What’d you say your name was again?”

The small hairs on the back of Tim’s neck rose.

“John,” he said. Rhys glanced at him without turning his head.

“Got a family name, John?”

“Nope.”

“No family name? That must’ve gotten confusing in your hometown. Unless you were the only John around?”

“It was never an issue,” Tim said evenly.

“Uh.” Rhys looked between them. “Have we got a problem here?”

Vermont gave him a cool look in response. “No problems. I’m just talking to John, here. Tell me, John, you always wear a mask?”

Tim kept his hands loose and open at his sides. He kept his stance relaxed and his expression neutral, out of habit.

“I try to,” he said.

“Any reason in particular?” Vermont asked.

“Sure.”

Vermont sighed. “And that reason is…?”

“None of your business,” Tim said.

Vermont’s eyes narrowed. Her mouth worked in silence, chewing on words she didn’t say out loud.


Vermont stalked off without waiting for an answer. Rhys and Fiona exchanged another glance. Rhys raised his eyebrows. Fiona rolled her eyes.

Rhys found the captain in the flock of buzzards. Their engines still hummed with life, the blades slicing lazy arcs through the air. Other members of the Raiders lounged in the area, most of them still
seated in their copters. Almost every one of them had a weapon in their hands.

“Is everything alright, captain?” Rhys asked.

“That mercenary you hired. How long’s he been with you?”

“A few days. Why?”

Vermont nodded, her mouth working. “You ever see his face?”

Even before coming to Pandora, Rhys could recognize trouble when it was coming for him. He’d spent enough time swimming with sharks to know when blood was in the water.

“Sure,” Rhys said. Vermont’s eyebrow twitched and Rhys knew he’d given her an answer she wasn’t expecting.

“Really. What’d he look like?”

“I don’t know. A guy? He had a nose and a mouth and two eyes. Nothing really stood out to me,” Rhys said. Vermont eyeballed him, but Rhys had just outrun a fleet of bandits for around the third day in a row, and her glare didn’t strike the fear into him that it might’ve any other day.

He met her gaze without flinching, made his face look open and guileless. It was an old trick he’d picked up in school. It made him look innocent, which people often conflated for stupid.

Vermont sighed. “Look. You seem like a nice group of kids, so I’ll let you in on something. The Raiders got tipped off about a guy in a mask causing some trouble ‘round these parts. We think he might be some ex-Hyperion stooge.”

The ex-Hyperion stooge standing in front of her put on an expression of surprise and alarm.

“Really?” Rhys said.

“Lilith herself has put the word down to the rest of us. This guy’s seriously bad news.”

Rhys let out a low whistle. “Sounds bad. What’s he look like?”

“We don’t know. According to Lilith, this guy would have reason to keep his face hidden. Back when Hyperion was still active, there were all kinds of rumours about masked assassins and black-ops spooks and whatever. He might be one of them. Either way, Lilith is hot to take him in alive.”

Rhys blinked. “Alive? You mean there’s a bounty?”

Vermont looked him over. “Yeah. Five hundred thousand alive, zero dead. So, you know,” Vermont went on while dollar signs danced in Rhys’ vision, “if you think you see anyone who might match that description, you give the Raiders a call, okay?”

Vermont offered to escort them back, which Rhys politely but emphatically rejected. He kept half an eye on Tim during the exchange, and didn’t miss the way his shoulders tensed and then relaxed. Tim was a difficult man to read, for obvious reasons, but there were signs if you knew where to look.

“Suit yourself,” Vermont said. “But keep an eye open. A lot of roaming bandits in this area these days, mostly belonging to a warlady named Malady.”

“It wasn’t like that when we came through on the way here,” Fiona said.
Vermont shrugged. “Someone must’ve kicked over the hornets’ nest. You all take care, now. And be sure to think about what I told you, Rhys,” she said.

Rhys felt Tim’s gaze on him but he didn’t turn away from Vermont.

“I will,” he promised.

The rest of the ride to the Atlas facility was quiet. Maybe the hornets’ nest had been kicked over, as she suggested (and Rhys knew who’d done the kicking), but no one else gave them a hard time. As they approached the facility, Rhys finally received a new databurst from the company, updates on various projects and business ventures. Atlas was still a shell of its former self, but Rhys could be patient. Every step forward, no matter how small or how long it took, was a step beyond where they’d been before.

The air had grown steadily colder over the past twenty minutes, and here and there, Rhys could see patches of snow. The road was smooth, or as smooth as it could get on Pandora, but the presence of snow and ice meant he had to pay closer attention to his driving. Which meant no more cruise control, and no more databursts.

With nothing better to do, Rhys found himself thinking about Vermont and her bounty.

Five hundred thousand was a lot of money. Admittedly, for a bounty, it wasn’t as impressive as the amounts offered by Atlas and Hyperion back in their glory days, but Sanctuary was a city, not a corporation, and their modest coffers meant fewer zeroes on the price tag.

Tim had stretched out in the back seat. He had turned away from Rhys, his head pillowed in his arms. He hadn’t moved since he’d lay down, and Rhys figured he was asleep.

Rhys wished he wasn’t driving. He wanted to look up ‘Timothy Lawrence’ on the ECHOnet, see what results he could pull up. He wracked his brains instead, trying to think of any time he’d heard the name before. Vault hunters were like celebrities down here. If Tim was one of them, why hadn’t Rhys heard of him before?

Maybe he wasn’t a very good one, Rhys thought. He recalled Tim’s performance in the Splatterdome, and the cool way he’d handled himself with the buzzards.

No, he decided. That couldn’t be it. Rhys drummed his fingers against the wheel. Squalls blew across the plains. Half-collapsed snow drifts spilled over the ground. Tim shivered, and pulled his knees tight to his chest.

Rhys tried to picture what would happen next. The Raiders likely wouldn't come for them in Atlas, and god only knew what happened to Malady. And Callum—

Pain splintered into a dull ache behind his eyes. Rhys scowled and rubbed at his ECHOeye.

Thoughts still on potential threats, Rhys called Vaughn, who agreed to send more back-up to Atlas.

“You think you’ll need it?” Vaughn asked.

“I think it’s better to be safe than sorry,” Rhys said.

“Everything okay?”

“Fine. Listen, do you remember all those rumours about Hyperion’s, like, black-ops team?”
“Uh. I guess so. Been a while since I thought about it, but yeah. There were all those rumours, right? Hyperion had a team of highly trained assassins at their disposal, to deal with problem settlements or, like, more extreme corporate espionage.”

“Right. All those rumours surrounding what happened to Maliwan’s fourth CEO.”

“Oh yeah, the one they found in her office... Well, most of her. Ha. Haven’t thought of that in a while.” He laughed nervously. “What brings all this on?”

Rhys glanced to the backseat.

Those digistruct clones of his, those could’ve been Hyperion tech. And they carried Hyperion weapons. And he’d gone to school on one of the Edens. That didn’t necessarily mean much, but Rhys knew you that Hyperion wouldn’t even look at your cover letter unless you’d spent an obscene amount of money on higher education. And there were no better universities to spend an obscene amount of money than the ones on one of the Edens.

Tim had pulled his stolen coat tight around himself. The material looked thin and cheap, and Rhys wasn’t surprised it wasn’t holding up against the growing chill. Rhys saw his earwidget, glowing soft violet against his sun-burned ear. Almost without meaning to, Rhys ECHOeye picked up on the device’s function, displaying the visual static that wrapped around Tim’s face. And the firewall that protected it.

No doubt about it, the earwidget was a fine piece of tech. Probably the most expensive thing Tim owned. And it could’ve been Hyperion-made.

“Rhys?”

“I’ll tell you later. Sorry to bug you,” Rhys said and ended the call before Vaughn could reply. It was a rude move, and he’d pay for it later, but he’d deal with Vaughn’s questioning when the time came.

Reports of corporate assassins fell away around the time Handsome Jack’s face starting appearing on posters. Everyone knew that Jack preferred using his own two hands and an army of loaderbots to take care of problems. And unlike Tassiter, Jack didn’t keep it secret. Hell, he’d filmed bandit camp massacres for use in propagandas.

It’d been one such video that served as Rhys’ first real memory of Handsome Jack. The posters, the daily announcements, the company-wide threats, all of those had served to build Jack’s character but it wasn’t until Rhys saw him in action down on Pandora, killing 20, 30 bandits, armed with nothing but some of Hyperion’s finest weapons, that Rhys felt the first stirrings of hero worship. Handsome Jack was more than just a CEO. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, he could put his money where his mouth was. He could walk the walk.

“You had posters? Really? How many?”

“It wasn’t like—it wasn’t that many. Just the ones they gave us during orientation…”

“Uh huh. And if I go poking around this noggin of yours, I won’t see my face wallpapering your cubicle?”

“I had an office, actually.”

“Oooh, is that where you kept your jack off shrine? Ahahaha, see what I did there? Cause my name…”
“Jack…”

“Look at your face! You’re real cute when you blush, kitten.”

Rhys winced when he realised he’d been thinking about Jack again. He flexed his grip on the wheel and breathed out. His heart pounded in his chest, an old reaction he hadn’t quite managed to purge from his system.

Handsome Jack tried to kill you, Rhys told himself sternly. Whatever you thought he was, he was so much worse.

Tim stirred when the car began to slow. He pushed one hand through his windswept hair, his jaw moving in what Rhys suspected was a yawn.

“We almost there?” he asked.

“Close,” Rhys said.

The sun had sunk to the west, dragging a navy blue shroud across the sky in its wake. Wind picked up handfuls of powdery snow, tossing it across the road in streams. Visibility wasn’t great, but it wasn’t dire.

Tim leaned forward in his seat, resting his chin onto the shredded headrest of the front seat.

“You need me to drive for a while?” he asked.

“I’m alright,” Rhys said.

Behind them, Fiona and the others rattled along in their 4-wheeler. Their car had scorch marks across the sides, bubbling the paint and warping the metal. He hoped the sisters weren’t too attached to their ride, because it would likely end up on a scrap pile sooner rather than later.

“Why’d you lie about your name?” Rhys asked. As Rhys predicted, Tim’s shoulders went stiff.

“Why’d you lie about the monster?” Tim countered.

“Because we’d found it in an old Atlas facility and I don’t want the Raiders getting any ideas about what my Atlas is up to,” Rhys replied.

“But what if there’s more monsters? Wouldn’t it be better to get the Raiders to look after the situation for you?”

Rhys felt annoyed. “No. They’d just make a big mess of things. Besides, if there’s any more monsters, I think we’d have heard about it before now.”

“Not sure I’m following your logic there, stretch,” Tim said easily. “But I know what you’re trying to say. You don’t trust the Raiders.”

“I guess I don’t,” Rhys admitted.

“Me neither,” Tim said.

“Is that why you gave them a fake name?”

Tim tapped his fingers against the cracked leather. “Lilith’s got funny ideas about vault hunters, even though she and her pals used to be ones. It’s no secret she’s unstable. I’d rather stay off her radar, if I
Rhys nodded. That didn’t sound... unreasonable. But it didn’t entirely sound like the truth to Rhys, either.

“What did that captain say to you, anyway?” Tim asked.

Rhys chewed his lip in thought. Five hundred thousand dollars was a lot of money. And as soon as Tim found out Rhys had lied to him about the money he owed him, he’d be in the wind. Rhys needed to keep him close, until he could figure out what he wanted to do with him.

Rhys hadn’t played poker since university, but he’d always been a decent gambler. He took a shot.

“Apparently the Raiders are on the look-out for a masked man.”

Tim’s fingers went still. “Plenty of those on Pandora.”

“Yeah, but it sounds like they’re looking for one who won’t show his face.” Rhys looked at Tim from the sides of his eyes. “She asked me if I’ve seen yours.”

Tim didn’t say anything.

“I told her I had.”


Rhys shrugged. “Figured I owed you. For the whole, you know. Saving my life thing. And,” Rhys went on while Tim stared at him. “I don’t think it’s you they want. I didn’t want to deal with all the trouble of them working that out. It could’ve taken ages, and they might have tried to take you with them. Better to just avoid it, don’t you think? Like you said, there’s plenty of masked men on Pandora.”

Tim said nothing. Rhys took a breath and upped the ante.

“I don’t know what your plans were for after our arrival, but it might be a good idea to lay low for a while. I'm not sure I managed to convince Vermont that you weren’t her guy.”

“Right,” Tim said and gave nothing else. Rhys hated that mask; it would’ve been banned from any poker tournament Rhys’d ever participated in. He got the feeling Tim had just called his bet.

Fine.

“You know, you’re welcome to stay at Atlas. We’ve got actual rooms, with actual beds, and hot running water. And the Raiders leave us alone. And I could use your help,” Rhys risked another glance. He used a look he’d wear back during his Hyperion days, when charming his higher-ups wasn’t always about confidence and smarm, but about his long eyelashes and his bite-stained lips. He made his eyes a little wider than usual and sucked on his lower lip. “You know. If you were interested.”

Tim said nothing for a while, but Rhys forced himself to be patient. The key to a good bluff was to know when to keep your mouth shut. He let himself wear the vulnerable look, though. He didn’t know if it would work on Tim the way it’d worked on his old supervisor, but he had a feeling. Tim might’ve rejected him last night, but Rhys knew he didn’t hallucinate that... moment they’d shared earlier. While the last buzzard rained down around them in pieces, Tim held Rhys close like he didn’t want to let go. And if this look worked...
“Maybe,” Tim said at last, confirming some of Rhys’ suspicions. “Let’s talk when we get there. It’s too cold to think right now.”

Rhys’ smile of relief and triumph was genuine, at least. “Sounds good! You’re gonna love Atlas. I can’t wait to show you what we’ve been working on. Shields, guns, grenades…” He flicked his gaze over Tim’s outfit and thought about the prototypes his tactical gear and wardrobe improvement division had just sent him. “Some real fun toys. And real food. And coffee!”

Tim buried the lower half of his face into his collar and Rhys liked to imagine he was smiling.

“Sounds real nice, boss.”

Rhys heart began to thud in his chest. He realised, with no small amount of shock, that he really did want Tim to like Atlas.

Tim didn’t know what to do. Leaving still sounded like a good idea (after extorting his money, of course), but if Rhys had been telling the truth about Vermont and the Raiders on the hunt for a masked man…

Fuck. Fuck. Had Lilith found out Tim was still alive? If she did, then why wasn’t everyone on the hunt for Jack’s doppelganger, and not a ‘masked man’? Tim snuck another look at Rhys, but the kid had returned his attention to the road. If Vermont had told him they were looking for one of Handsome Jack’s doubles, then he was doing a good job of hiding it. And Rhys honestly didn’t seem that great at lying. (Christ, that look he’d given Tim earlier. Who let someone with that face into Hyperion? How had he not been eaten alive by now?)

Vermont couldn’t have told Rhys about Tim. Maybe Vermont didn’t know herself. If she had, the name he’d given her was spectacularly stupid, in hindsight, but it was the first one that’d come to his mind.

If the Raiders really were looking for him, Tim would need to lay low for a while. Maybe for a long while. Rhys’ offer repeated in his mind, but Tim shook his head. There were plenty of places on Pandora to hide. Getting involved with Atlas—and Rhys and his stupid lip-chewing habit and his inked chest and shoulder and his big eyes—just seemed like inviting more trouble.

“There she is,” Rhys said, breaking into his thoughts.

A dome loomed out of the growing twilight, glowing violet and blue against the pink and gold sunset. Tim could see trees—honest, actual trees—growing densely behind the glass. Their branches reached high, just shy of brushing against the top of the dome.

“Holy shit,” Tim said. Rhys grinned, his eyes sparkling.

“It’s really something, isn’t it? That’s my baby.” The fondness and pride in his voice was so obvious it almost embarrassed Tim.

“Did you grow all those?”

“Hell no. We found it like that. But we’ve kept it alive, and made some improvements. To be honest, most of my work gets done in the underground labs. But I’ll show you when we get there.”

Two armed guards stood in front of the mechanical entrance. They stepped back as the cars pulled to a rolling stop. The taller of the two stepped forward with a barely concealed expression of alarm on her face at the sight of their rides and at their clothes.
Rhys smiled at her like he’d rolled up in a golden limo. She held a device up to his ECHOeye, which flashed green. She smiled.

“Welcome back, sir,” she said.

“Thank you. Anything exciting happen while I was away?” Rhys asked.

“There was a mild containment breach in Lab 12B, and Dr. Emmerich got stuck in the sneaking suit prototype, but both situations are under control. Madam Yvette has requested you speak with her as soon as you arrive.”

Rhys sighed, his winning smile shrinking to something a little more wry. “Figures. Alright, thank you, lieutenant.”

“You’ve got an army?” Tim asked as they were waved inside. Rhys shrugged.

“Private security firm. Maybe thirty people? Most of them are ex-Hyperion, but we’re getting more and more out of the nearby settlements on the southern shelf. Pandorans looking for a good benefits package.” Something about that last comment seemed targeted.

“Benefits, huh,” Tim said.

Rhys threw him a grin over his shoulder. “If you ask nice, I can show you the package sometime.”

What an awful line. Tim buried his heated face into his collar.

The air inside the dome smelled of sweet decay, like the scent of rotting plants and moist earth, and felt cool and damp. The trees’ canopy rustled in the artificial breeze far above, and Tim could help but stare. Fat, waxy leaves waved, their shine catching the ambient glow of mushrooms and crystal growths. Large toadstools grew out of the ground, clustered around the trunks of the trees. No wonder Rhys liked it so much here. The air reminded him of the biodomes found on all the Edens. It felt alive.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Rhys said, entirely too smug for a man who’d just admitted he’d had nothing to do with the biome’s growth.

“Not bad,” Tim said, leaning back in his seat.

They pulled up beside a concrete bunker, where a severe-looking woman with an ECHOpad in her hands and an unimpressed look on her face waited for them. Rhys’ expression slipped at the sight of her.

“Yvette,” he said by way of greeting. “I just heard—“

“That I was looking for you? That I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for a few days now? That I’ve got a giant stack of a to-do list, a line-up of impatient scientists all waiting to get the boss’ sign off, or impending deals just waiting for your signature?” She wrinkled her nose as he slipped from the car, her gaze taking in the remains of his suit and the state of his hair. “Yikes, Rhys. Did you crawl here?”

“I don’t know how much Vaughn told you, but things got a little complicated on the road. And before the road.” Rhys rubbed the back of his neck. “It was rough in general, actually. Things didn’t go as smoothly as I would’ve liked.”
Yvette rolled her eyes and lowered her voice. “Oh, it’ll be fine, Yvette. I can take the time off. It’s only going to be a few days, maximum. Practically a milk-run.”

“Hey, that’s a pretty good impression,” Tim said. Rhys shot him a pout. Yvette’s steel gaze landed on Tim, her lips pulling down at the corners.

“And you are…?”

“This is Tim. Tim, this is Atlas’ COO, Yvette Marshall. She’s ex-Hyperion too.”

“No kidding,” Tim said.

“What happened to your face, Tim?” Yvette asked, squinting at him with obvious suspicion.

“Wait, wait—let me guess.” Fiona strolled up to them, knocking the brim of her hat against the crook of her arm, sending a cloud of dust into the cool air. “Shaving accident? Or, no—medical condition? Hey, Yvette.”

“Fiona, Sasha.” Yvette greeted them with a nod, her posture losing some of its stiffness.

“Anyway, don’t waste your time with this guy. He won’t tell us where his face went,” Fiona said. She cocked her hip and her eyebrow at Tim, and it felt a little more put-on than usual.

Yvette’s frown returned. “He’s staying with us?” she asked Rhys.

“Let’s talk about this inside,” Rhys suggested. He turned to the straggler coming up behind the sisters. Dr. Etna walked between two guards. Her blank gaze gleamed in the glow of crystals. She clutched an ECHOtablet to her chest in a white-knuckled grip.

“Dr. Etna. Is everything alright?” Rhys asked.

“Yes, yes. I had some difficulties earlier, but I’m fine now.” Her voice sounded oddly faint. “It can take me like that sometimes. Trauma. Very delicate. Where’s the laboratory?”

“You brought us another scientist?” Yvette asked, exasperated.

“Yvette, this is Dr. Etna. She worked on Project Epimetheus,” Rhys said. “Dr. Etna, this is Yvette. She’s in charge while I’m gone.”

“I’m practically in charge when you’re here,” Yvette said. They entered the bunker side-by-side, Rhys taking a moment to nod to the armed guards on either side. Tim lingered behind, letting himself fall behind Etna and her escort. Despite her talk of ‘difficulties’, Dr. Etna seemed to have fared alright on their trip, although the fabric of her clothes bore a coating of faded yellow from the desert sand that the ride through the frost hadn’t managed to shake. As though sensing his gaze, Etna turned her head just enough to catch his eye. She didn’t smile. He didn’t expect her to.

But she looked him in the eye. Like she knew where it was.

She looked away and Tim suppressed the urge to check the earwidget. It was working, and he was overreacting. Eyes are nearly always in the same spot on nearly every face. No reason to get excited about it.

A youngish man with a clean face and an ECHOtab hugged to his chest greeted them at the end of the hall.

“Hi there, and welcome to Atlas! And welcome back, Fiona and Sasha.” He smiled at them, big and
bright and artificial. “For those of you who don’t know, my name is Todd and I’m here to—“

“Hey, are you leaving us!” Sasha called after Rhys. He half-turned, already caught up in what looked like an intense conversation with Yvette and two other people with ECHOtabs and annoyed looks on their faces.

“Yeah. Listen, I’ll catch up with you guys later. I’ve got—“ Yvette clucked her tongue and shoved Rhys down the hall.

“He’s busy,” she said, as she and the others ushered him away. Fiona huffed a sigh, crossing her arms with a scowl.

“What a peach,” Tim said.

“She’s under a lot of stress,” Fiona snapped, her cheeks reddening. Tim raised an unseen brow but kept his mouth shut. Todd looked between them both, strain beginning to show around his smile.

“Right. So, as I was saying…” He cleared his throat. “I’m here to show you to your quarters. I’m given to understand—“

“I would like to see my laboratory. I need to investigate the equipment. It’s very important. That young man informed me that I would have Atlas’ finest, but Atlas has been out of business for a long time,” Etna said.

“Ah, technically we were never out of business,” Todd said smoothly as he lead them further down the hall to an elevator. “We were acquired by Hyperion, who shut down all our operations and processing plants and research facilities.”

Ah, yes, Tim remembered too well what Jack did to Atlas. The acquisition had been brutal, even by Jack’s standards. And then Athena chewed her way through whatever was left. Tim’s own involvement with Atlas’ downfall was minor in comparison; he’d destroyed a few of the Crimson Lance’s base camps for Hyperion-distributed propaganda pieces.

“Yes, but my laboratory, I would like to see it,” Etna said.

Tim tuned Todd’s response out as two armed guards fell into step behind them. They were the same guards that’d been posted on the doors, he realised. Their armour looked second-hand, designed for different people. Tim could see the welding marks where the suits had been altered for a better fit. Their guns were old school Atlas, which surprised Tim. He’d always assumed, between Jack and Athena’s wrath, that nothing of Atlas’ weapons output remained. Maybe Rhys’d found a storage container they’d missed. They were holstered, their rifles slung across their backs.

Todd walked and talked, while Etna nattered in the spaces he left between his words. The sisters drifted together, not speaking. If they thought it strange to have Atlas guards on their tail, they didn’t mention it.

The elevator doors parted, revealing a dented but clean chrome interior, brightly lit by artificial lights. It was spacious, probably intended for use as a service elevator or something similar. Everyone piled on without a pause in their steps.

Tim stopped outside the doors, breathing hard.

Todd treated him to a disarming smile. “Everything okay, sir?”

“Fine. I just—I think I’ll take the stairs,” Tim said.
Todd blinked. Fiona scrunched her brows, and Sasha raised hers.

“Well. Of course,” Todd said, recovering quickly. “Corporal Friendly here will escort you to your quarters.”

Corporal Friendly—and Tim wondered if that was her real name—lead him down several flights of stairs, to a brightly lit corridor lined with doors. The hall was empty when they arrived, and Tim assumed Todd had either taken Etna and Donna to their lab, or they’d already come and gone.

Friendly gave him the brief tour, with far less corporate pep than Todd had provided.

“These are the living quarters. You’ll be sharing with the science division and we ask that you keep your talk small and your questions impersonal. Down there’s the mess hall, and to the right is the men’s showers. Any questions?”

Tim licked his dry lips and avoided looking at the walls. “How do I get back to the surface?”

The corporal gave him a distinctly unfriendly look. “You go up the way we just came, but I should warn you that your clearance is at basic level 1.”

“Which means…?”

“Which means that your access to the highly classified laboratory areas that surround this compound is restricted. If you wish to access these areas, you will need to speak with one of Atlas’ guards.”

Tim’s gaze travelled the length between the walls, the ceiling, the floor. His fingers flexed. “I came here with your boss,” he said, voice strained. “We drove through that classified laboratory. I don’t think he’ll mind.”

Friendly wasn’t moved. “Those are the rules. Sir.”

Tim shook his head. Underground, deep underground. No windows to be seen and closed doors in every direction. Sweat beaded on his temple, under his collar.

“Talk to your boss,” he said. “Ask Rhys—“

“The CEO is currently occupied in a meeting. As soon as he’s out—“

Tim disarmed her in two moves, twisted her around, bent her arm backwards and shoved her hard against the wall. He held her there, breathing like he’d just stopped running.

“Listen to me you little fascist,” he hissed. “I’m going to go outside whenever the hell I please and if you or any of those toy soldiers tries to stop me, you’ll be very briefly sorry and then very, very dead.”

She stared at him with pupils like pinpricks, her face gone the colour of turned milk. Her lips flattened together, shapeless and bloodless. She looked at Tim the way he deserved to be looked at in that moment, with a mixture of false bravado and honest fear. This close, Tim could see how young she was.

He jerked away like he’d been burned, dropped her pistol with a clatter. His head swam, his mouth watered, and his throat worked in a swallow. She said something to him but he couldn’t bring himself to hear what words she had for him. He might have told her again to talk to her boss. He might’ve mumbled nonsense.
She left him alone, stomp[ing] off—presumably, to get back-up. Tim knew he was screwed. He could run—he’d probably even make an escape—but he felt tired, limbs heavy. He shouldn’t have done that. He should’ve kept his temper. He should have kept his head. He didn’t even remember making the decision to attack her.

Well. Nothing for it now. He palmed the door release to his room, stepped inside, and slipped his boot between the door and the frame before it could close. The mechanism beeped in distress at the blockage but Tim could deal with a beeping computer more readily than he could deal with a closed door at that moment.

He stumbled into the small attached washroom, stuck his leg out before the door could close, and wretched cookies-n-cream flavoured nutribars and instant coffee into the bowl.

The meeting took forever, as they often do. One would bleed into another, as a clown car of employees unloaded from the open door, each holding an ECHOtab loaded with a fresh list of issues that absolutely couldn’t wait. Rhys recognized most of the people he saw, but he spotted one or two new faces that seemed to hold prestigious positions in Atlas and spoke to him like they’ve known him for years. Pandorans, he assumed. Or maybe ex-Hyperion who really had known him for years. Rhys couldn’t tell. He felt, as he usually did during these sorts of meetings, that he was barely hanging onto an unravelling thread down a deep chasm. He’d always thought that being CEO would mean ultimate control, but Rhys felt like he was constantly playing catch-up.

He slumped behind his desk (a regular desk they’d pulled out of storage—impressive CEO desk still TBA) and ran both hands through his hair.

“Holy god I am so tired,” he said. Yvette hummed without sympathy, flicking a few scheduled items around her ECHOtab.

“So,” she began, setting it down with a click. “When are we going to talk about that finely aged beef you walked in with?” She sighed at Rhys’ blank stare. “That vault hunter? The one without a face? The one who—” Yvette inhaled sharply. “Oh. Um. The one who, according to a ping I received 40 minutes ago but didn’t check until now, apparently issued a death threat to Corporal Friendly.”

“What?”

“It’s fine,” Yvette said, tapping out a speedy response. “There’s another message. Sasha already spoke with Friendly. Sounds like it was a misunderstanding. Or a disagreement. Something about clearance? Anyway, it’s been resolved.”

“That sounds… ominous.”

Yvette chuckled. “This isn’t Hyperion. No one’s dead or injured. Unless you count Friendly’s pride, I bet.”

Rhys let his head sink into his palms. He groaned.

“What exactly have you dragged home with you this time, Rhys?”

“I don’t know. He’s a vault hunter. He doesn’t have a face. His name is Tim. Now you know everything I know,” Rhys said, rubbing his temples.

“I doubt that. So, what’s the story? He a really good kisser?”

Rhys sputtered. Yvette sighed, like he’d disappointed her.
“Please. Like I don’t know your type,” she said.

“For your information, we haven’t kissed,” he said, face glowing.

“Oh, that is good information. Thank you for sharing that information with your chief operating officer. Maybe the next item on our agenda can be braiding each other’s hair.”

“You asked!”

“I was being sarcastic, Rhys.” She sighed again, and this time there was a definite undercurrent of pity in the sound. “Although you should consider sending Vaughn a thank you basket. No, what I’d like to know is why did you bring him back here?”

“He… he helped us out on the road,” Rhys said. Yvette waited, her arms crossed. “And maybe I promised him some money I can’t actually, uh, deliver on.”

“Oh, you’re kidding me,” Yvette said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Don’t worry though, I’ve got a plan,” Rhys said quickly.

“I hope so. Because this guy’s already proven himself to be unstable. You better have something to stay on his good side.”

Rhys honestly hadn’t worried about that. It hadn’t occurred to him that he could get on Tim’s bad side.

“It’ll be fine,” he said. “Forget about Tim. Tell me about Epimetheus.”

Yvette didn’t look like she agreed to the change of subject, but to Rhys’ surprise she didn’t push the issue. She picked up her ECHOtab and flicked the projected schematics onto the far wall.

“We’ve managed to piece together the original device from what we’ve recovered from Hyperion’s old files. It’s enough to start with, but there’s still some blanks we need filled in. Mostly the AI. The prototype’s already been built in the control core, although we haven’t managed a successful test yet. Digging into the eridium vein under the crust took a lot longer than planned, putting us a bit behind schedule. Hopefully with the head scientist here, we’ll be able to catch up. It’s all looking pretty promising.” Yvette gave him a sidelong look. “But it cost us a lot of money.”

“Don’t worry about the money.” Rhys leaned forward in his seat, his ECHOeye flaring to life. The specs looked good, although Yvette was right—there were holes in it big enough to drive through.

“Holy—what’s that number?” Rhys asked.

“That’s the eridium we’ve been using,” Yvette said without looking up from her tablet.

One of the engineers had talked about the eridium cost of the device, citing a number Rhys had thought was a humorous exaggeration. Now it stared him in the face and it didn’t seem funny at all. He rubbed at his forehead, leaning back in his (standard, generic) chair with a wince (expensive-ass lumbar supportive CEO chair also TBA).

“You still don’t want to worry about the money?” Yvette asked.

“Yeah,” Rhys said with a little less conviction. He closed his eyes. “Money is a secondary concern.”

“Hm. Never thought I’d hear you say that.”
“Aw, come on.” Rhys spun in his chair to face Yvette. “I’m not that greedy. Besides, Epimetheus is more important than money and eridium.”

“It’ll be hard to get Epimetheus without both, though,” Yvette said. “Our eridium consumption is already through the roof and we still need more.”

“How much more?”

“You don’t want to know,” she said.

He looked at the blueprints again. The flickered to a new page as he watched, displaying lines of code he could almost recognize. Some of it was his own, the stuff he’d worked on before he’d gone off to get shot at and captured. A lot of it looked new. He leaned forward, flicking through the display with his cybernetic arm.

“Still got a lot of work ahead of us,” he said.

“Projections look fine, for now,” Yvette confirmed. “But this thing’s already turning into a bit of a monster.”

“It’s what Epimetheus needs,” Rhys said absently. He flicked through to new pages, dismissing the code to display the next stage of schematics. Blueprints for an Eridium-infused device, and a map of Pandora’s mineral veins. A lot of Hyperion’s old mining facilities had already taken a huge chunk out of the planet’s stores, but Pandora was practically stuffed with eridium. Their Atlas facility was close to a rich vein, but the amount of digging they had to do...

Rhys sighed and sat back, rubbing at the ache stabbing behind his eye. He made a note to get the ECHO implant looked at when things settled down. It’d been sore since the Splatterdome.

Hang on…

“I’ve got a new job for our surveyors,” Rhys said, flexing his metal fingers. A screen appeared above his palm, displaying a map of Crisis Ridge and the plains. “The old Atlas factory, the one we’d just come from. I want to know what the hell they were doing out there.” The monster appeared on the screen, drawn in blue and white lines.

Yvette’s manicured brow raised at the sight. “What the hell is that?”

“Not sure, but it’s dead now. The Raiders killed it out in the Dusts. Not sure if they left the corpse, but I wouldn’t bet on it. We found it at the factory.” Rhys rubbed his temple again, wincing. “I think it was Atlas. I want a surveyor and recovery team dispatched out there and I want them to recover whatever they can from the servers—“ Rhys broke off, his breath hitching at the sudden, blinding stab of pain behind his eyes. Yvette called out his name, but Rhys held up his flesh hand.

“It’s fine,” he said. “Just… a bit of a headache.” The pain was already receding, pulling back like the tide and Rhys could breathe easy again. He blinked the stars out of his eyes, relaxing back into his seat.

Yvette watched him, looking concerned and frustrated. “What did you do?” she said.

Rhys flushed. “Nothing. I’ve entered the job order. I’ll get Finch to put together a team tomorrow.” He paged through the company’s intranet, scrolling past bulletins, until he found his high level access. Alerts and messages appeared on screen. Rhys made a soft noise at one flashing on his display. “I see Dr. Etna’s gotten situated in the labs.”
“That didn’t take long,” Yvette said.

“No it didn’t.” Another message nudged the first out of the way. Rhys frowned. “Oh. She’s already requesting more eridium.”

Yvette sighed, slumping down in her seat. “Great. Of course she did. What are we supposed to do, Rhys? We’ve already stretched ourselves thin getting the eridium we’ve got. We’re not exactly equipped to go deep diving for whatever’s left on this planet.”

“We’ll figure it out. Hyperion practically aerated this planet mining for Eridium and I know Handsome Jack couldn’t have bled the place dry before he died.” Rhys smiled. “There’s still gold in them hills.”

Still, Rhys could acknowledge to himself as he made his way back to his quarters, that while money was a secondary concern, it was a pretty close second. He chewed on his nails, nodding absently to whatever employee he passed in the halls, and tried not to think of Atlas’ dwindling funds. The programs he’d developed were earners, he reminded himself. They would make the company millions. But all that would look like chump change to what Epimetheus would get them, once they got it up and running.

He spat out a loose nail. If only the ‘getting up and running’ didn’t consume so many resources.

There was a fine layer of dust over everything in his room but Rhys didn’t care. He collapsed face first on his bed with a groan.

He lay still, his mind wandering. His thoughts found their way back to Tim, and to the money he owed him, and back to the five hundred thousand dollars.

And to death threats. Rhys frowned into his pillow and before he could think better of it, he activated his ECHO and dialled to Tim’s frequency.

It took a while to pick up.

“Rhys?”

“Hey, is everything okay? I just got a report from one my guard supervisors about what happened.”

Silence.

“Tim?”

“Yeah. Uh. Sorry about... all that. I’m gonna find Friendly tomorrow and give her a proper apology. And maybe let her take a swing at me.”

“What happened?” Rhys asked.

Tim didn’t reply for a while. Rhys was about to check his connection when he heard the other man sigh.

“...underground,” came the muttered response.

Rhys’ brows furrowed. “Uh, come again?”

Another sigh, louder this time. “Being underground. I don’t... like it.”
“So you… threatened to kill one of my employees?” Rhys accessed the security footage and scrolled through the past hour.

Tim made a frustrated sound. “I didn’t—I asked her if I could go topside and she gave me some shit about clearance and I just. I lost my temper and overreacted.”

Rhys found the incident. He let out a low whistle.

“Boy, you must really hate being cooped up.”

“I really do.”

An alarm flickered in Rhys’ display. He frowned. “What’s wrong with your door? Is that—is something jammed in it?”

“Oh. Uh. Yeah. That’s my boot.”

Rhys ran a hand across his face. “Uh huh. So you attacked one of my employees and then damaged one of my doors?” At this rate, Tim would owe Rhys money.

“...really, really don’t like being cooped up.”

Rhys buried his face into his pillow, stifling a laugh. He flicked over to the guest file his admin assistant made up for Tim and flicked his clearance to a higher level. Without giving it much thought, he also switched off the alarm.

“Consider yourself cleared for outdoor travel,” Rhys said.

“Oh. Uh, thanks.”

“Just try not to attack any more of my people, okay? Or break anything else.”

Tim laughed, but his voice shook. Rhys frowned.

“I’ll try not to, boss.”

Rhys expected the call to end there, but the line remained open. He could hear Tim breathing on the other end. Something strange, almost fond, stirred in Rhys’ chest at the sound. He felt compelled to speak, but he struggled to think of what to say.

“You lied to me,” Tim said, startling Rhys.

Rhys swallowed, and schooled his features before remembering that Tim couldn’t see him. “Uh?”

“About the monsters. You said I wouldn’t have to fight an alien monster at the end of this quest, but I’ve fought one twice now.”

“That’s—!” Rhys sputtered. “You fought it once. The Raiders took care of it for us the second time.”

“Still.”

“And I did not lie to you—I said there’d be no monsters at the end of this. Do you think we’re at the finish line yet?”

“Aren’t we?” Tim sounded amused. Rhys’ heart clenched.
“No!” he explained emphatically. “Because Epimetheus isn’t up and running yet.”

Tim hummed over the line. “Pretty sure the terms of my agreement only specified that I had to help you rescue the doc. I did that. Ipso facto…”

“Then maybe we should draw up a new agreement. After all, three thousand dollars is a lot of money. I’d like to feel like I’m getting my money’s worth here.”

“Oh really.” The amusement dropped from Tim’s voice like a body over the gallows. Rhys rubbed at the headache developing behind his brows.

“Not that you haven’t been great so far, but…” Rhys chewed at his nails. He was too tired to play this game properly, he could tell, but he had Tim on the line—ha, literally—and he didn’t want to see him slip loose.

“But not worth the money you promised me,” Tim said. Rhys winced.

“Look, you’ve stayed already, haven’t you? You didn’t run away at the first chance you got. You know what that tells me?” Tim didn’t reply, and Rhys ploughed ahead. “It tells me that you’re more interested in what we’re doing here than you’d like to admit.”

“I stuck around because you promised me hot running water.”

“And I delivered on that,” Rhys said. “I can deliver on a lot of things. Safety, for example, from nosy private militia with more buzzards than brains.”

“You’d take on the Raiders for me, would you?”

“I wouldn’t have to. They don’t bother us out here. Seriously, Tim. You should consider sticking around,” Rhys said. He heard Tim’s exhale on the other end. It could’ve been a laugh.

“This is a very aggressive job pitch,” he said. Rhys smiled.

“This is nothing. You should see me get aggressive.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh, definitely. It gets scary. People run.” Rhys rolled onto his side, stretching out his long legs with a yawn. “Sometimes they faint.”

Tim’s laugh sounded soft, like something Rhys could fall asleep listening to.

“I bet,” Tim said. He went quiet. Rhys’ eyes began to drift closed, his mind lulled by the sound of his breathing. “Why do you want me to stay so bad?”

“Maybe I like hearing you call me ‘boss’,” Rhys mumbled.

Tim laughed again, loud enough to startle Rhys from his doze. Rhys grinned, uncertain if he was being laughed at or with. Maybe it didn’t matter.

“Alright, alright. I’ll think about it, okay?”

“You’re staying,” Rhys said, confident and simple. “We’ve got so many guns you can try.”

“We’ll see. Goodnight, Rhys.”
Rhys yawned again, feeling warm and content. “‘Night, Tim.”

Tomorrow, Rhys decided with an exhausted sigh. He’d deal with it all tomorrow.

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THEN

They found Tim on the outskirts of the wreckage, the burning pile of scrap and bodies that used to be a bandit camp. The Hyperion-issued personnel retriever hovered above the ground, kicking up the dry earth and bending the grass under its wind. Two Hyperion soldiers rappelled down, took Tim, and ascended. They sat Tim on the bench, their helmeted heads turned towards him, like they had something to say. But neither spoke.

Tim ignored them, left the headphones they tried to give him around his neck, and reached for the medkit. Three syringes hissed their release before he began to feel better. It was the most he’d ever used in one sitting, and the combination of their fast-healing regenerative properties, the adrenaline still draining from his system, and the absolute lack of anything resembling food in his stomach, hit him like a tidal wave. His head swam, his vision strobed, and his hands shook. The last Anshin fell from his fingers with a clatter that was lost over the sound of the engine. He let his head fall back, let his eyes close, and his thoughts drift.

He really thought killing someone for the first time would feel different. He’d been preparing for it all week, since Jack told him about the little bandit camp giving the Hyperion Research Facility a hard time.

“Not a big enough deal for corporate to send real troops for, but big enough that it’s causing them grief. I volunteered us to take care of it. It’s the perfect mission to cut your teeth on, Timtam.”

Tim told Jack he was ready, but he would have said anything. The last six months had been punishing, lonely. Tim didn’t realise how much he missed the smell of natural atmosphere until his boots hit the ground.

Jack still visited every day, but his attention was split and he often didn’t stay long. After the ill-fated one night stand, Tim had resigned himself to being Jack, to being Jack’s. He let go of himself, and it got easier. But the thing inside of him didn’t wither away, no matter how much he tried to keep it in the dark. Instead it grew. It sat behind his ribs like a beast in a cage and every day, it seemed, it found something new to destroy. Tim couldn’t pretend this was infatuation anymore. This was love, and it was going to kill him.

The carrier sealed itself, the pressure normalizing as they raised high above the planet. The cabin shook violently as they broke atmo, but Tim barely noticed. He felt weightless already.

First mission complete.

They docked on Eos without incident. Tim did as Jack told him to before he left and headed straight to his office. He didn’t see any people on the way, which was a relief. He didn’t think he could muster the energy to be Jack. He could barely hold it together as Tim.

The retinal scanner beeped, flashed green all over his face, and the doors slid open with a hiss. Jack stood as he entered, pushing away from that polished monstrosity of a desk. His hair looked like it’d been pushed out of its style, like someone had put their hands through it. Tim dully wondered if Jack’d had a visitor before Tim’s return.

Tim put one foot in front of the other until he was standing in front of Jack’s shiny desk. He could see Jack’s ECHOtab, the display a grainy image of a smouldering ruin. The bandit camp, he realised.
“Were you watching?” Tim asked.

“Of course.” Jack’s eyes were gleaming and wide. “After all that time and money I poured into you, you think I wasn’t gonna watch the magic? And boy, am I glad I did.” Jack chuckled. “That part where you kicked that pipe bomb back over their cover? Beautiful. Come on, precious, come over here before you fall over.” Jack beckoned him close and Tim, bewildered, did as he was told.

Jack guided him into his chair (a yellow-gold wing-back, perfectly garish and very Jack). Tim sat with a sigh, his shoulders slumping. Jack ran his hand through Tim’s hair, pushing it out of his face.

“How many Anshins did you take?” he asked.

“Three.”

“Do you want any more?”

Tim shook his head.

“Do you want something to eat?”

Tim nodded. Jack opened his desk drawer and produced a wrapped protein bar, the same ones Tim had been eating every day for the last four months to build muscle. He chewed mechanically, the taste as bland as ever. Jack sat on the lip of the desk, barely inches away from Tim, and resumed his ministrations. He poked and prodded at Tim, pushing at the ripped holes in Tim’s clothes to examine the tender skin beneath.

Tim hissed as Jack pressed against a still-healing burn on his abdomen.

“Easy, kitten,” Jack said. His fingers found their way under Tim’s—Jack’s—yellow Hyperion sweater, moving over each rib with slow care.

The thing growing inside Tim gave a painful throb.

“I saw you take the hit—right here.” He pushed between his ribs, just under Tim’s right pectoral. Tim shifted in his seat, grumbling. “I thought you were a goner.”

So did Tim. Shrapnel from an ill-timed explosion ripped a gash wide across his chest. The yellow sweater was still black and tacky with dried blood. Jack made a noise of impatience, and tugged at the hem. Tim lifted his arms obediently, and Jack tossed the sweater away. It landed on the floor with a wet slap.

Satisfied, Jack returned to his ministrations, eyeing Tim’s chest with a proprietary air.

“But you surprised me.” Jack’s voice was gentle, more gentle than his hands. “Did it feel good?”

“Getting ripped open? Not really.” Tim sounded more tired than annoyed. He didn’t entirely enjoy being half naked under Jack’s scrutiny, but he didn’t feel like making a big deal of it either.

“No, no. Obviously that sucked. I meant, after. You fought like a demon down there,” he said. “You killed a l-o-o-o-t of people, pumpkin. How’d it feel?”

Tim’s chewing slowed. He swallowed the last mouthful and frowned down at the dried blood on his chest.

“I don’t know,” he admitted at last. “It didn’t feel bad.”
Jack looked up at him, his hands stilling against his chest. He watched Tim like he was looking for something. Tim didn’t know what to do, what Jack wanted to see, so he did nothing. He stared back.

Jack smiled. “See, this is why I knew you were the perfect candidate for this job. Any idiot can learn how to shoot, and how to fight, given enough time and patience. But you already know what most people lie to themselves about.” Jack cupped Tim’s face, rubbing his thumb across the specks of someone else’s blood under his eye. “Killing ain’t hard. Not really.”

Tim thought back to the digistructs in the basement, person-shaped polygons that exploded into blue pixels when shot. Tim had gotten so good at fighting for his life, so used to their threats, that when he dropped into the middle of that camp it felt almost familiar. He kept waiting for it to feel real. He didn’t even see the first man he killed; he’d been too busy.

“Everyone just looked like a target to me,” Tim admitted at last. “I kept waiting for it to sink in, that I’ve killed someone, that I’ve done something terrible, but…”

Jack’s smile widened. “You’re a killer, precious. I knew it from the moment I laid eyes on you. It’s what makes you special.”

Something inside Tim stirred at Jack’s words.

“Thanks,” Tim managed.

“I mean, we’ve still got some finessing to do, but I’m really pleased with your performance. I’m really proud of you, kiddo.”

Tim was absolutely turning red. He made a half-hearted effort to pull away, which Jack ignored.

“You know what I like to do, after killing a whole lot of people? You know what feels really good?”

Tim couldn’t bring himself to look Jack in the eyes. “I was thinking a bath, maybe,” he mumbled. Jack pinched the back of his neck.

“No, kitten. I’m talking about getting laid.”

Tim’s stomach dropped at the thought of another random hook-up. He jerked his head away from Jack’s grasp.

“I’m not in the mood,” he said.

Jack quirked a brow. “No?”

“No,” Tim said.

Jack was dangerous. It was easy to forget.

He hauled Tim up from the chair and before Tim could even formulate a plan to defend himself, Jack had him flat on his back, bent backwards over his desk. Tim’s eyes widened. Jack pinned Tim’s hands above his head and leaned over him, with a decidedly wolfish grin.

“No? Not in the mood, Timmy?” Jack was inches from Tim, his shirt rasping against Tim’s bare
“Not at all?” He slipped his leg between Tim’s thighs, rubbing against his half-hard length. “Is that why you’ve been like this—?” He pushed against Tim’s crotch, firm enough to be painful. Tim squirmed and tried to hate it. “—since I took your shirt off? You sure you’re not in the mood, kitten?”

Tim wanted to deny it. He wanted to tell Jack to go to hell, push him off. But he was hard and Jack was so close. He wanted to rut against his leg like a damn dog, anything, anything to relieve the pressure that he’d been building up over the last half-year. He waited for Jack to pull away, leave Tim desperate and wanting, as he always did.

Instead, Jack moved closer, until his lips were against Tim’s ear. “Answer me, pumpkin.”

“Jack.” Tim’s voice cracked the way it used to. “Jack, please.”

Jack pulled away and Tim nearly sobbed. Before he could pull a gun out and do something drastic, Jack grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him upright.

Jack kissed him. Tim’s mind shorted out.

Jack kissed the way he did everything else: with single-minded focus, and more than a little aggression. He wanted the lead, and Tim was happy to give it to him. One hand held Tim firmly by the back of his neck, keeping him where Jack wanted him. The other moved around Tim’s waist, slipping under the waistband of his tight jeans to toy with the elastic waist of his briefs.

When Jack broke away at last, Tim was panting. He held Jack like he thought he might try to run away, wrapping his legs around his waist as Jack nosed his neck. He trailed kisses from his shoulder to his ear.

Jack touched him as he pleased, running his hands over freshly healed skin like he was taking stock. He raked his hands down Tim’s chest, nails catching his nipple. He chuckled when Tim gasped and arched into the touch.

“Little sensitive, huh?” Jack pinched the nub between thumb and forefinger. “And maybe a little into pain?” He sunk his teeth into the crook of Tim’s neck, hard enough to hurt without breaking skin.

Oh, Jesus Christ. Jack really did want to kill him.

“’m gonna make you all mine, Timmy. Fuck, I can’t tell you how long I’ve wanted to do this.” He sucked at the sensitive flesh under Tim’s ear, sending a shiver down Tim’s spine. “You looked so good out there. I could eat you alive, you looked so good.”

His teeth in Tim’s neck felt like a promise. Tim made a sound he wasn’t proud of. He tugged Jack close, until they pressed against each other and Tim was free to grind against Jack’s crotch. Even trapped under too many layers, it felt good. Jack cursed into the crook of Tim’s neck. He could feel his breath coming fast and hot against his abused skin.

“Fuck it.” Jack flipped him over, pushing him down against the desk. Tim was ready this time; he didn’t fight when he felt hands at his waist, unbuttoning his fly, tugging down his jeans.

“I was gonna do this properly, you know? Give you a little of that romance I know you like. But I just—” Jack broke off with a strained chuckle. He grabbed Tim’s ass with both hands, kneading the firm flesh. “Fuck. I can’t wait anymore.”

Tim didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what to do. He’d been with people before, but he was hardly experienced and he’d never been with anyone like Jack.
He heard the sound of a drawer opening, heard Jack fumbling with the contents. Heard the familiar click of a cap.

Tim felt like a live wire. He felt wound up, taut and ready to shatter. Jack tugged his jeans the rest of the way off, kicking them aside. Tim knew what came next, but the press of a finger against his opening still made him jump.

Jack shushed him, running his other hand down Tim’s flank like he was calming a startled beast.

“Breathe, Timmy.”

Jack had big hands. Tim had gotten to know this little fact very intimately during lonely nights over the last few months, after he’d gotten over his initial shyness in his new body. Lonely nights that got a little less lonely when Tim closed his eyes and played pretend.

He didn’t have to pretend now. Jack worked him open and, despite his earlier claims against romance, he did it more slowly than Tim anticipated.

Too slow, in Tim’s opinion. He pushed his hips back, trying to get Jack in deeper, to hurry up, but Jack grabbed his hip with his other hand and held him firm.

“Well, now. Here’s something interesting, kitten.” Tim tensed, panting. When Jack sounded soft like that, he knew it promised trouble. “It seems to me like you’ve maybe done this before.” He crooked his finger, brushing against the bundle of nerves inside Tim. Tim made a sound between a squeak and a gasp.

“Want to comment on this little fact?”

Tim opened his mouth to respond but all he managed was another groan when Jack pressed against that spot, more firmly this time.

As if to prove a point, Jack worked a second lube-slicked finger inside. Tim arched back to meet him, but Jack’s hand on his hip held him down.

“Easy,” he growled. He pulled his fingers out and pushed back in one easy motion. He fucked Tim with an easy patience, his fingers brushing against the same spot, teasing at toe-curling pleasure without delivering. Tim whimpered.

“Please, Jack,” he tried. “Please, I need—” He broke off with a cry as Jack pressed both fingers hard against him.

“I need answers. You told me you haven’t been out since that night—”

“I h-haven’t,” Tim said.

“But evidence—” Jack scissored his fingers with an obscene sound. “—would suggest otherwise.”

“I haven’t, I h-haven’t, please, Jack, please—” Tim clawed at the desk as Jack hit his prostate again. He tried to reach for his cock, trapped and leaking between himself and the desk, but Jack’s warning growl stilled his hand.

“Just—just myself, Jack,” Tim admitted at last, humiliation creeping through his words. Jack went still. Tim whined and tried to push back, desperate for movement despite his growing mortification.

Jack wasn’t having it. “Yourself? You—” He broke off with a laugh. “Oh, now that is interesting.”
He pushed in a third finger and Tim breathed hard to accommodate. “Tell me, Timmy, do you just use your fingers or do you have a special toy?”

Tim groaned as Jack established a new pace, quick and punishing. He felt full, but it wasn’t enough.

“B-both,” he said. “Please, please, Jack—”

Jack laughed again. He dropped a kiss on the back of Tim’s shoulder.

“Ohhh, that is good to know. Do you think about me, precious?” He punctuated the question with a rough thrust that made Tim’s back arch.

“Y-yes,” Tim said.

“Of course you do. I might need a demonstration. Some other time, though.” Jack pulled out and Tim nearly cried. Jack wiped his fingers off on Tim’s thigh, grabbed his hips, and lined himself up. Tim tensed at the press of the head of Jack’s cock. Jack patted him on his thigh, reassuring.

“Brace yourself, kitten.”

Jack fucked into him with one easy motion. Tim trembled and tried to breathe through it, ready for a brutal pace, but Jack surprised him. He didn’t move immediately. He ran his hand over Tim’s back, his other hand squeezing his hip. Tim could hear him breathing harshly. He looked back and caught Jack’s eye. Jack stared at him like he was starving, and Tim was a banquet spread out on his desk. But he didn’t move. And Tim realised he was waiting.

Tim swallowed, and nodded. “Okay,” he said.

Jack grinned at him. He grabbed Tim by the hips and gave a shallow thrust. Tim felt a spark of pleasure and he realised that this was actually happening. His cock twitched at the thought.

“You look too good like this, pumpkin,” Jack said, picking up his pace. “I’m not going to hold back. I don’t think I can. Fuck—” An off-rhythm thrust rubbed a spot inside Tim that had him arching off the desk. Jack wrapped his arm around Tim’s shoulders, and pulled him close, bending him like a bow.

He sucked and bit at Tim’s neck, peppering the skin with bruises Tim knew would be hard to hide. He couldn’t bring himself to care, not with Jack’s cock inside him, stretching him, filling him. He reached out behind him, grasping Jack’s hip, wordlessly trying to urge him on.

“I can’t tell you how often I’ve thought about this.” Jack dragged his fingers across Tim’s chest, catching his nipples with the blunt of his nails. Tim jumped at the sensation and he could feel Jack’s grin against his neck. “About you, like this, bent over my desk and squirming on my dick. You’re so desperate for it, aren’t you, baby?”

“Y-yes, yes— Ah, please, please, Jack—” Tim panted.

“You ask so nice.” Jack toyed with his nipples, rolling the flesh between his thumb and forefinger. Tim’s grip tightened, digging into Jack’s thigh. He had no leverage like this, no way to meet Jack’s thrusts. He could only take what he was given and the thought of it was so hot, Tim felt light-headed with it.

“I wonder if I can make you cum just from this?”
Probably, Tim thought even as Jack skinned his hand down his stomach, following the trail of dark hair from his navel down. He brushed his thumb across the curls of hair, dipped his fingers in the crease of his thigh, wrapping his hand around the base of his dick.

This was too much. Jack’s pace was relentless, harder than anything Tim could have managed on his own. Tim felt elemental, electric under his skin, hot enough to burn. Jack wouldn’t let him go. Jack would never leave him alone now, he knew. Tim struggled to keep his wits about him, even as every other thrust rubbed against his prostate. He wanted to remember this. He wanted to keep this with him—Jack pressed against his back, lips and teeth and his neck, arm holding him tight, cock buried up to the hilt inside of him—until he died. Tim was so close he could scream. It was only Jack’s hand around the base of Tim’s cock that kept him from coming all over himself like a teenager.

But it was too much, too good. Tim’s fingers dug into Jack’s thigh.

“Jack.” Tim’s voice cracked.

Jack growled. He pulled out, and before Tim could even make a sound, he flipped him over onto his back, grabbed his hips and thrust back inside in one stroke. Tim shouted and if he were in his right mind, he might worry about others hearing. Jack grabbed his leg and placed it over his shoulder. He leaned forward, bracing himself on either side of Tim’s head.

“I know what it’s like,” Jack said between kisses, his breath like a furnace. “Just after a fight like that. You’re all keyed up. All that adrenaline. All that aggression—” He snapped his hips and Tim groaned. “You just need an outlet, right? A good—” Thrust. “Hard—” Thrust. “Fuck.” The desk jumped under them, but Jack held him tight.

Tim could feel his release building up inside of him again. His abdomen muscles tightened, sparks lit up behind his eyes, and something molten pooled in his stomach, lapping over him in waves. He shut his eyes and tried to last a little longer.

Jack nuzzled the soft skin where the hinge of his jaw connected to his neck and bit.

“Look at me.”

Tim opened his eyes to find Jack watching him, his face, intently and it was enough to send Tim over the edge. He came with a groan, Jack’s name on his lips, tightening around Jack’s cock. Jack cursed, his thrusts becoming wild. He came moments later, shaking.

He gave a few more shallow thrusts, milking the last of his orgasm, before stilling. Tim’s legs finally gave out, falling limp over Jack’s desk.

Jack didn’t pull out and Tim was happy to keep him there. If he had the strength, he’d wrap his legs around his waist. He wanted to hang onto this for just a little longer. Jack looked a mess, flushed all over, his hair falling out of its style, his eyes still holding a wild gleam and Tim felt pride bloom in his chest, that he could have done this to Jack.

When Jack finally pulled out, Tim bit back a whine. Jack laughed softly.

“This is a good look for you.” He pulled his pants back up, the buckle jingling. “Well-fucked and absolutely wrecked. Was I too much for you, kitten?”

Tim laughed, a little breathlessly. “Asshole.”

He pulled himself onto his side with a groan, his body aching all over. He stood up on shaking legs, catching his balance on Jack’s desk. He wondered what the cleaning staff would make of this. If he
could think of anything beyond the bone deep satisfaction that came after an incredible orgasm, he might pity them.

“Stop admiring our handiwork and go get yourself cleaned up.” Jack punctuated his command with a smack on Tim’s ass. Tim yelped. “I’ll meet you in your room for round two in a little bit. I’ve got some stuff to finish up. Oh, and uh—” He hooked his arm around Tim’s waist, pulling Tim close and slipping his fingers back inside with ease. Tim shuddered as Jack worked him open. “Try to think of me when you’re in the shower. Okay, pumpkin?”

Tim nodded, struggling to keep himself upright.

Jesus Christ. Jack really was trying to kill him.

Chapter End Notes

That's the end of part deux. Thanks, as always, for reading and leaving comments and kudos. Also, as always, please let me know if you've spotted any typos, repetition, or anything that seems like I might've missed it during the proofread. I appreciate it.

Next chapter: Tim sticks around. Rhys takes Tim out on a date. Jack teaches Tim about the measure of success.
Part III: Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Tim and Rhys get to know each other. Tim gets to know the real Jack.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to Part III. This is the chapter where all those warnings in the tags come into play. It's a downer, which is exactly what the world needs more of right now. :|

cw for verbal, emotional, and physical abuse between 'romantic' partners.

Tim did find Friendly the next morning, in the mess hall. She sat amongst a small group of similarly tough-looking, battled-scarred people (kids). They watched Tim with wary expressions that suggested to him that Friendly had told them all about what happened last night. A small part of Tim—the perpetually greasy-faced, sixteen year old part—quailed under their glares, wanted to turn tail and run. The rest of Tim marched up without pause, like a man prepared to take his lumps.

“Hey,” he said. She glared at him without replying. Fair enough, he supposed. “I want to apologise to you for what I did last night. You didn’t deserve that. I also want to offer you a chance to hit me. We can do that here, or outside. Your choice.”

Her expression shifted. She looked around at her friends, pursed her lips, and said, “Outside.”

“I reported you, you know,” she said as they ambled from the hall. “I was gonna get the others and we were gonna beat your ass, but your pal with the dreads talked me out of it. You should thank her.”

“I will,” Tim said. He didn’t miss the change in her language—last night she’d been stiff and professional. Now she talked to him like they were heading out back to trade smokes and bitch about their biology teacher. She waved her security pass in front of a reader, her lips twitching with a wince at the movement.

“Did I hurt you last night?” Tim asked.

“No,” she said, all bravado. Tim let it go. “What’d you freak out so bad for, anyway?” she asked.

He hesitated. They were alone now, in a stretch of hallway lined with closed doors. Tim’s stomach clenched a little, but it wasn’t as bad as last night. He owed her some measure of truth, even if he couldn’t tell her everything.

“I was a prisoner in a place like this for a long time,” he said.

“How long?” she asked.
“About five years.”

She whistled. “At one of those Hyperion Friendship Gulags or something?”


Friendly eyed him before dropping to a fighter’s stance (not bad). She drew back her right arm and swung hard, fist connecting with his chin. It knocked him back, sent a spike of pain up his face and into his mouth. It was an amateurish move, going right for the face. With any luck, she didn’t break any of her fingers. Friendly cradled her hand and tried to look as if she wasn’t in pain.

“Alright,” she said with a decisive nod. “Apology accepted.”

Tim flexed his jaw and made a note to speak to Rhys about the training he gave his soldiers.

“By the way, your clearance has gone up. You’re free to wander outside, if you’d like.” She left, presumably to find an Anshin. Tim considered finding one himself, but they weren’t cheap and he’d been overdoing it lately. Too much of that stuff could fuck up your body’s natural healing process, and his was already pretty bad. Anyway, he’d dealt with worse pains.

He went topside. The surface under the dome was just as beautiful as he remembered it. The blue sky appeared distorted beyond the barrier, and the light that filtered through the treated glass seemed almost golden. After the artificial smelling and heavily cooled air from underground, the air outside felt wonderfully warm. Tim shrugged off his jacket and started walking.

He spotted a few scientists here and there, often accompanied by a guard. Otherwise, Tim found himself finally alone. He wandered, stopping occasionally to examine a particularly strange looking plant. He wondered what this place was meant for—terraforming Pandora was a fool’s errand, a waste of money and resources for a planet that was meant to be mined and abandoned. Maybe Atlas just wanted to see if they could? He’d have to ask Rhys later.

He found an old observation tower, half-overgrown and hidden in the thick trees. Violet vines twisted around the base, and inside the broken windows, winding around and through the frame like fingers prying a mouth wide. The sight of it made Tim feel a little queasy, but he made his way up anyway.

Inside, the tower was a mess. The computers were dead, covered with a thick layer of dust and dirt. Dried leaves and pieces of safety glass crunched under Tim’s boots with each step he took. The vines thinned out inside, trailing off like incomplete sentences before they could reach the full-stop. Light shone in from the shattered window, splashing golden-yellow across the floor. It was quiet, save for the whisper of leaves moving in an artificial breeze. Tim breathed in deep the smell of abandoned buildings and rich earth. He hadn’t slept well last night. He rubbed the back of his neck and tried to think of the last time he’d slept well at all. At least nine years ago, he decided.

Tim nudged most of the dirt and debris aside, spread his jacket out on the floor, and lay down. It wasn’t comfortable, but the sun felt good on his face and it wouldn’t hurt to just close his eyes for a minute or two…

Thinking about Tim wasn’t helpful. It didn’t make Rhys feel very good. It made him feel like he’d swallowed a bird, like his heart wasn’t keeping the proper rhythm. He became aware of himself and his body in a way he didn’t really care for when he thought about Tim (and Tim’s body). It wasn’t productive and it would have to stop for a while. And Rhys could stop. Infatuation was nice, but it
was child’s play and Rhys was a grown man. He wasn’t going to think about his crush, or about his
crush’s freckles, or the grey hair in his temples, or how nice he sounded when he laughed.

Rhys focused on his work instead and the day passed in a blur. He might have eaten something,
although he couldn’t remember what or when. He could remember another databurst, fresh off the
computers of his 35 or so scientific researchers, and the 15 new meeting requests (all flagged as
urgent), and the little coloured blocks on his schedule filling up before his eyes with new obligations.
Yvette crisply informing him that she was his COO not his PA and if he wanted someone to field his
requests and work his schedule, he could damn well hire someone.

Rhys thought about Tim. He then told himself to stop thinking about Tim.

Because of all that, it was well after lunch by the time Rhys found his way down to Lab B12, where
Etna and her newly appointed team had set up. Dr. Peel, the former head of the project, met Rhys at
the door. She wore a pinched look on her face.

“Have you seen my messages?” she demanded. Rhys raised his brows. It was true, she had sent
Rhys a few terse messages on Etna’s progress through the day, but Rhys hadn’t even had the time to
look them over.

“It’s been a full day, Dr. Peel. Has anything gone wrong?” he asked.

Peel panted her hands on her hips. Behind her, the lab appeared in disarray.

One component of Epimetheus’ half-completed prototype—the AI terminal—lay in pieces on several
different tables, its guts strung out across the room. The assistants scurried between, some wearing
proper safety equipment and some without. All of them seem preoccupied, almost every one of them
holding onto a piece of machinery. The artefact sat in the centre of the room, elevated above like a
position of honour amongst the chaos. Etna stood beside it, like a conductor in a hurricane.

“This is a travesty, sir,” Peel said. “What she’s doing—”

“Ah, it’s the young man!” Etna waved him over. Rhys gave Peel a reassuring smile and brushed past
her.

“How are things going down here?” Rhys asked.

“Fine, fine. I’ve had to restart nearly everything but that is fine and expected.”

“Really?” Rhys stepped aside as another assistant hurried past. “Everything? We built this from the
specs we recovered from your old computers.”

“Yes, yes, but I’ve had time to think on my designs since. I’ve made notes.” She waved her beaten
ECHOBtab under his nose. “Pandora has been awful but it has something about its brutality has
inspired me. The horizon makes you think differently, doesn’t it? The vastness of space can seem so
claustrophobic, even though that should not make sense. We are encased with atmosphere down
here, but it feels like the sky will last forever. It makes me rethink eternity.” She tapped her tablet, an
irregular rhythm.

Rhys recalled Tim’s words from the night before, about being ‘cooped up’.

Stop thinking about Tim, he reminded himself.

“Right,” was Rhys’ contribution to this conversation. She didn’t seem to notice. “How long will this
all take?”
“Oh, a while. Several weeks, maybe a month. I need to get everyone here up to speed. Peel dislikes me because I have usurped her position so that will take some dealing with, I think.”

Rhys shot a discreet look at Peel, who stood off to the side with her arms crossed and a sour lemon look on her face. “Don’t worry about her. She’s an Atlas employee and she’s committed to the project.”

“As you say. But yes, Project Pyrphoros may take some time, but now that I’m here I’m sure things will run smoothly. I will see to it.”

“Sorry—Project what?”

“Pyrphoros. I decided to rename it. I feel this is more appropriate,” she said briskly.

“Oh.” Rhys had no idea what Pyrphoros meant, any more than he’d understood the Epimetheus reference, but he would never admit to such. Especially not while standing in the building he technically owned. “Sounds good.”

“And I suppose I should thank you properly as well,” she said. Rhys frowned. “For saving me.”

“Oh. Of course.” Rhys rubbed the back of his neck. He hadn’t really done much, in the grand scheme of things. But taking credit for someone else’s work was Corporate Procedure 101.

He didn’t think about the man who actually had done all the work.

“I wanted to thank the man without a name, too. Where is he?”

Rhys looked around the room with a frown, as though a man without a name might materialize. “I’m not sure who you’re…”

“The man without a name of his own, without a face of his own. You know who I mean.”

Rhys certainly didn’t. “The man with no name… are you talking about Tim?”

“I suppose I am.” Her expression shifted, her dark eyes, already magnified behind her thick lenses, seemed to get larger. “Could you thank him for me? I would do so myself but I think I need to wait. Yes, we’ll meet again, but right now I am so busy and he won’t come down here, I suspect.”

“I will,” Rhys said, because he suspected she was right. Tim would stay away from this windowless space, filled with delicate technology.

Etna nodded, her attention already wandering. Rhys wrapped the conversation up, told her he expected a progress report by the end of the week, although he suspected she wouldn’t remember. He made a note to speak to Peel about it.

He lost the rest of his day. He answered emails, signed off on reports, visited departments. It seemed like everything required his personal attention and he tried not to feel annoyed about it. Atlas was a limping beast, still wounded and easy prey for any scavengers, but Rhys felt confident she’d be on her feet and swaggering through the planet again. But if she was going to recover to her full strength, then it meant Rhys would have to care for her. It meant nights without sleep and days without food. It meant boring meetings and new hires and a little bit of micromanaging, at least in the beginning. Yvette helped a lot with that latter part, her experience with acquisitions making her a deft hand at keeping people and departments under control.
Man without a name... What did she mean by that?

No, Rhys told himself firmly. Stop thinking about him.

Rhys answered an email, which sparked a chain, which devolved quickly to a conference call. He mediated an argument between the Technical Engineering Division and R&D. He caught a string of bad code in KR4K3N’s latest patch. He drank three cups of espresso. He paced his office, ECHOeye a-glow, and sorted through messages, rerouted resources, monitored projects.

It was no surprise, then, that he didn’t notice when his door opened and someone stepped inside. He didn’t notice a thing until someone tapped him on his temple. He jumped, the data in his eye scattering. When he focused on the present, he found Sasha standing in front of him with an amused look on her face.

“Am I interrupting?”

“No,” Rhys said. “Yes. Sorry.” He ran a hand over his face and sighed.

Sasha arched a brow, her lips twitching and an old fondness stirred in Rhys’ chest at the sight.

“It can wait,” he said decisively. “What’s up, Sash?”

“Just wanted to check in with you,” she said, pulling Rhys’ one and only guest chair from the wall. Following her cue, Rhys took his seat. “We didn’t really get much chance to talk yesterday, what with all the…” She flapped her hand in the air.

“Yeah, no, the whole bandit convoy, followed by the appearance of a hideous monster, followed by the Raiders’ bizarrely uncomfortable questioning really… put a damper on our reunion.”

“You could’ve just said ‘Pandora put a damper on it’.” Sasha kicked her feet up onto Rhys’ desk. Rhys tried not to mind.

“Noted.”

“I wanted to talk to you about last night. Did you hear about what happened in the living quarters?”

Rhys winced. The universe didn’t seem to care about his current Tim ban, and Rhys’ traitorous mind was only too happy to find something new about him to obsess over. Like the smooth way Tim disarmed one of Rhys’ own security personnel.

“Yeah, I got a report from the lieutenant,” Rhys said, pushing those thoughts away before they could turn impure. “Thank you for diffusing the situation, by the way.”

“No problem,” Sasha said.

“What’d you say to her, anyway?”

“Just told her we’d just come off of a pretty intense firefight and we were all a little wound up. She seemed to understand. I don’t think that’s the real reason, though,” she said. Rhys only shrugged.

“First Yvette, now you. Why does everyone talk about him like he’s a wild animal that followed me home?”

“Because I’ve seen him fight,” Sasha said. Rhys thought about the Splatterdome, the controlled and precise way Tim killed with his bare hands and suppressed a shiver. “And because we’ve both seen
the way you look at him.”

“That’s got nothing to do with anything,” Rhys said, ignoring the colour rising to his cheeks.

“Really? I figured that was what motivated him to stick around.” She laughed as he sputtered.

“That’s not—” He took a breath. “That’s not how I usually do business, Sasha.”

She looked him over, her grin widening. “You guys’ve kissed, haven’t you?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but no, we haven’t.” Rhys did his best to not sound disappointed. Sasha’s sympathetic look told him he’d failed.

“What’s the hold up? You feeling shy or something?”

Rhys fidgeted with his stylus, stalling for time. This was ridiculous. He shouldn’t even be thinking about Tim. But… this was Sasha. Even if their relationship hadn’t been the smoothest, she’d always been good to him. More than anything else, he missed talking to her.

He peeked over her shoulder, his ECHOeye activating the security lock on his office door. He’d be damned if anyone walked in on him while they were talking about boys.

“This stays between us, okay? Don’t tell Fiona,” he said. Sasha nodded easily. “I… may have already made a move.” Sasha smiled encouragingly. “But he shot me down.” Sasha sagged back. “Except… I’m not so sure he’s as disinterested in me as he lead me to believe. We had a… moment in the car, before. Kind of a ‘thank god we’re alive’ thing, maybe, but I think he wanted to kiss me.”

“Sooo… what? You think he’s interested?”

“I don’t know. He made it sort of clear he wasn’t before, but then we had that moment and now I don’t know…” Rhys trailed off in embarrassment. Sasha stared at him.

“Rhys. Listen to yourself: it sounds like you’re grasping at straws.”

“I know. But—”

“Maybe you’re just seeing what you want to see.” She hesitated. “You… kind of have a history of doing that, you know?”

She said it kindly, but Rhys still had to fight against flinching. He dug his nails into the palm of his hand.

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you?” he asked.

“Maybe not. A guy who wears a mask at all times probably has some serious intimacy issues. It could be that he is interested in you, but maybe he’s afraid,” she suggested.

Rhys sighed. It was like floodgates opening, and his thoughts were submerged. Everything he’d been struggling to avoid thinking about came rushing through. Tim’s face, his history, his name (why did Etna say he had no name?). He rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes. The only thing that could keep his thoughts in line was Pyrphoros, but that was such a mess right now that it was no better.

“I just want to know what he’s hiding,” Rhys said. “What if it’s something horrible?”

“You already know he kills people for a living. It’s kind of hard to get more horrible than that.
Everyone’s got secrets, Rhys,” Sasha said with a shrug. “If you’re really serious about this—and I’m getting the feeling that you might be—just take it slow. Oh, let’s not with that look.” She straightened up, leaning over the desk, aiming a smile into Rhys’ miserable face. “You’ve got a crush! Just enjoy it, okay? Crushes are fun. Dates are fun. Try asking him out or something.”

“I did that,” Rhys mumbled. “He said—”

“Did you actually ask him out? Or did you do that thing you usually do where you make it seem like you’re not actually that interested so you don’t get hurt by rejection?”

Rhys swallowed and looked away, which was answer enough. Sasha sighed.

“God help you both,” she said. “Get to know him, dummy. Find out what he likes, and if you like it too, ask him if he would like to do that thing with you. Oh, not that.” She laughed as Rhys’ face turned beet red. “Personality, Rhys. You want to get to know his personality.”

“He seems like kind of a jerk,” Rhys muttered.

“Then he’s just your type,” she said.

Rhys sighed again and ran his hand through his hair. “I can’t believe you came in here to talk about boys.”

She grinned, unashamed. “My advice is golden, Rhys. Don’t screw it up.”

THEN

“What am I looking at here, Timmy?”

Jack paused the display, a blue holographic depiction of the world Tim had just so recently inhabited, projected above Jack’s desk in miniature. Jack pinched the flickering blue figures and expanded the display, bringing three men into larger focus. Tim was one of them. The scene Jack had selected showed Tim caught mid-stumble, frozen in time with a wide-eyed look of alarm on his face and a clip falling from his hand. Two masked men reached out for him. One had Tim’s arm in his grip. The other reached for Tim’s face. Both had bombs.

“A close scrape?” Tim said, rubbing at his stinging eyes.

They’d been at it for almost an hour now, and Tim knew from previous debriefs that it would be at least another hour before Jack let him go. Tim knew Jack could get obsessive—it was part of what made him such an excellent engineer, or so he was told—but he had no idea how relentless Jack could be. It’d been like this for the last two months. Tim would return from a mission, head straight to Jack’s office, where Jack would force him to go over each decision he’d made on the field, grilling him over his thought process, his movements, what he could have done better (nearly everything, apparently), how he would do better next time. Sometimes he would remember to feed Tim a protein bar before they got started, but not always.

Jack glowered at him. “That’s cute. A close scrape. Cause what I’m seeing, is an idiot flailing around like a clown.”

“They caught me mid-reload, Jack, how was I—”

“What kind of idiot reloads in the open like that? You were asking to get blown up.”
Tim’s stomach clenched and he knew it wasn’t just his hunger. “I didn’t think—”

“No kidding, you didn’t freakin’ think!” Jack sighed and pushed away from the desk, pacing in front of the massive view of space. “What is the matter with you, Timmy? I swear, ever since that first mission you’ve just been going downhill. It’s a freakin’ miracle you haven’t gotten something blown off yet, although I have to say today’s performance was the closest we’ve gotten to dismemberment in a long time.”

“I came back in one piece,” Tim muttered, staring at his hands. He hated this. Hated the way Jack berated him like he was a misbehaving student, and not in the fun way.

“Oh, well, congratulations. What a relief that I don’t have to spend even more money on you to get you a fancy prosthetic. Christ, Tim, you’re driving me crazy here.” Jack paced like a stalker at feeding time. His expression pulled into a snarl, emphasizing the dark circles under his eyes. Tim knew he’d been working late almost every night, that Tassiter had been riding him harder than usual. Tim’s stomach tied itself into knots.

“Seriously, I spend a small fortune on your trainers, on that fucking private gym—do you even go?”

“I do.”

“Are you even trying? Or are you just wasting my time?”

“I’m not— Of course I’m trying, Jack.”

“Are you taking this seriously?” Jack’s pacing brought him around the desk, rounding on Tim. Tim tensed but forced himself to stay put.

“Of course. Jack, of course I’m taking this seriously—”

“Really? Cause that’s my face you’re making into a laughing stock out there. I’m starting to think you’re trying to sabotage me.”

Tim blanched. “No! I would never—! Jack, I wouldn’t, I never would, you know that I—” He stopped before the words could slip out, his heart seizing at the sneering look Jack gave him. He swallowed, burying the feeling stirring in his chest. “I wouldn’t do that,” he said weakly.

Jack rolled his eyes. “You’re freakin’ killing me here, princess. How am I supposed to believe you, when I’ve got evidence to the otherwise staring me in the face?” He jabbed his thumb at the display, Tim’s failure writ large like one of those nightmares where you’re naked in class.

“It’s…” Tim struggled, rubbing at his forehead. “I’m just tired, Jack. That’s all.”

Jack didn’t immediately reply. When Tim looked up, he found the other man staring at him with an expression that Tim imagined a lot of people saw moments before they were shot out of an airlock.

“Are you suggesting this is my fault?” Jack asked softly. Tim stiffened.

Jack didn’t have a temper. Tim wasn’t blind to that—hell, they’d met on a firing range. Tim had seen it in use before, but lately it seemed like Jack was losing it more frequently. Tim tried to be cautious, but it was hard to predict what would set Jack off.

Tim could feel Jack’s anger the way a sailor could feel the ill wind of a forthcoming storm. He tried to steer accordingly.
“No, no, of course I’m not—”

“You think I’m making you work too hard, is that it? I’ve spent a fucking fortune on you, Timmy. You don’t think I should send you out on these missions? You don’t think you owe me?”

Tim took a breath and controlled his voice. “Jack. I’m really not trying to blame you. I just—”

Jack grabbed Tim by the back of his neck and slammed him down onto the desk. He leaned forward until his face was inches from Tim’s. Tim shrank back, his eyes wide and heart pounding.

“Jack—”

Jack exhaled through his nose, his breath hot against Tim’s face. It felt like a reprimand.

“You know, I really did think you could handle this job,” he said, voice quiet. “You told me you could. Were you lying to me, Timmy?”

“No,” Tim said. Jack’s grip held his throat against the flat of the desk, pressing down until each breath felt like a struggle. It didn’t escape Tim’s notice that Jack had pinned him like this only a few days ago, under far more pleasurable circumstances. Humiliation and fear burned his cheeks.

“Really?” Jack leaned his weight into Tim’s neck. “Then why am I hearing a bunch of ungrateful nonsense about how hard it is?” Jack simpered the last words in a cruel impersonation. Tim tried to pull in a breath, but Jack pressed him down and Tim could only wheeze.

“Please,” he tried. Another awful parallel to the last time he’d been on Jack’s desk.

“Do you know how hard I’m working? You think I’m not making sacrifices? You think I’m not working my goddamn ass off, every fucking day, to make sure you get to keep that fancy fucking apartment, and your fancy fucking private trainers, and every other goddamn thing you make me spend—”

Jack’s grip tightened as he spoke, forcing Tim down. Tim struggled, pushing against the desk. His head swam, black lights winked in his vision. The lack of food, the after effects of too many Anshins, too many late nights—it all caught up to him in a poison tide that fed the beast and stole his words. His nails scratched at the finish of Jack’s desk.

Jack thumped Tim’s head against the wood. “Stop that,” he snapped. “Just fucking sit still and be good for once.”

Tim did. He closed his mouth and his eyes and curled his hands into fists. He bit down on his lip to stop himself from making a sound. He dug his nails into the palms of his hands to stop himself from shaking.

“This was nothing, he told himself. He faced death almost every day. This was nothing. Jack’s temper was a storm and all he had to do was weather it.

Jack’s breathing came ragged. Tim could hear it high above.

“God, you drive me fucking crazy,” Jack said. He sounded exasperated and Tim knew they were coming to the other side of it now. He just had to wait. Quietly.

This was nothing, this was nothing, this was nothing at all. He could do this.

“Well?” Jack voice’s snapped across Tim’s back. Tim flinched. “What have you got to say for
yourself?”


“I don’t want your apologies, princess. I want you to do better.”

Tim tried to swallow. “I will. I promise.”

The pressure on the back of his neck eased away, but didn’t leave him completely. The winds were calming. His sails were in tatters (his fault, he should have kept a cool head instead of letting panic get the better of him), but his ship was still in one piece.

“Every week you say that. Every week you tell me what I want to hear. And every single time I let you back out, you embarrass me. What’s gonna make this week different, Timmy?”

Tim’s head felt clearer, unsurprisingly, now that he could breathe.

“I’ll… I’ll remember to reload only in cover. I’ll be more aware of my surroundings. I’ll keep closer watch over my ammo, so that I’m not caught out like that again.”

The pressure was nothing more than a light weight at the back of his neck. Tim relaxed his shoulders, but didn’t move.

“You could have died out there, precious. You understand that?”

“I do, Jack.”

Jack whistled out a low exhale. He tugged the back of Tim’s neck and Tim obediently rose. Jack closed the distance between them, placing a gentle kiss over Tim’s mouth.

“You understand why I get so worked up, right?” Jack rubbed his thumb across the red marks on Tim’s throat. “You know what I’m dealing with up here, don’t you? I need you to understand how important this is for me.”

“I understand, Jack,” Tim said. His voice sounded rough. His forehead throbbed and his throat stung.

Jack kissed him again, the carrot after the stick. Tim knew it, but he didn’t mind. This was what Jack was. Unpredictable, volatile, difficult, but ultimately rewarding. This was what Tim wanted. This was the only thing that made the creature inside of him fall silent. What was a few cuts and bruises, a few harsh words? He killed people, for Christ’s sake. He didn’t mind.

This was nothing.

NOW

Tim gathered sand as fine as powdered sugar, as smooth as silk, in his hands. It fell from his fingers in silver drifts, caught in a feather-light gravity of the thin atmosphere. Tim couldn’t hear his breathing, but he could feel his breath bounce back from the O2 kit. A nebula swirled in the sky above him, like spilled violet and blue paint across a black canvas. It was gaudy as hell, the sort of thing you wouldn’t even hang up in a cheap motel, but Tim loved it fiercely. He sat back on his haunches to watch the unchanging sky. There was no one for miles, for years. He felt light and it wasn’t just the gravity. Freedom tasted like recycled air, it felt like sand in his boots, caught in the creases of his jacket. It looked like this.

Tim’s arm throbbed, a pain like a spike up to his shoulder. He ignored it as a fluke, but it happened
again and this time it burned. He pushed his sleeve up, before he could think better of it.

Something was growing in his arm. It glowed like eridium, a crystalline outcropping that pushed from his arm, visible through his stretched skin. It grew as he watched it, violet and blue straight lines that shot out like pathways in a microchip. Tim clawed at the skin, but his nails were too blunt to break through. The crystal flared and his arm throbbed, the pain shooting up to his neck. Tim stumbled, kicking up white-silver sand in his wake. The nebula above twisted like a pinned snake, writhing through the sky in reds and orange, bright as a nova, bleeding like a gash.

And out of that blaze, a figure strode. He was tall and broad and his shadow stretched across the ground. Blue crystal grew from the tear in his face, a weeping wound, in the shape of an upturned v. He had a glowing brand in his right hand, hissing and spitting like a chained beast.

Tim wanted to run but his legs betrayed him. His knees hit the ground. The figure gripped his throat in one hand and held the brand out with the other and Tim didn’t even fight. Couldn’t even plead. His mouth wouldn’t open, his body wouldn’t move, because it wasn’t his mouth and it wasn’t his body.

The infection was inside him, growing down to his bones. It had him. It would never leave.

The brand kissed him. Tim screamed.

Tim woke with a start, his ear buzzing. Sleep disoriented, he swatted at the air before a voice intoned that one ATLAS CEO was calling him.

“Hey, where are you?” Rhys said as soon as Tim opened the connection.

Tim flopped back, kicking up dried leaves and dust. “Hiding. What do you want?”

“Why are you hiding? You didn’t do anything, did you?”

“I set fire to the east wing and murdered everyone in the mess hall. I also broke the espresso machine.” Tim yawned, his jaw cracking. The sunlight he’d been luxuriating in like a lazy cat had moved across the floor during his nap. Squares of light now rested on the opposite side of the room, crawling up the wall.

It’d been a long time since he’d dreamed about Jack and his brand. Tim rubbed his face with a wince. The talk of his past imprisonment with Friendly that morning must’ve brought out the old toxins.

“That’s outrageous. That espresso machine is one of a kind.”

“Not anymore,” Tim said with a smile. The effects of the nightmare had begun to wear off. His breathing returned to normal. Looking out the broken windows helped. (Maybe hearing Rhys’ voice helped.)

“Seriously, where are you? It’s been a long day and I don’t want to scan security footage.”

Tim scratched his stomach and looked around. “A tree house? I found a damaged tower on the north-east side of the dome.”

“A tree—? Wait, I think I know where you are. An old guard tower, right? Sit tight, I’ll be right there.”

“Uh—” Rhys ended the call.
Tim scowled at the finger-thin tendrils growing across the ceiling. He considered leaving, more out of annoyance from being told to stay where he was than actual restlessness. But maybe it wasn’t worth it. He glanced again at the open door, the broken windows. The leaves outside were still, glossy and bright under the now orange-gold light of late afternoon. The sight of it did Tim’s spirit some good. He thought about leaves, about the way the light hit leaves, until his mind felt calm.

The sound of footsteps on the struts brought him back sometime later. He tensed a little, brought his hand to his thigh holster. Rhys’ coiffed head appeared over the side, his yellow-gold eye bright. His smile widened when he saw the state he’d found Tim in, stretched out across the floor.

“Am I interrupting anything?” Rhys asked as he stepped in.

“If I said yes, would you leave?”

“That’s hurtful.” Rhys sat down beside him.

God, his legs were long. Gangly. That was a good word for it. Rhys gangled like a long-limbed cat, sleek and graceful but a little doofy. Tim supposed he looked no better. Especially now.

“You would not believe the day I had,” Rhys said, letting his head fall back. Tim’s wandering gaze took him to the length and curve of Rhys’ exposed neck.

“Oh yeah?” Tim said, barely hearing himself.

“No one shot at me. Not once.” Stretched out like that, his adam’s apple was all the more apparent. It bounced with each word. Rhys wore his black suit open, too. The first two buttons of his pinstriped shirt undone to reveal smooth skin and blue ink.

“Sounds dull.”

“Not as dull as lying in an abandoned guard tower. Were you here all day?”

Tim traced the lines of Rhys’ tattoo with his eyes. Like the sight of the leaves, it did something good to his soul.

“Maybe,” he said. “I did apologise to Friendly earlier.” He rubbed his jaw with a wince. “She hit me.”

“You probably deserved it.”

“I definitely did. How old is she?”

“Friendly?” Rhys scratched his ear, his ECHOeye flaring to life once more. “Her personnel file says she’s 24 but honestly, I don’t know if I believe it. A lot of our recruits lie about their age.”

“She looked 19. And you gave her a gun and made her security?”

Rhys lifted one shoulder. “I only signed the papers. Captain Bell is the one who gave her the gun. You got an issue, you can bring it up with her.”

“I might.”

“Hey, a lot of recruits are Pandoran. Most of ‘em have been handling guns since before they could walk.”

“That seems like an exaggeration,” Tim said. Rhys rolled his eyes.
“You know what I mean. They’re tough.”

“They’re kids. And their training sucks. Friendly socked me in the jaw when she could’ve done real hurt. She went for showy over effective. She probably learned how to fist fight in some shit hole pub.”

Rhys looked sheepish. “You’re not supposed to hit people in the jaw?”

“It’s a good way to end up with a fistful of broken fingers. Well, maybe not you. But the rest of us don’t have fancy metal arms.” Tim raised his head off the ground, narrowing his eyes at Rhys’ reddening face. “Don’t tell me you’re responsible for their training.”

“Oh god no.” He laughed. “No, no, that’ll be Bell. Or… one of her lieutenants. Like I said, if you’ve got a problem with their training, you can take it up with her.”

“Fine. I’ll look for her tomorrow.”

“Alright. You do that. Maybe do that within full view of the security cameras. For my piece of mind,” Rhys said.

That settled that, as far as Tim was concerned. He lay back down, crossing his hands over his chest. He followed the trailing vines up above, to the centre where water stains had discoloured the ceiling. He wondered what happened to this place (Athena, he supposed), and why Rhys hadn’t bothered to fix it up yet. Maybe there was nothing out here worth fixing.

He looked up to find Rhys staring down at him with an odd smile.

“What?” Tim asked, feeling uneasy.

“You’re staying,” Rhys said, smug.

Fuck.

“For one more night,” Tim said, face heating.

“Nah. I’m not buying it. You like it here. You’re already thinking about ways you can help out.”

“Telling your idiot child army not to hit a man in the jaw hardly counts—”

“And you went exploring today. Do you know how many people bother to come out this far? You like it here.” Rhys leaned over with a smile Tim could’ve smacked. “You like me.”

Tim glared at Rhys, the effect almost completely neutralized by his damn mask. Rhys’ grin was smarmy enough that Tim considered reaching up and squeezing it off, but the sight of Rhys’ hands gave him pause. They were balled up into tight fists. There was tension in his arms and shoulders, and it wasn’t just from leaning over Tim. A lump rose in Tim’s throat at the sight.

“Maybe.” Tim reached up and flicked Rhys in the nose. Rhys flinched back with an undignified squawk. “I’d like you more if you paid me.”

“Asshole. Is this any way to treat the CEO?”

“You’re not my CEO.”

“I’m your boss, though, remember?”
“Not until you pay me, Atlas. I’m starting to think I ought to charge extra if you want me to call you ‘boss’ again.” Tim grinned and crossed his arms behind his head, stretching out his broad chest. “Seeing as you like it so much.”

Oh, it felt good to watch that smug smile melt away, and watch that pretty face turn red.

“I am your boss,” Rhys said. As recoveries went, it wasn’t his best. He ran his hand through his hair, a nervous tic Tim started to recognize. “Anyway, stop trying to distract me from the central point here.”

“Which is…?”

“You’re staying, which means I win. And—” Rhys stopped as Tim’s stomach chose that moment to let out a long, loud grumble, as if it were complaining on his behalf.

“Yikes,” Rhys said. “When was the last time you had something to eat?”

Tim frowned, and placed a hand over his stomach. “Uh. Yesterday?” Nothing after he threw up.

Rhys rolled his eyes. “No wonder you’ve been sleeping all day.” His left eye glowed, the ECHO device activating. “Lucky for you, it’s roast meat strips and noodles night in the mess hall.”

“Meat? What kind of meat?” Tim asked.


“Did you just order take out?” Tim asked.

The smug look came back. Tim should not have found it endearing. “I’m the CEO. I get what I want. Besides, they’re used to it. I barely get out of my office these days…” Rhys took in their surroundings with a frown. He nudged a brown leaf with the shiny tip of his skag-skin boots. A beetle scurried away, disturbed from its hiding spot. “Although my office is looking like a five-star restaurant compared to this place. Seriously, you were sleeping in here?”

“I’ve slept in worse places.”

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned. Come on.” Rhys stood, batting the dust and dirt from his slacks.

“Where are we going? I thought your order was coming here.”

“Eh, he’ll get lost anyway. I got a nicer place in mind. Come on, on your feet.” He levered a gentle kick to Tim’s leg.

Tim grumbled but pulled himself up to a seated position, wincing at the cracks in his spine and neck. He accepted the hand Rhys offered him.

“You doing okay there, old man?” Rhys asked.

“Keep talking, and I’ll make you eat those gaudy boots.” Tim braced both hands against the small of his back with a hidden wince. Alright, maybe sleeping on the hard ground had been a little easier when he was in his 20s.

“Hey. These boots are classic. Timeless.” Rhys started down the steps, fixing Tim with a frown.
“Horrible in every era, I agree,” Tim said, falling into step behind him.

“I’m not taking insults from a guy who has worn the same settler-chic outfit two days in a row.”

“These are the only clothes I own at the moment. In case you’ve forgotten, I lost my clothes in a corrosive yellow pool of toxic waste because I was helping you out.”

The ground felt springy and soft under Tim’s feet. He had to fight the urge to take his shoes off and feel it for himself.

“Why don’t you go to my tailor? He can set you up with something a little less sad.” Rhys gaze flicked over Tim’s outfit, at once cataloguing and dismissive. Tim tugged at the hem of his stolen jacket, maybe a little self-conscious.

“I doubt I can afford your tailor,” he said as they walked through the trees. Rhys shrugged.

“Consider it a gift.”

Tim’s guts gave an unpleasant twist at the thought of Rhys spending money on him. “No thank you,” he said.

“Suit yourself. Or, uh, don’t I guess.” Rhys aimed a grin over his shoulder at Tim. “See what I did there?”

Tim rolled his eyes. “Face forward, stretch. You don’t want to get a low-hanging branch to the head.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Rhys lead them away from the compound, the tower disappearing into the canopy behind them. It took Tim a while to realise they were even on a path—brush and fallen branches had nearly obscured what had likely been a well-trodden pathway. It slowed their progress, but it wasn’t too bad. Rhys could walk through it in his stupid boots without too much trouble. Although if he twisted an ankle because of his dumb sartorial choices, Tim had half a mind to just leave him there.

Except he probably wouldn’t. Tim could admit that to himself.

Rhys had a cat growing up. It was one of those hybrid breeds, a domestic house cat cross-bred with the felix omni felidae alien animal found on Eden-2. They came in all kinds of sizes, bred specifically to adapt to multiple planetary environments and created for the sole purpose of being a house pet. Rhys’ omni cat was larger than most, a beastly thing with a head the size of a softball and long, long fur. He could’ve been a real tough cat, if it weren’t for the fact that Rhys put his sister’s barrettes and bows in his fur. He had a revolving index of names, including ‘hey, you’, ‘dumb cat’, ‘cat’, ‘bastard’ (used by Rhys’ dad when he thought the kids couldn’t hear), and ‘fluff monster’. Rhys preferred ‘Bastard’.

After his mother lost her job (again) they had to move from their nice neighbourhood to the taller building in the alpha-taurus sector of the city. Rhys hated it there. The light felt thinner, and the air felt wetter, like they’d moved into a cave. Bastard came with them, a yowling ball of anger in a cat carrier. As soon as the latches of his carrier were removed, he took off in a white-brown streak and hid himself under Rhys’ bed. He wouldn’t come out for days, not even to eat. It drove Rhys crazy with worry.

He thought about that now, that pair of shiny eyes in the darkness under his bed, as he lured a reluctant Tim from the guard house.
Although it seemed to Rhys that he snapped every single branch in between himself and his
destination, Tim scarcely made a sound. He prowled through the underbrush like he’d been hiding in
forests his entire life. Tim would’ve made a perfect predator, if it weren’t for his grumbly tummy.

“We’re almost there,” Rhys told them both.

The trees thinned and fell back, revealing a rolling incline of blue-green grass, thick and shiny. The
hill lead down to a natural-looking moat of clear, tranquil water. The edge of the dome gleamed
directly ahead, its fractal surface breaking the sunset into shards of white-yellow-orange light.
Beyond that, the snow-capped tundra rambled to the horizon in soft lavenders and whites. Rhys
spread his arms out.

“How’s this for open spaces?” he asked.

Tim stared at the expanse laid out below them. He tilted his head up towards the sky, the blank plane
of his face catching the fading light. Rhys tried to read meaning into the way he stood, the looseness
of his hands and shoulders, but that could have meant anything. It could have meant nothing.

“It’s… really nice.” He sounded like he meant it. Rhys thought maybe he detected a hint of awe in
his voice, but it might have been his imagination.

Still, Rhys didn’t get so far in life by not assuming people were impressed by him. He preened.

“We’ve got five square kilometers of beautiful, slightly dangerous, but definitely lush alien flora and
fauna,” Rhys said, stepping forward with an expansive gesture. “Atlas may have hit the skids in the
last few years, but we’ve got plenty—WHOA!”

The scheduled afternoon drizzle had left the grass as slick as melting ice, and Rhys’ skag skin boots
hadn’t exactly been designed for their grip. The flat soles slid across the grass and the sky wheeled
above his head and Rhys was going to land flat on his ass.

An arm around his waist caught him before he could embarrass himself and ruin his suit with grass
stains. Rhys hadn’t even seen Tim move.

Tim held him like Rhys was his dance partner mid-dip, his arm solid and his hand warm where it
gripped his hip. He pulled Rhys up by his flesh arm, and Rhys gripped his (solid, muscular) bicep.

“You want to be careful, boss.” Tim’s voice rumbled from his chest. This close, Rhys could see the
freckles dusting his tanned neck. He thought about putting his mouth on them.

Bastard had been a rescue cat, one they’d adopted when he was already fully grown. Rhys never
knew the details of Bastard’s life before he lived with Rhys, but he knew that it hadn’t been a happy
one. Bastard hid under the bed during storms and flattened his ears at the sound of a raised voice. He
didn’t like most people, and he hated hearing voices in the hallway outside. He didn’t like anyone in
Rhys’ family, would hiss and swat whenever they tried to get close. Rhys had been hurt and
frustrated, too young to understand why his cat didn’t love him.

It’d taken patience, and bribes. A lot of bribes. Eventually, Bastard warmed to him.

Slow and steady, he reminded himself. Tim carried himself like Bastard had, like he’d suffered some
hurt in the past.

He smiled brilliantly, gave Tim’s bicep a squeeze.

“Thank you for the save,” he said, letting his own voice lower to what he hoped was a more pleasing
sound. He was rewarded with a pink flush spreading across Tim’s neck.

Tim grunted and set Rhys upright, pulling back quickly. He stalked some distance away, shedding his jacket.

“When’s the food coming?” he asked. Rhys grinned at his back.

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**THEN**

Tim killed people. He kept waiting for it to hit him, and sometimes it did. Never in the moment, the way he expected it to. There was never a big mental slow-down, no sad music playing over the scene as blood sprayed through the air. No eye-opening moment of truth, no wave of guilt and disgust. There was never any *time*. There was the person trying to kill him, and then there were all of their friends, just waiting for their chance. Tim wasn’t afforded any introspection. The people trying to kill Tim never seemed all that conflicted about it, anyway.

Sometimes, at night, though…

Look. If Tim were being perfectly honest with himself (something he still tried to do), he could admit that he didn’t feel bad about the scum he killed. He tried to, from time to time, but it never amounted to much. It was kill or be killed, and Tim knew which he preferred.

But he chose this. He could have chosen something else. He could have stayed in the administrative pool. He could have starved himself on his ideals in some shitty one room on Eden-5, writing mediocre fiction and waiting for a big break that would never come. He could have waited tables. He could have lived any number of lives.

He chose this one. He killed people, for money (for Jack), and he didn’t have to. Jack wanted him to be a weapon, and Tim didn’t mind. And it didn’t bother him as much as it should have.

That’s what bothered him, from time to time. Those people in the kitchen were right all along. Psycho.

And maybe that’s why it’d gotten harder for him. Maybe that’s why he started making mistakes. His first outing had gone so well, but nearly every mission since had been a disappointment.

The most upsetting thing of all was that disappointing Jack hurt more than pulling the trigger.

They had to stick close to wherever Hyperion base or satellite Jack had them stationed at. Their home base was Eos, but Helios, still in construction, remained a tempting target. Jack had ascended to serious leadership at Hyperion, partially off of the relentless wheeling and dealing, partially off of the strength of his coding, and partially because of Tim’s efforts.

Missions came one right after another. In theory, they had to keep Tim’s involvement reasonable and realistic, trying to stay within a day’s travel of Eos. Occasionally, Jack would send him out further, to Hermes, or to one of the moons around the newly terraformed Eden-7. Tim enjoyed those missions the most. That far from Jack’s control, he could actually step outside into the fresh air without a gun in his hands. He’d truly enjoyed the last mission on Eden-7’s Moon Theta which had given him nearly two days on his own before he was recalled back to Eos.

Those missions were few and far between. For the most part, Jack kept Tim close. Jack liked to watch Tim work, even if he seldom had anything good to say about his performance. Jack had made a real name for himself not only in Hyperion, but in the galaxy at large. Bandits looking to start trouble with Hyperion interests were starting to think twice, for fear of ‘Jack’ bringing the hammer of
retribution down between their eyes. Not that it stopped them, ultimately, but at least they thought about it.

Even if killing people didn’t bother Tim as much as it should have, getting shot at certainly did.

Tim was better for a while, but Jack always found something new to pick at. Tim made mistakes and Jack would rail and rage, accusing Tim of trying to make him look bad. As if Tim intentionally got shot, or stabbed, or burned, solely for the purpose of making Jack look stupid. As if Jack were the one who suffered, who bled, who had to peel away clothing that’d burned into his skin after an ill-timed explosion, who jabbed Anshin after Anshin until he passed out from the sensation of pain and regeneration.

It took about a year for Tim to snap.

“If you’re so unhappy with what I do, Jack, you can just do it yourself next time.” It wasn’t an impressive snap, all things considered, but it was more than his usual apologies and feeble excuses.

He pushed his (Jack’s) hairstyle of out its shape with both hands, stress and anger and not enough sleep pushing him beyond his usual discretion. There was weathering the storm, steering with the winds, and then there was cutting all the ropes and screaming into the gale.

Jack didn’t respond immediately, and that, more than anything, told Tim he’d gone too far. His stomach plummeted.

“Jack…” He fell silent as Jack stood. He walked over to Tim and, without a word, without a change in expression, wrapped his hands around Tim’s neck and began squeeze.

“Jack—”

Jack’s hands were firm and his grip unyielding. He pulled Tim close, until their faces were inches apart, until Tim could feel his each exhale against his mouth.

“Do you think,” Jack said, “that you’re special?”

Tim opened his mouth to reply, but Jack’s hands tightened, squeezing the breath from his throat.

“Huh, Timtam? That you’re the first person to waltz through a bandit camp and emerge with all your limbs intact? You think I haven’t done that before? That a million idiots couldn’t do the same thing?”

Tim pulled at Jack’s wrists, mouth opening and closing silently. His eyes watered. He could feel the blood trapped in his head, turning him red. Soon he would turn blue. He dug his nails into Jack’s wrists.

“Are you tired, Timmy? Is that it? Do you need to be put down for a little while? Because I can give you some rest. If that’s what you want. Is that what you want?”

Tim couldn’t hear the sounds he was making over the rush of blood in his ears. Jack’s gaze raked over his face. He squeezed Tim’s throat with all the strength in his hands. Black stars winked in Tim’s tunnelled vision. His chest ached. His head throbbed. He was going to die.

Jack could kill him. Hadn’t he already done as much? Timothy Lawrence’s records had been expunged. As far as Hyperion was concerned, he’d never worked for them. Outside this office, Tim didn’t exist.

“Is it time to go to sleep, Timmy?”
Tim mouthed his name, tears spilling over his cheeks. His hands went slack, their grip weakening around Jack’s wrists.

Jack sighed and released him at last. Tim doubled over, hacking and wheezing.

“Jack…” His voice was wrecked. His eyes streamed. Jack worked a hand through his hair, fingers digging into his scalp, yanking his head up. Tim didn’t even have the energy to flinch.

“What do we say, pumpkin?” Jack asked him patiently.

“Sorry…” Tim wheezed. “I’m sorry, Jack.”

Jack sighed and rolled his eyes. He drew Tim close, letting his doppelganger bury his face into the crook of his neck. Tim wrapped his arms around Jack and held tight, desperate for the carrot after that particular round of the stick. Jack wrapped an arm loosely around his back.

“You really need to stop mouthing off, kitten,” Jack said, petting his fingers through his hair.

“Sorry,” Tim mumbled. Jack yanked on his hair.

“Don’t give me sorry. Just don’t do it again, alright? Just try to think before you open your mouth next time. Christ, you’ve been really pissing me off lately.”

Tim started to apologise but thought better of it. Instead he said, “I don’t mean to. I’m... I’m just stressed.”

Jack forced out a hard breath. “Stressed, huh?” Tim expected another lecture, more berating, more mocking, but Jack surprised him when he said, “I guess you have been working a lot lately.”

Tim peeked out from Jack’s embrace. Jack met his gaze with a wary look of his own.

“Oh, don’t give me the puppy dog eyes.” He dropped a kiss on his crown. “Alright, alright. Maybe I can give you some time off.”

“Really?”

“I already said yes,” Jack grumbled as Tim sagged in his arms.

“Thank you, Jack. Thank you, thank you—” He pressed kisses against Jack’s neck, giddiness bubbling in his stomach.

“Yeah, yeah.” Jack lifted his chin, indulging his affection. “Why don’t you go back to your room? I’ve got some work to finish up here, but I’ll meet you there in a few hours and you can show me how sorry you are.” Tim could hear the leer in his voice. He chuckled. Jack patted him on the head and sent him on his way.

Time off! Maybe he could go back to Moon Theta. The atmosphere had been thin as tissue paper, but the view of Eden-7 had been incredible and it’d been so quiet up there. He could manage with an O2 kit and enough supplies. People were already making a go of living there. He’d pick someplace on the other side, away from the Hyperion mining facility, where no one would care what ‘Jack’ did.

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NOW

Dew gleamed on blades of grass like glass beads smoothed by the tides. Rhys sat beside Tim, on Tim’s jacket which Tim had laid down for him without a word. Their noodles had come, still
steaming in the clammy chill of the night air. It reminded Rhys of the wet season on Eden-5, the smell of damp earth and grass, the feeling of humidity with just enough bite in the air to necessitate wearing long sleeves. Or cuddling with a good-looking vault hunter.

Tim sat cross-legged beside Rhys, close enough that every time he leaned over his noodles, Rhys could feel his clothing rustle. He didn’t seem to mind the damp too much, although Rhys could see goosebumps across his arms.

“You sure you don’t need your coat?” Rhys asked, watching noodles vanish under the veil of Tim’s mask.

“I’m fine. Besides, it’s gotten all wet by now anyway,” Tim said.

“Well, you look cold. And I’m starting to feel a little bad about that,” Rhys said.

Tim snorted. “Didn’t stop you from taking my coat in the first place, though.”

Rhys stirred his noodles, watching the stir-fried greens swirl with the thick sauce. “This is a nice suit,” he muttered. “And grass stains take forever to get out.”

“So I’ve heard.” Tim hunched over his bowl, slurping up nearly half the contents. It was his second bowl, which he took from the tray the cook had set beside Rhys without asking. Rhys didn’t mind, especially when Tim had leaned across Rhys’ lap to grab it. Rhys returned to his own bowl, taking more delicate care with his chopsticks, cautious of getting flecks of sauce on his shirt.

A white bottle of sweet rice wine sat between them. It was homemade and a little thin, but Tim didn’t seem to mind.

“You know, for mystery meat, it’s not bad,” Tim said, pinching a strip of what looked like pink skirt steak between his chopsticks. “Got a depth of flavour. Definitely not skag, I’m guessing.”

“I have no idea. We trade with the settlement on the coast, and the cook is responsible for the purchases. It’s definitely not human, though, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Tim paused, his chopsticks half raised to his lips. “Well, I wasn’t before,” he admitted, eyeing the meat. After a moment, he gave a philosophical shrug and stuffed his mouth.

“But you like it, right?” Rhys asked. “See, we make good things here. I can’t promise every night will be noodle night, but our chef is pretty talented. She makes a lot from what we can get from the surrounding settlements. I can promise it’s at least better than those bars you keep eating.”

“Hey, those bars are a complete meal,” Tim said.

Rhys shook his head with a sigh. “You’re killing me. Someone of your calibre shouldn’t be out there, sleeping in other people’s houses and eating freeze dried, processed garbage instead of a proper meal. You deserve more.”

Tim’s chewing slowed. “This is the longest, most persistent job interview I’ve ever had. Can’t you take a break for one second?”

Rhys suppressed a wince. He really hadn’t meant to make this into another round of job pitching, but Atlas was always on his mind.

“I can’t help it,” he said honestly. “This company is important to me. And I think you’d make a good fit.”
“Are you this aggressive with all your prospective employees?”

Rhys nudged him with the toe of his boot. “I told you, this isn’t aggressive. You’ll know when I’m being aggressive.”

“Right.” Rhys couldn’t fight the nagging feeling Tim wasn’t taking him seriously. “Anyway, I don’t know why you’re bothering. According to you, apparently I’m already a done deal. You seemed pretty confident I was staying an hour ago.”

“Maybe I want something in writing,” Rhys said, delicately plucking greens from his bowl.

Tim tilted his head towards the darkened sky. This wasn’t Menoetius. Here, the sun had set under twenty minutes, leaving them in the dark. The soft, ambient illumination set up around the dome gave them enough light to see by. It was really disgustingly romantic. Rhys felt a little guilty for spoiling the mood with business talk.

He really didn’t want this to be a job interview.

“Atlas means a lot to you, huh?” Tim said.

“Being a CEO has been my dream since I was a kid.” Rhys hunched forward, pulling his knees in. “When I was ten years old, I even made up my own company. I used my mom’s printer to make up little business cards.”

“That’s…” Tim held his chopsticks in mid-air. Rhys held his breath. “Kind of adorable. And a little douchy.” Tim tilted his head towards him. “Sounds like you.”

Rhys played it cool while his face burned. He lifted one shoulder and stuffed his mouth full of noodles in lieu of a response.

“Must’ve been a pipe dream at Hyperion, though,” Tim said.

“What do you mean?” Rhys asked.

Tim turned his face towards his empty bowl. He twirled his chopsticks through the remaining sauce and brought them up to his mouth. Rhys felt his breath catch at the image of those chopsticks disappearing between his lips. He thought about leaning over and stealing a taste.

“I mean…” Tim sounded hesitant, breaking Rhys of his spell just as his body began to list towards him of its own accord. “There wasn’t a whole lot of opportunity for upward mobility at Hyperion. What with Handsome Jack at the top and all.”

“It didn’t bother me,” Rhys said, pulling back. “I figured it would’ve taken me years to climb the corporate ladder and by then, who knows? Everything got pretty tumultuous under Jack. Handsome Jack,” Rhys amended quickly. If Tim noticed the slip, he didn’t comment on it. “There were a lot of upper management positions opening up under sudden circumstances. A lot of people getting tossed out of airlocks or mysteriously vanishing overnight.” And maybe it was the wine that made him bold, because to his surprise, he kept talking. “To be perfectly honest, I kind of wanted to be just like him.”

“You wanted to strangle your boss?”

“Maybe not… quite like that.” Rhys toyed with the bottle, listening to the liquid slosh against the side. “I just wanted people to take me seriously.” Although he’d never put it quite like that before, he realised it how true it was as soon as he said it. “Even when Jack—Handsome Jack was being ridiculous, no one ever laughed at him. He intimidated people.”
Tim turned to Rhys, his blank face somehow radiating judgement.

“He was a psychopath,” he said.

“I know that,” Rhys said defensively. He knew it better than most.

Tim didn’t reply. He set his empty bowl aside and drew his knees close. Rhys felt a heaviness settle in his stomach, weighing down the enjoyable fluttering he’d been experiencing all night. Why the hell did he have to bring up Handsome Jack? Even the mere mention of him ruined things. He was the monster at the end of the book, the beating heart under the floorboards, the skeleton hiding in the back of his very nice wardrobe. He was always there, always lurking. Rhys wished he could just bury him. Wished he could forget.

“He brought out the worst in me,” Rhys said and he didn’t know why he said it.

“Obviously.” Tim’s voice sounded distant. Rhys quirked a brow. “Well. You did bring down a very expensive satellite all on your own. Those don’t sound like the actions of a man at his best.”

Rhys barked a harsh laugh and took a swig. The cook had thoughtfully given them cups, but neither of them bothered. The sweet wine was mild on his palette, a pleasant, light presence that bypassed the noodles and went straight to his head.

“You’re right,” Rhys said. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“I’d like to hear that story.” Tim took the bottle from Rhys’ loose grip. “David and Goliath, you versus the satellite. You’ll have to tell me about it someday.” He took a drink and Rhys wished he could watch it properly. He contented himself with staring at the movement of Tim’s neck.

Rhys didn’t think Tim would believe him. He hadn’t made a habit of telling that particular tale, not since before the Vault of the Traveller.

“Sure. I’ll tell you.” Rhys reached over and reclaimed the bottle. “Just as soon as you tell me what happened to your face.”

Tim might’ve been watching him drink. “I lost it,” he said.

“Uh huh. When?”

“Long time ago.” Tim pulled his knees in. He turned his face away from Rhys, and Rhys wondered if he imagined it or if he really could feel the loss of Tim’s gaze. Rhys quelled his frustration. He felt as if he’d spoiled things again. He took a sip of wine and cast about for another topic.

“Do you want this last bowl of noodles?” he asked.

“’m not hungry,” Tim said.

“You sure?” Rhys pulled off the plastic cover, releasing the scent of red meat and savoury sauce into the air. Tim turned his head slightly, but didn’t respond. “I don’t think I could eat all this myself.” Rhys angled his head just right, trying to look fetchingly from under his eyelashes. A difficult manoeuvre when you were as tall as he was. “Maybe we could share?”

“Yeah, alright,” Tim said.

Tim made as if to move away, make space for the bowl between them, but Rhys closed the distance instead, cradling the bowl in his metal hand. Tim stiffened. Rhys pinched some noodles and greens
between his chopsticks, swirling them through the sauce, before taking a bite. He tried to appear harmless and nonchalant, as if he’d be doing this regardless, as though Tim’s presence were just a coincidence and not a concern.

Slowly, Tim relaxed. He pulled out the pink meat and Rhys tried to hide his smile.

It’d taken little Rhys almost a full month before he managed to get Bastard to eat out of his hand. This felt far more satisfying.

They chatted a little more. Tim ate cautiously, like Rhys might pull the bowl away or stab him in the hand with his chopsticks or something. Rhys did neither. He let himself lean into Tim’s space a little, until they were pressed shoulder to shoulder, and felt like he’d earned a reward when Tim didn’t pull back.

Funny, how a man he’d personally witnessed killing other people with a machete could seem so vulnerable. Rhys would be lying to himself if he didn’t find it… kind of adorable.

Tim stood when they finished. He emptied the last of the wine without asking Rhys, turning away and giving Rhys a peek at the pink flush spreading across the back of his neck. They walked back together, and Rhys kept the conversation light, asking after topics he didn’t think Tim would mind talking about. He learned Tim liked to read, although he’d lost his collection, along with his ECHOtablet a few days before he accepted the mission to rescue Rhys. Rhys made a note to poke around the cloud. Tim’s files probably weren’t as lost as he thought.

“I guess I don’t read so much,” Rhys admitted, stepping over an exposed root. “Maybe some non-fiction.”

“Let me guess. *How to Make Friends and Influence People*?”

“Yeah, ha-ha. You’re very—” He paused as Tim slowed down. The abandoned guard house loomed ahead, its broken windows like holes cut out of a photograph. Rhys looked to the tower, and then to Tim.

“You’re not serious,” he said. Tim didn’t reply. “You’re not thinking about spending the night here, are you?”

Tim crossed his arms.

“It’s full of dirt! And dead leaves, and bugs, and probably broken glass? Nothing in there even works, and it doesn’t have any running water…” Rhys trailed off. It seemed as if luring the cat from its lair was one thing, but convincing it to follow you inside was another. “And it’ll get chilly tonight,” he tried anyway.

“I’ll be fine. I’ve—”

“Slept in worse, yeah. I get it, you’re a tough guy.” Rhys sighed and looked around. Most of the glowing creatures he’d encountered last year had gone into artificially induced hibernation, safe and inert until they could figure out how to reinstate their pens. But still. He didn’t like the idea of Tim out in the cold, so far from anyone who could help in case things went wrong.

“I need a place with windows,” Tim said.

My room has plenty of windows, Rhys wanted to say. It took him nearly six months to get Bastard to sleep on his bed. Slow and steady, Rhys.
“Well, at least let me get something brought up for you.” Rhys considered the tower, his ECHO whirring to life. “Maybe I can hack some of the systems back online. Some security, maybe…”

“Don’t strain yourself,” Tim said, as he began to ascend. “Seriously, Rhys, I’ll be fine. You worry too much.”

“I’ve been on Pandora long enough to know there’s no such thing,” he said. He patched into janitorial, sending a request for a bedroll with several blankets to be delivered, while his scanning program swept over the tower for any signs of digital life. There wasn’t much. Most of the systems had received hardware damage that would require a few days to repair. He found only a handful of nonessential subroutines and programs. Still, he decided as he flicked through the list, there was at least one thing he could do.

Tim’s steps faltered. The maintenance lights flickered to life, sending white light through the open windows.

“There,” Rhys said with satisfaction. “At least now you can see how filthy your little den is. Some of my people will be over within the hour with something for you to sleep on.” And a change of clothes probably wouldn’t go amiss, either. He made a note.

Tim’s shoulders pulled in. He tugged at the edge of his sleeves. “This isn’t necessary,” he said, almost too quiet to hear.

When was the last time you let someone take care of you? Rhys wondered. When was the last time you let someone get close enough? Rhys wasn’t a big fan of tending someone else’s garden, but he found the idea of spoiling Tim to be appealing. And a lit up junkyard on stilts wasn’t enough. He wanted to bring Tim home, dress him up nice, feed him expensive foods. Make him sleep in a proper bed, with a real mattress. Watch him turn soft.

“It’s a couple of lights and a sleeping bag,” Rhys said, squashing the impulse to drag Tim back to his place. Slow and steady, dammit. “And here—” He reached into his jacket and withdrew his ECHOtablet. “So you’ve got something to do while you wait. I’ve got some games loaded up.”

Tim hesitated, his fingers drumming on the rail. “Isn’t that for your work? Are you sure you want to let me take a look?”

“I’ve disabled anything important so you can’t get into trouble,” he said. Tim didn’t immediately move and Rhys tried not to sigh with exasperation. “Come on,” he wheedled. “You can return it to me tomorrow.”

Tim shook his head and finally walked back down. He took the shiny, expensive-looking tablet gingerly.

“Thanks,” he said gruffly.

I’m going to keep you, Rhys thought.

He smiled and said, “No problem.”

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**THEN**

Jack left before morning, as usual. He liked to get to the office long before anyone else, claimed it was a good intimidation move. He almost always woke Tim before he left, usually to steal a kiss or something a little longer, if he was feeling frisky and indulgent. Tim didn’t mind. It was nice
whenever Jack stayed.

That day was no different. He woke Tim with a nibble on his earlobe. Tim mumbled and batted him away, hissing when Jack sunk his teeth in and pulled.

“Wakey wakey, pumpkin. I need my goodbye kiss before I go to work.”

Tim sighed and opened his eyes. Jack was already dressed, lying on top of the 9000 thread count sheets like he owned them. Nothing out of the ordinary.

“Right, okay,” Tim said through a yawn. Jack wound his hand through his thick hair.

“But I’ll be back a little later,” Jack went on, surprising Tim. “After I speak with the doctor.”

“What? Why?”

“Gotta make sure you’re in tip-top condition, don’t I?” Jack toyed with the strands, pulling Tim’s bedhead further awry. “I don’t want this whole stress thing you’re dealing with turning into something big.”

Tim felt his face heat. Was Jack worried about him?

“Jack, I don’t need—”

Jack kissed him, taking advantage of Tim’s open mouth, and sliding one hand behind his neck. He guided Tim back into the sheets, his other hand copping a feel of Tim’s exposed chest. Tim groaned as Jack began to toy with his nipple, the flesh still sore from the rough treatment he’d endured only hours ago. Jack had been wound up. Tim’s neck, shoulders, and chest still bore the bruises.

“Relax,” Jack said as he broke away. Tim tried to follow, but Jack chuckled and pushed him back. “I’d love to stick around and finish what I started here, but daddy’s gotta go to work, kitten. Although…” He dipped down and reclaimed Tim’s lips. Tim responded with eagerness, wrapping his arms around Jack. Jack indulged him for a little while, his hand tracing down Tim’s abdomen, teasingly close…

He pulled back. Tim groaned.

“Although,” he went on with a grin. “Leaving you here like this, all worked up and frustrated… It’s kind of doin’ it for me, pumpkin.”

Tim flopped back with a scowl.

“You’re an asshole,” he said. Jack pecked him on the cheek and rolled off the bed, onto his feet.

“You think you can keep your hands off ‘til I come back?” he asked, pulling on his jacket. Tim grumbled, but nodded. “Of course you can. Be good for me, precious.” At once a reminder and a warning.

Tim sighed and buried his face shamelessly into his sheets. He inhaled the familiar scent and let it lull him back to sleep.

He woke a few hours later, on schedule and sore. He knew better than to pull out an Anshin to treat it though. Jack had already told him he liked Tim marked up and walking funny from the night before, at least for a little while. Tim not-so-secretly enjoyed it too. Although he enjoyed it a lot less when he had an entire workout session ahead of him. He showered quickly, got dressed, and rushed
out to meet one of the trainers Jack had selected for him, a wall of a woman named Cynthia.

Like every person Jack let Tim interact with, Cynthia was quiet and discreet. As far as she was concerned, she was providing weight and endurance training to Jack and she didn’t ask any questions. It made her for an excellent employee, but not great company. If she thought anything strange of the colourful bruises on Tim’s neck, she kept it to herself.

Tim’d had a chatty trainer once. Quutang. She’d been responsible for basic training and liked to fill the air with encouragements and stories about her dog. Tim had liked her, but he’d made the mistake of mentioning her chattiness to Jack, who’d frowned in response and told Tim he’d take care of it. Tim had tried to protest there was nothing to take care of, but Jack shut him up and Quutang was gone the next day.

After Cynthia, it was Tolliver for martial arts. After Tolliver it was a much needed Anshin and then a trip to the private range.

Tim navigated these spaces like a zoo animal in its familiar habitat, went through his prescribed routine without engaging his higher functions. His body moved the way it was supposed to, and everyone seemed happy with his performance. He maybe spoke three words all day.

He returned to his apartment, showered, picked up his ECHOtablet and waited. He read through five chapters before he heard the sound of his lock disengaging. Jack strode inside without a word, tossing Tim a brief, strained smile. Tim saw the gleam in his eyes, the one that suggested he’d been skipping meals and guzzling coffee, and bit back a sigh.

“Hey there, kitten. How was your day?” Jack flopped down on the sofa beside him, flinging his legs over Tim’s lap and taking up whatever space Tim hadn’t claimed for himself.


“Tired?”

“Shitty, Tim. Shitty was the word you were looking for. Which is also a good description for my day.” He lay back and flung one arm over his eyes, as over dramatic as a child. “Hey, make yourself useful and give me a foot rub, will ya?”

Tim rolled his eyes even as he began to unlace Jack’s boots.

“I spoke to the doctor,” Jack said as Tim peeled off his socks. “He made some suggestions. Said time off’s probably a good idea. The mind can go funny when the body can’t catch a break. And I guess being shot at consistently can cause some kind of stress fatigue or whatever.”

“No kidding,” Tim said. He hummed as his hands got to work, his mind already turning over potential vacation spots. If not Theta, maybe one of the Edens. Someplace remote, where he wouldn’t be recognized.

Jack sighed as tension drained from his body. He went lax under Tim’s hands.

“Anyway. Starting tomorrow, you’ve got time off. And he gave me a little something for your nerves.” Jack reached into his jacket and pulled out a yellow bottle.

"What are they?" Tim asked.

"Pills." Jack gave them a shake. "They're good for you. Supposed to help you relax. You can have one now, if you want."
"I feel pretty relaxed already, Jack," Tim said. "But thank you."

"Suit yourself." Jack tucked them away.

Tim worked on Jack, content to have the other man in his home. It felt almost illicit, having him stretched out and utterly at ease in Tim's presence. Tim knew that Jack wasn't often like this. He had to be larger than life, an intimidating presence to remind all the peons who the top alpha dog was (a direct quote). Tim wondered if he found it exhausting. Tim certainly did.

He felt a prickling on the side of his neck and when he looked up, he saw Jack looking at him from under heavy lids.

"What's wrong?" Tim asked.

Jack's lips quirked. "You look cute. It's just weird. Seeing my face look all…" He sighed as Tim's face began to flush. "Yeah, like that. Christ, you blush easy. Seriously, how does anyone buy that you're me? You're so freaking adorable, I can hardly stand it. You've been good today, haven't you, babe? C'mere."

Jack took Tim to bed.

They slept side-by-side, Tim curled up on Jack's chest until Jack woke him up before decency should allow, as usual. He kissed him slow and careful, like he had nowhere else to be, although Tim knew it was a lie.

"Stay," he tried anyway. "Take the day off with me."

"Tempting, but no can do, babe. This company's not gonna over-throw itself. Some of us don't have overly sentimental bosses who can give us time off whenever we ask," he added with a sharp pinch. Tim jumped and Jack chuckled. "Alright, stay here and be good. I'll see you in a little while."

Jack didn't return that day, which was disappointing but not terribly unusual. Tim spent his first day off lazing about on his couch, ordering cheat day meals, and reading trashy fantasy novels. His order of banana-almond pancakes with extra whipped cream came through panels, serviced by the stations robots, which meant that Tim was as isolated as he hoped he might be.

He slept that night spread across his bed, drooling all over his clean sheets.

Jack didn't appear on the second day, either and this was a little unusual but not enough to be alarming. Tim knew Jack occasionally took business trips off-world, although he generally made a point to send Tim a message to let him know.

Tim tried to be patient, but without the routine of his personal trainers, he began to feel a bit bored and lonely. He downloaded a few new novels, but none of them could hold his interest for long. He played a few games, but he had the same trouble.

Finally, Tim sent Jack a message through their secured line, asking if he was still on the satellite. No response came. Tim ordered himself a sundae to make himself feel better. He slept fitfully, dreaming of a sun-scorched planet and blood like rubies on the yellow sand. He woke to the sound of gunfire, scrambling for his weapon, but he was alone. Just a nightmare.

Jack didn't appear on the third day, and Tim had had enough. He checked his messages one last time to ensure he hadn't missed anything—he hadn't—before sliding on his jacket and shoes. He knew
Jack would be pissed if he found out Tim had gone out unauthorized, but Tim was fed up with waiting. He didn’t know what he’d done to deserve the silent treatment, but he didn’t care. It seemed like Jack was already pissed off anyway, so why not make it worse? He could take his lumps when they came.

He palmed the security panel. It flashed red. The door remained closed.

Frowning, Tim tried again. The same flash of red. He did it again, more slowly this time, only to get the same results. Frown deepening, Tim stood in front of the panel, pressing his palm against the gene-reader. The word ‘UNAUTHORIZED’ flashed across the screen in disapproving red.

“What the hell…?” He tried again, and again, but the result never changed. The word flashed over and over, a reminder and a reprimand.

Was the machine broken? Tim felt the first stirrings of panic in his chest. That could be bad. That could be very bad.

He took a breath and tried to calm down. This was nothing, he told himself firmly. Just last week he’d survived someone stabbing him in the shoulder. The week before that, he’d infiltrated an abandoned factory filled with bandits armed with electric payloads (it’d been their gimmick—they were the Electrodes or something). He pulled out his ECHOtab and sent another message.

‘Where the fuck are you? My door won’t work. Come over ASAP.’

He hesitated a moment, as he had more or less openly admitted to an attempted unauthorized trip outside, but the moment passed and he hit send. If Jack wanted to come down and give him hell, he was welcome to do so. Tim could deal with it. He swallowed a fresh swell of panic and placed an order for lean salmon and brown rice. This newfound complication had robbed the fun of cheat meals. He set down to performing some reps, making use of the exercise equipment Jack had given him.

Tim finished three reps, and no response.

His food arrived through the refrigerator chute, and Jack had still not replied.

Tim finished eating, and his inbox remained at zero.

He worked out a little more, setting an intense pace on his jogging machine and ran for nearly two hours. He blasted music as loud as he could, although there was no one around to hear. Part of the expense Jack had put into Tim’s apartment, was ensuring it remained isolated and remote from the rest of the station. Tim ignored the shiver of fear the thought gave him. He pressed the resistance up higher, and turned his music up louder.

Tim ran until his lungs burned, until he could feel his heartbeat down to the soles of his feet, until he was ready to fall over.

He powered the machine down, panting and walked over to the door on trembling legs. He tried again. Unauthorized. He looked at his ECHOtab and felt the runner’s high drain away at the sight of an empty inbox.

He showered, checked again, and sent another message. ‘Please just let me know where you are. I need you.’ After a moment’s hesitation, he deleted the last sentence and pressed send.

The next day there was nothing. The door remained stubbornly closed, and his inbox remained empty. He sent another message (‘Where are you??’). Got to work. Tried to keep himself busy, even
as he caught himself shaking. Even as his heart started racing and wouldn’t stop.

He tried not to think. Jack was the only person who knew about this place. Jack was the only person who knew Tim’s name. If Jack decided to forget about him—

Nothing, this is nothing. Keep it together, Tim.

(Be good, precious.)

Half-way through the seventh day, Tim grabbed his pistol and took aim at the security pad. He didn’t know if this would work. He didn’t know how the machine had gotten broken in the first place, how the lock worked, how any of the programming functioned. He only knew that Jack would be incandescently furious when he found out. And while that made Tim’s chest clench and his skin grow cold, he pushed past it because he couldn’t go on like this.

He squeezed the trigger, and the first round bounced off the apartment’s shield, activating once it recognized a potential threat. Tim squeezed the trigger again and the gun clicked and nothing happened.

Tim lived in an age where guns had been designed beyond the imperfections that caused their ancestors to jam, but if he hadn’t, he might’ve thought that was the problem. He examined his Hyperion-issued pistol (the one Jack had given him for his birthday all those years ago), pulling out the ammo clip and taking stock. The count still read 9 bullets. He pushed it back in, squeezed the trigger again. Nothing.

He replaced it with a fresh clip. Nothing.

Tim sucked in a breath. He released the clip and set the pistol down. It was a modern pistol, Hyperion-made and well-designed. He knew these things had onboard computers. They couldn’t jam, but maybe something could interfere with that. He stood and stared at the undamaged panel, fingers curling and uncurling. His heart hammered against his ribcage like it was desperate to escape.

Jack could forget him. Jack could leave him here, sealed up in a clean, air-conditioned tomb and no one would know. Tim could scream himself raw and no one would hear. Jack could forget him and there’d be no one left to remember Tim in his place.

Tim whimpered and pressed his hand against the panel again and again. He pushed away, feeling dizzy, and catapulted to the other side of the room, snatching up his ECHOtab.

‘I’m trapped please please please help me.’

‘Jack I need you please please I don’t know what to do.’

Begging and desperate, just as Jack liked him best.

Tim’s outbox filled up with single-line messages, stretching outside of the screen, while his inbox remained empty. He had no way of knowing where Jack was. He had no way of knowing if his messages were even being read. He tapped another message, sweat smearing across the screen.

‘I’m sorry whatever it is I did I’m so sorry please please please please’

The screen went black under his fingers. Tim tapped the power button, but nothing happened. He tried again, and again, pressing his thumb down until he could feel the molded plastic crack.

The screen remained dark. The door remained locked. Tim realised he was struggling to breathe. He
threw the ECHO against the wall with a scream. The screen cracked on impact and lay on the ground dead dead dead.

Black spots danced in his vision. He felt like he’d been hit in the head. He was sweating, shaking. He sank to his knees, his breathing becoming a shallow wheeze. There wasn’t enough air. Had the filters malfunctioned? He couldn’t breathe. He curled up, tried to make the space around him seem larger.

The next few day passed in a haze.

By the eleventh day, he grew violent. It was like it’d been conditioned in him. He didn’t know what to do so he did what he was trained to do. He took as many things as he could destroy and he destroyed them. He took a knife from the kitchen and gutted the sofa, slicing it open and spewing its innards across the floor. He broke his dishes because it felt good to watch them shatter. He crushed his ECHOtab under the heel of his boot again and again, until it broke into pieces.

He considered the knife in his hands and shook his head at an errant thought. A part of him clung to sanity like a limpet in a storm, but the rest of him raged.

Tim stopped ordering food, but food still came. It was the pre-programmed meals, high protein and nutritionally calculated to a precise degree. He didn’t touch them.

He slept poorly, and only when he was exhausted.

He wept and raged. Said his pleas aloud to an empty room. Said his curses when those produced nothing. Tried to find the security cameras, and tried to message for help. Tried to apologise.

He thought about what he did wrong. He thought about all the mistakes he’d made. He made a list and went over it. He paced through the destruction of his home and tried to make amends.

Another week passed. Tim spoke out loud just to hear a human’s voice. It didn’t make him feel any less lonely. Without his ECHOtab, he couldn’t cue up any music. He curled up in the corner of his apartment, closed his eyes, and tried to stop from spiralling.

Jack reappeared on the twenty-eighth day.

“Hey hey, pumpkin, how are…” He trailed off, footsteps slowing as he entered the torn and dented remains of Tim’s living room. Tim stood at the entry opposite, gripping the doorway hard enough to hurt.

“Jack,” he breathed. His voice came out soft and rough.

“What the fuck…” Jack’s eyes scanned the room, cataloguing each damaged item.

“Jack.” Tim staggered forward, clutching onto Jack’s arms. He tried to pull himself into Jack’s embrace, but Jack took him by the shoulders and held him out at arm’s length. He whined without shame, desperate for contact, but Jack held him firm.

“What the fuck happened here.” Although Jack spoke evenly, without raising his voice, Tim knew better than to push. Jack watched Tim like a tiger stalking prey through the long grass.

“I—my messages—” Tim struggled. His thoughts worked sluggishly, punch drunk from the month-long breakdown and stunned by the sudden appearance at light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. “Didn’t you get my messages? My door wouldn’t— I couldn’t get out—”
“What are you talking about? Your door? I got in just fine. What the fuck happened to your apartment?” Jack’s voice sharpened to a razor’s edge. Tim flinched away, but Jack wouldn’t let him go. “Answer me.”

“I couldn’t…’’ Tim’s breathing quickened. He eyed the door over Jack’s shoulder and licked his lips. “I couldn’t leave…”

“I’m not asking you about your fucking door! I’m asking you about your fucking apartment! If the next words out of your mouth aren’t a proper fucking explanation, Timmy, daddy’s going to make you very sorry.”

Tim didn’t know what to say. Jack was using the voice he used in his office, to his peons, and it wasn’t right. He didn’t know how to fix this. He didn’t know what Jack wanted him to say.

You would think that after nearly twenty-five solid days of panic and fear, it would’ve worked its way out of his system. That he would run out of his internal stores of anxiety. And yet, as Jack stared at him, jaw clenched and fingers flexing, Tim felt as if he’d found a hidden cache.

He didn’t want this. He wanted things to go back to the way they were before. He wanted Jack to hold him, tell him everything was fine.

Jack’s hands crept from Tim’s shoulders, up around his neck.

“Answer my question, cupcake,” Jack said, soft.

“I did this,” Tim said, swallowing as Jack’s fingers twitched.

“You did this. You destroyed all the lovely, expensive things I bought for you. Why?” Jack’s grip tightened, bending Tim’s head back.

“Because I c-couldn’t leave,” Tim said. “Because y-you weren’t answering me.”

Jack laughed, the sound scraping across Tim’s nerves. “That’s it?” He walked Tim backwards, keeping his grip tight. “You wrecked your apartment, all the fucking things I spent my hard-earned goddamn money on, because you were lonely? Jesus, Timtam.” Tim’s back hit the wall. He tried to draw breath, but Jack’s grip was getting tighter. Jack shook his head with a smile. “I mean, there’s pathetic and then there’s pathetic. Are you a dog? What, did you think your master abandoned you? Is that it? Are you a poorly trained, stupid fucking animal?”

The monster inside of him whined, and the sound of it came out of Tim’s mouth.

“Don’t take my dulcet tones for granted here, kiddo. I’m really, really, really pissed off with you. This was supposed to be your big vacation, remember? You were supposed to relax at home. That was the whole fucking point. And I come back, expecting to find you all rested up and ready to kick ass for me again, and instead this is what I get? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Tim’s vision blurred. He blinked and water splashed over his cheeks. He didn’t know what to say. Everything he said was the wrong thing to say and he couldn’t risk angering Jack further. What if he left?

He felt pathetic. He felt like an idiot. He’d over-reacted. He was supposed to be good, to relax, and he couldn’t even manage that.

A sob squeaked its way past the hold on his throat. Jack’s lip curled back with disgust and Tim closed his eyes, unable to face Jack like this. He would give anything not to be here.
Jack’s hands slackened.

“Maybe you need a little more time off…” he sighed, mostly to himself.

Something in Tim broke.

He heaved with sobs, tears sliding down his face as he cried like a child. Jack pulled back and Tim sank to the floor. He curled up, buried his face between his knees and wrapped his arms around his head. Hiding.

Distantly, he could hear the sound of Jack’s boots tapping against the floor. For a heart-stopping moment, he thought perhaps Jack intended to leave him, but he heard the hiss of his sink activating.

Jack reappeared, crouched beside him, with a glass of water in his hand. He offered it to Tim wordlessly, his expression unreadable. Tim sniffed, his body still wracked with tremors, but the worst of the break-down had passed. He took the water with shaking hands.

“You done?” Jack asked. Tim nodded blearily. “You think you need more time off?”

Tim shook his head.

“Really?” One of Jack’s dramatic brows climbed. “You’re good to go?” Tim nodded. “If I give you a bandit camp to raid tomorrow, you’d do it?” Jack asked.

Tim nodded again, without hesitation. Something flickered in Jack’s gaze. The corner of his lips pulled up.

“Here—” He tapped Tim on his thigh. Tim let his legs uncurl, forced himself to relax while Jack’s hands wandered over the material of his sweats, squeezing at the muscle with an almost clinical detachment.

“Well, luckily for you, I don’t intend to send you back into the field just yet,” Jack said as his hands travelled up Tim’s stomach. “I think you’ve lost some muscle mass. We need to get you back to tip-top shape before you’re me again.”

Tim said nothing. He sipped his water while Jack’s hands pulled his shirt up. He leaned forward a little as Jack touched him, skin on skin.

“We’ll put you back on your training schedule tomorrow morning. Alright, pumpkin?”

Tim nodded. He swallowed. “Can… can you stay tonight?” he asked.

Tim flinched at Jack’s bark of laughter. “Are you kidding me? Have you seen this place? Forget it. You’re still in the doghouse, Timtam. Look around at the mess you made. You really think you deserve some company right now?”

Tim wilted. He looked around at the destruction of his little temper tantrum and felt stupid.

“No, Jack,” he whispered.

Jack nodded, satisfied and encouraging. “That’s right. But here.” He retrieved the orange pill bottle he’d shown Tim almost a month ago and shook out a white tablet. “I think we can both agree that you’re not feeling relaxed right now, so how about a little medicine?”

Tim swallowed the pill. Even with a mouthful of water, the taste of it hit the back of his throat. A sharp, metallic tang.
“Good.” Jack stood. “Now, I want this place cleaned up, you understand? I’ll be back tomorrow evening and we can discuss your next steps. And maybe you can start making this up to me.”

Jack left. Tim knew without checking that the door locked behind him.

Chapter End Notes

I'm overwhelmed with the incredible positive response this story has gotten. Thank you all so much for reading, reviewing, and leaving kudos.

Next chapter: An accident shakes Atlas to its core. Rhys and Tim work out some issues.
Part III: Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Atlas runs into some problems. Rhys finds himself in a desperate situation. Tim is there to help.

Chapter Notes

Happy Christmas eve eve. More mentions of abuse in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rhys’ people delivered a bed roll and a change of clothes, although Tim hadn’t asked for either. There were two of them, a soldier—one of Friendly’s pals, judging by the look he gave Tim—and Corporate Cheerleader Todd, whose smile seemed more strained than it usually did when he took in Tim’s new abode, his eyes lingering on the tablet Rhys had lent him.

“So, I understand you’ll be staying with us?” Todd asked. Tim paused in the act of unrolling the sleeping bag, wondering if he misheard the note of disapproval in Todd’s voice.

“Not for long,” he said and he definitely didn’t imagine the look of relief, no matter how quickly Todd covered it up. Tim snatched the tablet from the ground.

“Here. Take this back to your CEO, will you?”

Todd took the tablet from Tim and his smile became more genuine. He assured Tim that he would.

The clothes were fine. They were clean, and fit well enough. Tim sought out the closest body of water as soon as woke the next morning. He cleaned up, changed, and set off towards the compound to find Captain Bell.

He got directions to her office, on the other side of what used to be an animal pen. The walls had been pulled down, and the growth and rocks had been cleared out. Targets and obstacles had been erected in their place and Tim could see recent bullet wounds in the ground and dented into the cheap scrap metal walls surrounding the area. Morning practice had already finished.

Captain Bell was in her office. She was a big woman with brown skin and her own collection of scars, although she’d managed to keep most of them off her face. She had bags under her eyes and lines around her mouth, but Tim could see she was young. Maybe five years Tim’s junior, maybe more.

But she grew up on Pandora, he reminded himself. That aged a person in more ways than one.

She let Tim in when he asked politely. She even listened when he explained what he was doing there in the first place. She stared him down when he finished, and even managed to impress him a little when she didn’t seem all that fazed by his empty face.
“Why don’t you sit down,” she said at last. He sat. “So. The faceless vault hunter wants to help with training, does he?”

“He does,” Tim said.

She tapped her stylus against the hollow of her cheek while she considered him. Tim had said his piece. He was happy to wait her out.

“I heard what happened between you and Friendly. I saw the footage. Saw how you let her hit you.” She didn’t look impressed, although Tim couldn’t tell who her disappointment was aimed at. “Most of these kids are Pandoran, you know. We got a couple of properly trained Hyperion thugs, but all of ‘em are stationed in Helios.”

“Yeah, Rhys—uh. Your boss mentioned that.”

“Did he mention that I’m responsible for their training?”

“He seemed a little fuzzy on that, actually,” Tim said, shifting. “But I can tell you’re stretched thin. Maybe you don’t have as much time as you’d like to dedicate to their development.”

She considered him for another long beat. “Alright,” she said at last. “I won’t lie. I am stretched thin and we could use the help. And I maybe don’t like this, but I don’t want to let my ego get in the way of this base’s security—and these kids’ lives.”

“I’ll do my best,” Tim promised.

“I want better than that. The next shift starts in two hours, which means we’ll get a fresh batch in for afternoon training. You think you can get something together by then?” she asked. Tim nodded. “Good. Do you want to tell me what happened with your face?”

“Uh,” Tim said.

“It’s weird. Your face. Do you want to tell me?”

“I do not,” Tim said.

Bell didn’t look happy, but she didn’t push it. She told Tim to return in two hours’ time for his first lesson.

What should have been an hour of training turned into two, and then three. Most of the kids had skills, but lacked finesse.

One night turned into two. And then three. Tim spent most of his time out on the training fields, working with Bell and her soldiers. On the fourth day, Tim returned to find the windows of his guard tower had been replaced and the interior cleaned. He called Rhys, unsure if he was angry or not.

“If you insist on staying all the way out there, the least we could do is make sure you didn’t freeze to death or catch an infection or something.”

“You worry too much,” Tim said. He couldn’t deny the place looked a little more habitable, with the floor cleared and the vines taken down. The cleaning crew had even left a little space heater, which would be useful at night.

“I told you, there’s no such thing on Pandora. Hey, have you eaten dinner yet?”

Tim thought about telling him that he had, but Rhys went on.
“It’s bean and veggie stew and flatbread night in the caf. Sash and Fi are gonna be there, too. Meet me in my office. We can head over together.”

Tim knew this wasn’t smart, even as he trudged back towards the compound. He told himself that it was safer here, under Atlas’ dome. If Lilith and her Raiders were after him, it only made sense to go to ground for a while, wait for the heat to die off. Might as well stay. It wasn’t like he would be here forever.

Rhys smiled at him when he stepped inside his office.

“Perfect timing!” he said. “I’m just finishing up the last of these reports. You wouldn’t believe how much of my job is just giving people permission to do what they want…”

Tim took a seat on the little couch. Todd entered a moment later, casting Tim an uneasy look. He collected the small stack of tablets on Rhys’ desk, giving Rhys a dazzling smile.

“Is there anything else I can do, sir?” he asked, eager.

“Nah, that’s all. Come on, Tim. Let’s get over there before all the good stuff is gone.”

Todd gave Tim an outright nasty look as Rhys swept him up and took him outside, confirming a few of Tim’s growing suspicions.

Got a crush on the boss, huh kiddo? Given how good looking Rhys was, Tim would be surprised if Todd was the only one.

“How’s the training going?” Rhys asked as they made their way down to the mess hall.

“Fine. Georges managed to pin Talu in under thirty seconds today, and Maverick shot half a clip into centre mass.”

“I’ve been reading the reports Bell has been sending me,” Rhys said as they stepped into the elevator. “But they’re not really detailed. To be honest, she’s pretty slammed with her own paperwork. I was sort of hoping you might take over some of her duties. On a temporary basis, of course,” he added as Tim shifted on his feet. “I’d pay you.”

“I guess I could,” Tim said as the elevator doors slid shut. He breathed out, crossing his arms tightly. Rhys glanced at him from the corner of his eyes.

“I’ve already discussed it with Bell. She’s got some things she’d like you to take care of. She can give you the full list tomorrow,” he said.

“Right.” Tim watched the floors blink past on the display.

“I’ve transferred some funds to your account,” he went on in a light voice. “Enough that you could probably pay a visit to the Atlas tailor, if you wanted.”

Tim huffed. “This again?”

Rhys leaned against the wall. “Atlas has got an image to maintain. If you’re going to work for me, you’ve got to look the part.”

“For the last time, I’m not an Atlas employee. I’m just… helping out for a little while,” Tim said. Rhys shook his head, watching the numbers drop.

“Whatever you say. But a new outfit couldn’t hurt.”
Tim looked down at his borrowed clothes with a hidden frown. He didn’t know whose clothes he was wearing, or if they’d even belonged to anyone before the pile of military slacks and t-shirts found their way to his tree house. Maybe they were just something else dug up from the underground Atlas vaults, same as the weapons Atlas’ security team carried.

“What’s wrong with what I’ve got?” he asked. Rhys only shook his head, his smirk widening.

He didn’t mention it again for the rest of the night. Fiona and Sasha sat at a table with two empty seats. They seemed pleasantly surprised to see Rhys, and a little less pleasantly surprised to see Tim. At least, Fiona did. Sasha had a sly look on her face that implied things Tim didn’t like to examine too closely.

Dinner passed without incident and soon Rhys was walking Tim through the compound, and into the forest outside.

“You don’t have to do this,” Tim said, when he realised Rhys intended to walk him back to his tree house.

Rhys gave him an innocent look. “Would you rather be alone right now?”

“It’s just out of your way, isn’t it?” Tim said, deflecting the question. Rhys shrugged.

“I don’t mind. I haven’t seen you in a few days.” He gave Tim a small smile. “And I like spending time with you.”

Alarms went off in Tim’s head, barely audible over the sound of his heart thudding against his chest.

“…can see about making something,” Rhys said, and Tim realised he’d been talking for a while.

“Hm?” he said. Rhys stared at him, one brow raised. “Sorry. What were you saying?”

“I was saying, the cook has asked if there’s anything you’d like her to make for you. If you’ve got a special dish or something you miss from home. I don’t know what the regional food was like in your part of Menoetius, but…”

“Oh.” Tim fidgeted. “I don’t know. Don’t worry about it. There’s no reason…” He stopped at the exasperated look Rhys threw him.

“Eunjoo is trying to be nice. Maybe you could, I don’t know, just let someone do something nice for you?”

“It isn’t necessary,” Tim muttered.

“Of course it isn’t necessary. That’s the whole point of doing something nice for someone,” Rhys said. He sighed when Tim didn’t respond. “Just think about it, okay?” He brushed his hand across Tim’s back, a small, comforting gesture that Tim tried not to flinch away from.

Night had fallen completely. They trekked through the forest, listening to the sounds of insects singing.

“No pancakes,” Tim said at last. Rhys quirked a brow. “Anything is fine, really. I just… don’t like pancakes.”

“I think she can work with that,” Rhys said.

They arrived in front of Tim’s temporary home. Rhys stood within reach of Tim, his hands loose at
his sides, and a small, warm smile on his face that Tim tried (and failed) not to look at.

Tim felt like a graveyard in a horror movie. Things long buried returning for an ill-planned sequel to the original massacre. The longer he stayed, the more dangerous it all felt. The last time he’d felt like this, he’d barely escaped with his life.

And there was the not-insignificant matter of his face, of Rhys’ own history with Jack.

This is a mistake, he told himself. Staying was a mistake. Get out now, before anyone gets hurt.

“See you tomorrow?” Rhys asked, sweet and hopeful.

“Sure,” Tim said, weak and hating himself for it.

THEN

Tim behaved himself. He did as he was told, and he did it for years. Occasionally, Jack even seemed satisfied with his performance.

Tim became Jack. With his trainers, with his boots on the ground, with a gun in his hands, he was Jack.

When his stomach clenched when the doors to his apartment closed, when he flinched at loud, sudden noises, when he woke up shivering from half-remembered nightmares, he was Tim. Tim existed to be Jack’s shadow, the burial ground for all the weaknesses Jack couldn’t afford to have. And Tim had so many.

Jack’s name became well-known, synonymous with blood on the ground and the smell of spent gunpowder in the air. Tim got better at acting, and at surviving. He walked away more frequently, spent fewer Anshins, and smiled at the cameras.

The cameras were new. Jack—and Hyperion—liked the idea of propaganda pieces to spread around the border planets, give the natives a little incentive to respect Hyperion property, to avoid tampering, or plundering. Tim didn’t like being filmed, but what did that matter? Jack watched him all the time.

“You look so good, baby,” Jack said, sucking fresh bruises into his neck. “Good enough to eat.”

As if there was enough of him left for a meal. Tim tilted his head back and closed his eyes, happy to have Jack stay.

There were good days. Days when Jack would stick around, treat him nice, or as nice as he ever got. Days when Jack seemed pleased with Tim, and not just with Tim’s progress but with Tim himself, even with all of his flaws.

And there were bad days.

Some days Jack would get angry, and that could be unpleasant but Tim could handle the beatings, the lectures. He could be strong for Jack. It wasn’t as if it mattered that much in the long run, anyway.

He hated when Jack would mock him, call him pathetic. He preferred Jack’s hands around his neck to the disgusted curl of his lip, the dismissive roll of his eyes. Like Tim wasn’t even worth hitting.

He hated the most when Jack would lock him away, leave him alone. There hadn’t been another month-long stretch, not since Tim’s break, but Jack would lock him in his room for a day or two,
sometimes longer, if he got fed up and frustrated enough. On those days, Tim would take his medicine, curl up in the corner, rehearse his apologies, and wait.

( “I don’t want your apologies, princess. I want you to do better.”

“I’m—I’m trying.”

“Who gives a shit? Just do better. Christ. And cut it out with the waterworks, would you? It makes us look weak.”)

Jack rose in the ranks. Helios was nearly complete, the multi-trillion dollar satellite, built on the promise of vaults and the Eridian legacy left behind on Pandora and Elpis. A promise Jack himself made to the board, to the investors, to Tassiter himself.

“Is it true?” Tim asked. “All that stuff about the vaults and sirens and the rest of it. You believe it?”

Jack’s smile was a pale shape in the dim bedroom. “Of course I believe it, cupcake. Have you ever known me to promise something I couldn’t deliver on?”

“You won’t give it to them, will you?” Tim asked. Jack pulled him close.

That had been a good night. The propaganda pieces were a huge success. They not only struck fear into the hearts of Hyperion’s enemies, they enticed the young and bright eyed into joining the corporate machine.

And Jack had been certain Helios was all but his.

His, not theirs. Tim wasn’t stupid. He could fool the cameras, the bandits, the rank and file, even the Hyperion brass when the need called for it. But he would never be Jack.

NOW

One morning, Tim woke up to the realisation that he’d been staying at Atlas for a month. He lay in his cot, watching the shadows of moving leaves on the ceiling of what he knew the recruits (and Rhys) called his tree house, and thought for the thousandth time about leaving. He composed a list, his personal fuck you list, which didn’t have very many points, but they all carried the same, crucial message:

1. Rhys is Handsome Jack’s ex
2. When he finds out you’re Jack’s doppelganger, he’ll feel hurt and angry
3. Stop thinking about Rhys
4. Staying in one place for too long will make you a soft target
5. Going soft will get you killed a lot faster
6. The longer you stay put, the greater the chance someone will discover your secret
7. Stop thinking about Rhys’ smile
8. You are Handsome goddamn Jack’s doppelganger, you stupid motherfucker

Tim ground the heels of his hands into his eyes. He faced danger almost nearly every day. It’d become his entire life since he fled Hyperion—maybe even before that. But all those times, all those firefights and burning buildings, all those angry men and women fixing to kill him, all of that was just him. This was the first time in a very long time that he felt he was putting someone else at risk.

Because make no mistake, this was dangerous. He didn’t know what Jack had done to Rhys, but if it was anything like the number Jack’d done to Tim…
The thought of Rhys being reminded of whatever past hurt he’d suffered just because of Tim’s face made Tim feel like an actual monster.

He should leave. Surely the Raiders would have lost interest in him by now. He could just pack up supplies and go.

The recruits all shared a communal shower hall, separate from the ones in the dormitories in the basement, conveniently close to their training hall. Tim suspected it’d used to be a chemical shower, but stalls had been erected around the room, giving it some privacy. Tim had stopped using the little creek about a week into his stay. The lure of hot, running water could not be overstated.

He brushed his teeth. The sun had climbed over the horizon, and the sky beyond the dome turned yellow and blue.

He could go to the mess hall. He knew a little bit about where the chef kept her non-perishables. There was a safe house about sixty kilometres away.

Wednesday morning meant juk with fish and diced veggies, and a soup made from seaweed and kelp for breakfast. The whole cafeteria smelled of the sea. A few recruits nodded at him in the line-up. One smiled and said, “Good morning, Mr. Lawrence.”

Mr. Lawrence. Like he was their history teacher or something.

He didn’t see Rhys. He generally didn’t in the mornings. The CEO would’ve locked himself in his office by now, fielding requests, attending meetings, overseeing projects, something something dependable business matrices or whatever it was corporate higher ups did with their time. Rhys would occasionally try to explain his day to Tim, but even with his mask on, Rhys could tell Tim found it confusing.

He took his meal upstairs, to the training grounds, and ate under the morning sunlight. A few tamer members of the local wildlife beeped and squawked at him from the tree line, but none of them came up to him.

He thought about the snow beyond the dome. The only creatures ‘round here were likely bullymongs, the stupid bear-ape looking things with more teeth and claws than braincells. Occasionally, Captain Bell would arrange for a hunting party whenever the local population got too curious about the dome. It’d happened once since Tim arrived, and he caught himself thinking that he might join them if it happened again.

But it wouldn’t. Because he would leave.

Any day now.

Friendly’s technique had gotten better, although she had some bad habits she needed to unlearn. Tim had finally gotten her and her buddies to let go of the idea of knocking a man on his ass with a right hook to the jaw, but she still preferred to throw punches instead of using the moves Tim had painstakingly taught her.

Emphasis on ‘pain’. She really did have a solid jab, and the one she threw during a simple sparring session caught Tim not on his jaw but on his brow.

Their audience groaned and laughed, a typical reaction to seeing their teacher get knocked down. It wasn’t often his pupils got the drop on him. Of course it had to be Friendly.
“You okay, sir?” a recruit named Tula asked, giggling.

The skin had broken and things had gotten graphic. Blood fell quicker than Tim could wipe it away. Tim didn’t know how much they could see under the veil of his mask, but blood dripped down his chin, stained his hand.

“Take a good look, kids. There’s plenty of blood vessels in a person’s head, and a knock to the brow can blind your enemy. Although I would recommend using the butt of your gun, and not your fists.” He wiped at his forehead with a wince. His head felt numb and light, which he knew wouldn’t last. “How’s the hand, Friendly?”

Friendly grinned at him, even as she cradled her fist against her chest. “Sorry, boss.”

“Not your boss, Friendly. Shit.” It really was getting hard to see. Tim gave a small shake of his head, trying to shake some of the blood loose. He stumbled back, blinking hard against the spots appearing in his vision.

“You should go to the med wing, sir,” Tula said, smile fading.

“Did I give you a concussion, sir?” Friendly asked nervously.

Probably, Tim thought.

“Class dismissed. Friendly, find an Anshin for your hand. I’m just gonna…” He paused, smearing more blood across his face with a wipe of his hand, and sighed. Med wing. Right.

It wasn’t a wing, really, although it had been before Rhys and his people took over. Most of the rooms had been claimed for other departments, the medical equipment pushed into storage or traded off to local settlements. Two rooms served as the building’s clinic, staffed by one doctor with questionable credentials. She took one look at Tim and gave him a healing patch and two painkillers. He looked at both like she’d slapped a dead fish in his hands.

“What about a syringe?” he asked.

“We’re low,” she said. “Your recruits’ve worn out our supplies. We’re due for another delivery in two weeks. ‘Til then, you’ll have to heal the old fashioned way.”

Tim looked down at the patch and wondered when a medically treated device designed to speed up the body’s natural healing process became ‘old fashioned’. The instant gratification of Anshins had definitely spoiled them.

The doctor helped him clean up and applied the bandage. The medical pad warmed upon contact and almost immediately, Tim began to feel better. It’d still be a day or two before he was back to normal, but at least it would avoid the worst of the swelling. The doc told him he could lie down for a while, but Tim took one look at the windowless clinic and told her he’d be fine.

The clinic was in a sub-basement, level 7 of 24. Under normal circumstances, Tim would use the stairs to climb back to the surface, but his head still felt tender and it wouldn’t be a very long elevator ride. It wasn’t easy convincing himself to remain calm as he pressed the call button. He tried to think of something else.

Had Eunjoo written down the dinner menu yet? He kept waiting for another noodle night, but lately all they’d been having was rice, soup and little side dishes. He hoped they had those spicy pickled radish things again.
He wondered if Rhys would come out for dinner tonight. He’d joined them in the mess hall last night. He’d sat across from Tim and nudged his leg with his foot. Tim had tried to move away, but Rhys kept doing it and it took Tim an embarrassingly long time to figure out that he’d been doing it on purpose. That he’d been flirting with Tim. It took Tim even longer to remember why it was a bad idea, and by that time he’d been alone in his room. Conveniently too late to tell Rhys to stop.

A technician sidled up beside him, shooting him a nervous look he ignored. Tim ran a hand down his face, dried blood flaking off with the movement. He really thought they’d put the sexual tension thing to bed back at the hot springs. He just had to try again. Make it clear to Rhys that he wasn’t interested, no matter how nice the attention felt. Tim couldn’t be selfish about this, even if it might hurt the kid’s feelings.

Or he could just fucking leave. Like he should’ve done last week, or yesterday, or this morning. He could head up to the surface right now, grab his things, some supplies, and be gone before supper time.

Tim fidgeted. The elevator arrived with a cheerful chime. The technician scurried inside, nose buried in her ECHOtab. Tim dawdled a second longer, took a step forward—

The lights flickered overhead and the ground seemed to tremble. He froze. The technician looked up at last, her brow furrowing.

“Uh, are you—“ she began. The building rumbled. Tim could feel it through the soles of his feet. Dust hissed down from the ceiling.

The lights died. Alarms rang.

“PLEASE REMAIN CALM. LEVELS 1 THROUGH SUB-BASEMENT 24 HAVE BEEN SEALED FOR YOUR PROTECTION. PLEASE PROCEED IN A CALM AND ORDERLY MANNER TO YOUR DESIGNATED SAFETY ZONE. PLEASE REMAIN CALM…”

Tim jogged down the hall, feeling neither calm nor orderly. Other employees streamed past in the opposite direction, presumably towards the designated safety zone. Tim imagined another large, windowless room filled with people and decided he wanted no part of it. He forced his way through, towards the stairs. The elevators had shut down when the alarm went off, and if the automated voice over the PA was to be believed, all the levels had been sealed off (fuck don’t think of it like that, there’s always a way out, nothing has been sealed like a tomb, fuck fuck fuck) but Tim gambled on his clearance getting him past the security locks.

The stairwell door was closed. He pressed his hand against the security pad, which flashed red. Tim took a calm breath and reached for his pistol.

His ECHO buzzed before he could open fire, a voice informing him that the ATLAS CEO was calling.

Rhys’ voice came faintly through fuzz and distortion. He sounded out of breath. “Thank god—Tim is that you?”

“I need you to unlock the door,” Tim said at the same time.

“You—“ Rhys broke off with a strained laugh. “Believe me, I would if I could. Where are you? Are you underground?”

“Yes,” Tim said through grit teeth.
“Which level? I can’t—“ More fuzz, drowning out Rhys’ words. “—rong with the frequency. I think maybe something’s knocked out our tower. I...” Another burst of static.

“Rhys, slow down.” Tim ducked his head and plugged his other ear. “Did you say something’s wrong with your frequency?”

“Which level are you on?”

“Seventh sub-basement.”

“—say seventh? Can you—stairs?”

“The doors won’t open. My clearance must not be high enough.”

“No, that’s—possible. It must be—...ference. I need—help.”

Tim’s heart thudded against his chest. “What’s wrong?”

“—trapped in—needle room. We’ve got—rious problem. I need—help I can get.”

“Trapped where? Did you say the ‘needle room’?”

“Yeah. It’s—as it sounds. I’m on sub—24.”

Tim aimed his pistol at the pad and pulled the trigger. A shield flickered across it, but three shots took it down.

“What—doing? Were those—?”

The pad spat out sparks, the screen flickering, but the door remained shut. Tim cursed.

“Nevermind that.” Tim slammed his palm against the cracked screen, but nothing happened. “Just some troubleshooting that didn’t work out. Are you in danger?”


“How? I can’t get into the stairwell and the elevators aren’t working.” Tim looked around the hallway. He could spot a few vents, but they were far too small to admit a man of his size. The emergency lights had come on, flooding the space with red. It made the shadows look deeper.

Static greeted his words. Tim glared at the sealed door and wished he’d brought explosives.

Think, dum-dum. There’s gotta be more than one way to skin a cat.

Tim recalled the elevators. One sat with its doors open, still stationed on his floor. And hadn’t he seen a maintenance hatch? Right at the top?

“Tim,” Rhys’ voice caught him off guard, causing him to stumble as he sped back towards the elevators. “—need your help. Whatever—doing—fast. Please.”

The halls were empty now, the few employees on sub-level seven having retreated to their designated safety zone. Despite what potentially waited for him far below, he still didn’t envy them.

The elevator was still there, still open. And there, on the ceiling, was the maintenance hatch. It’d be a tight fit, he decided as he eyeballed it, but not impossible. Tim dragged a chair from one of the empty
“Coming quick as I can, boss.” Tim knocked the hatch open.

“Be safe—please.”

Tim pulled himself up until he was on top of the elevator. He ignored the way his stomach clenched as he stared down the wide shaft. Wires hung on either side, attached to the other elevators. He tensed, swallowed a fluttering of fear, and jumped. He slammed into the wires, legs scrambling and arms tightening. He wrapped himself around the rail, sliding down only a few heart-thumping feet before slowing to a stop.

He breathed out.

“Don’t worry about me, boss.” He looked down, and wished he hadn’t. “Just sit tight ‘til I get there,” he said, voice cracking. He began his descent.

Tim tried not to rush. He kept the frequency open, although he didn’t have the breath to speak. Rhys talked a little, filling him in on what he could over the spotty connection.

“Accident with the—eridium. A test that—bad. Don’t know—happened but—on it.”

Tim hummed to indicate he was still there, still listening. The distance between himself and what he tried not to think of as the ‘splatter zone’ was growing smaller and smaller. He really wanted to be finished. He never thought he’d look forward to emerging into an underground, sealed off (fuck stop thinking of it as sealed off fuck fuck) laboratory, but here he was. He didn’t know if it was a relief to learn his fear of heights trumped his fear of enclosed spaces.

“Everyone—out before the lockdown but I—behind.”

“Stupid,” Tim wheezed. How many floors? He took a peek and guessed fewer than five left.

Rhys chuckled, and even over the pops and static, he could hear the strain in his voice.

“Yeah. Probably. But—baby, you know?”

Tim didn’t, and didn’t want to spare the breath to tell him.

Thirty seconds later, he landed on solid ground with tingling feet and shaking legs. His head gave a weak throb, which he ignored. He pried the doors open and found Rhys waiting anxiously for him on the other side.

“Thank god,” he said and grabbed Tim by the arm. “It’s the needle, something went wrong, I don’t know how it happened because I can’t get into the systems because the eridium radiation is messing with the ECHO signals. I couldn’t get a hold of anyone, they must’ve all been too far above ground and the signal couldn’t reach them. I can’t tell you how relieved I am that I got you but Tim—“ He stopped them in front of a pair of heavy-duty doors, with the words ‘CONTROL CORE’ carved above.

“You should know. This is going to be dangerous.”

“How dangerous?” Tim asked. He hadn’t missed the mention of ‘eridium radiation’, two words he never liked hearing together.

“It’s the needle.” Rhys leaned down to the retinal scanner. Tim noticed for the first time the way his
cybernetic arm hung limp at his side. “It was built to dig into the eridium vein located directly under the facility. We had to dig for months to get to it.” The doors hissed open. “It’s designed to harness the eridium without actually pulling it from the planet.”

“Like a power source?” Tim asked. Rhys lead him into what looked like a circular observation room. It wrapped around a large, deep chamber with a long, thin metallic device built into the centre. Tim peered down, ignoring the flutter of fear in his stomach, and saw where the original floor had been split open, where massive machinery had dug in deep and pried a hole into the heart of the planet. Tim tracked its depth until the shadows became too dark, and the cavern too deep. He swallowed and looked away.

“It’s… Something like that. But not exactly.” Rhys cast a glance to the stack of humming consoles that filled the room, the blue light of the monitor washing out the colour on his face. “Look, I’ll tell you everything later, but right now I need you to focus. The radiation—it’s too much.”

“What happened to your arm?” Tim asked.

Rhys’ left hand fluttered to the cybernetic, gripping the sleek bicep.

“The eridium,” he said. “I don’t know how it happened. We weren’t supposed to—“ He stopped, inhaled sharply. “It doesn’t matter. The eridium core’s been breached, and the needle’s accessing its energy but it’s—it’s not ready to handle it. The initial wave was like an electro-magnetic blast.” Rhys’ lips twisted as he scowled at the computer. “It knocked out my arm. I only just managed to get my eye online, but it’s in safe mode. The radiation’s building up and it won’t be long before the needle is forced to vent the access energy, but if the computer’s projections are right, then it won’t… go well.”

“You mean it’ll explode,” Tim said.

Rhys nodded, looking miserable. “It’ll take the facility with it. Kill us all.”

The whole room was awash in the violet-blue glow of eridium. Sweat prickled under Tim’s collar.

“How long?” he asked.

“If it keeps building at this rate?” Rhys leaned over the keyboard and stared up at the screen, where graphs displayed data too complicated for Tim to follow. “Ten minutes.”

Tim’s dragged his gaze back to the chamber. The glow pulsed as he watched, bathing the metal and glass needle in violet. Eridium always did look beautiful.

“What do you need me to do?” he asked.

Rhys wiped the sweat off his forehead. “We need to access the safety override. It'll stop the needle from drawing any more energy from the eridium and stop the radiation build-up. It’s a two person operation. I can shut down the program from in here, but I need a pair of hands out there to enact the manual override. The radiation’s dangerous, so you’ll need to wear a containment suit.” Rhys watched the numbers climb and the graph fluxuate.

Tim waited. He could feel the ‘but’ coming.

“The override process will take some time,” Rhys said. “There’s a code you have to punch in. I’ll walk you through the process. But…”

There it is.
“When the needle first pierced the vein, it created a mild quake,” Rhys said. “We got everyone out in time but... I think there might’ve been some structural damage. The walkway... might not be entirely stable.”

“Right. So, you’re telling me you want me to go into an irradiated room on an unstable platform to override a device that might be too damaged to use. Is that about it?”

Rhys bowed his head and sucked in a long breath.

“Yeah,” he said, turning to face Tim. “That’s about it.”

Tim nodded. “Where’s the suit?”

The doors sealed behind Tim with a hiss of released air. He stood in the decontamination chamber, holding his breath and waiting for the countdown to finish. Thirty seconds seemed like a lot when he only had about ten minutes to save a few hundred people.

He adjusted his stance and tried to control his breathing. He could feel each exhale against his skin, the clear shield over his face fogging with each breath. As soon as he strapped himself into the containment suit, he started to notice a thousand little itches, a million little discomforts. He tried to ignore them.

“You sure you don’t need your clones?” Rhys asked. Tim couldn’t see him on the other side, but he could imagine him sitting in front of his console, typing as quickly as he could with one arm.

Tim had considered it, but knew it wouldn’t work. They were strong fighters, but they were fragile. As soon as their shields died, it only took one shot to kill them. The growing ache in his head reminded him that he couldn’t exactly afford the additional hit a summoning and dismissal would give him.

“If the radiation’s as bad as you say, they won’t last long enough to be any use,” Tim said.

The countdown hit zero and the doors finally parted. The chamber looked worse from the inside. Tim could see more clearly the chunks missing from the walls, the cracks that crawled up to the ceiling, black dips and lines in the violet light. The needle hummed where it stood, vibrating at a frequency Tim could feel in his teeth. Surrounding the needle was the circular walk-way, the industrial grating-type of structure Tim had seen a thousand times in factories across the galaxy. Opposite from where he stood, he could see where the guard rail had twisted, where the grating dipped and warped, as though hit by something massive. He looked up and saw where a portion of the cave-like ceiling had collapsed.

He stepped out carefully, wincing when he heard the floor creak. He could see where the needle punctured the ground, a massive hole dug out far below, where the eridium glowed bright enough to make his eyes water. Tim’s heart sped up at the sight.

“Looks like there’s some damage out here,” he said.

“Probably happened when the needle pierced the vein.”

“That’s a disgusting way to phrase it,” Tim muttered.

“Just be careful around anything sharp that might puncture or rip your suit.”

“Okay. Was sort of planning on that already.”
“Good. Because it would only take three minutes of exposure to kill you.”

“Right. Great. Noted. What now?” Tim asked. The edges of the needle blurred and Tim could feel the heat building through it, the unspent energy, even through his suit.

“There should be a console beside the needle, with a cage over the top. I’ve already disengaged the lock. Inside you should see nine cylinders above a display screen. Do you see it?”

“Yeah. What do I do?”

“Tell me what you see.”

They were crystal cylinders, made from what Tim only sort of recognized as a lab-grown composition of eridium and terran diamond, a blend that made use of the rigid strength of diamond and the bizarre conductive properties of eridium. Hellishly expensive.

They were encased in glass tubes, nestled into the console. Their soft lavender light looked almost pleasant. Except…

“I see nine cylinders, but they’re not sitting right. Looks like something knocked ‘em loose.”

He heard Rhys sigh. “Yeah, I kind of thought that might be the case. Okay. First thing’s first. There should be a screen and a keypad just below the cylinders. Do you see them?”

He did, just where Rhys described. A screen about the size of his hand and an even smaller keypad with tiny keys.

“Don’t tell me I have to type stuff in,” he said, looking down at the thick material of his gloves.

“Sorry. I’m going to give you a code and I need you to type it in exactly as I say.”

Tim flexed his fingers. A stab of pain shot up his right arm, followed by a tingling, numbing sensation. He frowned and shook his hand out.

“Everything alright?”

How long did they have before melt-down? Probably better not to think about that now.

“Fine. Hit me, boss.”

He pecked the string of numbers Rhys rattled off as delicately as he could manage. He hit enter. The needle shuddered and began to hum at a higher frequency, one he could feel like a needle inserted into his ear canal. It didn’t hurt, not yet, but it felt thin and delicate and a breath away from piercing.

“Fuck.” He reached up to pinch his nose before remembering about the suit. “Right. What now?”

The ground below him rumbled like the stomach of a giant, shaking the walkway. Tim froze, the memory of the vast distance between the soles of his feet and the floor forcing its way into his overcrowded brain. It made itself at home as sweat prickled on his forehead and his stomach soured.

“You okay?”

“Fine.” He swallowed against the roiling nausea and tried to breathe through the spike in his pulse. “C’mon boss, we’re on a time limit here.”

“Right. Okay. Look at the cylinders and tell me what you see.”
The soft lavender glow had been replaced with a deep red. He told Rhys.

“Good. Okay. Now, at the top of each cylinder there should be a number of 1 to 9. Do you see them?”

“Yeah, 1 to 9.”

“I need you to carefully remove each cylinder in the order I tell you and then I need you to replace them in a new order. It’s important that you follow the order and that you don’t let the cylinders touch the sides when you remove or replace them. I’ll guide you through the whole thing, but I need you to be really, really, really careful with this, Tim.”

“Got it.”

“No, I mean—really careful. The amount of radiation built up right now needs to be safely vented before it has a chance to go wrong for us. Those cylinders are what conduct the excess radiation and they’ve been knocked out of socket. You can’t let them touch the sides when you remove them. Each one contains enough eridium to evaporate you where you stand. One wrong move and—“

“Kaboom, yeah, I get the picture.” He could feel the humming in his nose, vibrating the cartilage, building up pressure behind his brows. Pain spiked up his arm, a sharper, more persistent ache that sent a numbing sensation all the way up to his shoulder. He shook it out again, flexing his fingers until the sensation returned. The thing in his wrist seemed to vibrate in frequency with the needle.

He took a breath. It was fine, it would be fine. Focus.

“I’m ready.”


Tim worked as slowly and carefully as he could manage. He tucked the unused cylinder under his arm, unsure what else to do with it until he could give it a new home.

Pain grew like a weed through his sinuses, under the fused device in his right wrist. He ignored both aches while he worked.

The ground rumbled again, and this time Tim could hear the walls around him crack. Dust rained down from the ceiling, small pebbles bounced off the grating which swayed under Tim’s feet like a fragile, eggshell thing. The hole below felt like an open throat and even though Tim didn’t look, he could see it in his mind’s eye.

With both hands occupied, he couldn’t reach for a guardrail to steady himself. Tim stayed very still, as though his fear were a bear he could just trick into walking away. He stared out at the needle, at the wall.

Except it wasn’t a wall. It was a cave and he was underground. He was deep underground and for all he knew that last quake could’ve knocked out the ventilation system and he’d been sealed off. The next quake could destroy the exits, block the doors with fallen debris.

Tim’s vision began to grey around the edges and his pulse pounded in his ears, almost drowning out the drill-like whine of the needle.

Fuck what was he doing here he could fall and break his legs, his neck, but he wouldn’t die right away he’d just suffer at the bottom of a deep hole until he starved, and no one would hear him
screaming for help and Rhys could just leave because he—

He wasn’t trustworthy. He never paid you! He lied to you, remember?

Tim remembered and he focused on that. He gripped the memory of his anger with desperation, until he could feel it flooding through his body, lighting up synapses. He looked down at the cylinders still in his hands and brought his mind back into the present.

“…Tim? Tim, please, I need you to talk to me. We don’t have a lot of time.” Rhys’d been speaking for a while, Tim realised. The sound of his voice was like a struck match to a fuse.

“You lied to me,” Tim said as he held cylinder 5 over its new slot.

“What?”

“The money. You were lying to me about the money. You owed me three thousand dollars and I haven’t seen a fucking dime.” Tim could hear his voice trembling, but he was gratified that it sounded more like repressed rage than all his petty, irrational fears.

He lowered the cylinder, breathing carefully to steady his hand. It still shook, but not enough to kill him just yet.

“Um. You want to talk about this now?”

“Yes!” More than anything. Cylinder 5 snapped into place, and its red light turned lavender.

“Cylinder 5’s in place and you’re an asshole.”

Stunned silence and the quiet hiss of an open frequency greeted his words. “I’m… sorry? Seriously, are we doing this right now?”

Tim grit his teeth. “Yes! What’s next?”

“Cylinder 8 with cylinder 7, and then cylinder 6 with cylinder 8, and I wasn’t lying to you, Tim.”

Tim laughed. He tucked cylinder 7 under his arm and used both hands to carefully remove the crystal marked with the number 8.

“I’m not! I’m sorry that it’s taken so long to get the funds transferred for your original job, but it’s not like I’ve given you nothing.” Oh, he sounded annoyed now. Good. Tim held that anger and let it warm him from the inside.

“So, I should be thankful you’ve actually decided to give me anything after all the work I’ve done for you? I didn’t realise Atlas employees had to beg for scraps.” The seventh cylinder rattled a little as he slowly replaced it.

“That’s not… Of course they don’t,” Rhys snapped. “Anyway, as you’re so fond of pointing out, you aren’t an actual Atlas employee because you’re too stubborn to sign the goddamn paperwork.”

“Oh, it’s an extortion game, is it? You’ll hold my paycheque until I sign over my soul?” The seventh cylinder slid home with a satisfying click. He breathed out.

“I’m not asking for your soul! Why are we doing this right now?” Rhys sounded frustrated, exasperated.

“Because I heard you, that night at Etna’s. I heard you talking to Fiona about the money you promised me. Cylinders 7 and 8 are secure.”
“I—Cylinder 9 with 6, then replaced cylinder 9 with 1. Look, I might’ve… overstated my available funds, but it wasn’t like I—“

“You were never going to tell me, were you?” Tim asked. Sweat beaded at his brow, and while the bandage around his head kept the worst of it out of his eyes, he knew it’d get soaked through sooner or later.

Tim felt like a walking furnace. He felt like a live wire. He pounded away at his anger until it crystalized, until he could see straight again, and the anger that came out of the realization that Rhys would’ve kept Tim in the dark, would’ve kept lying to him even as he played footsie and shared noodles and took up Tim’s space—all of it felt clear and sharp and perfect.

“You would’ve just kept lying to my face,” Tim went on. He carefully replaced cylinder 9 with the one marked 6. “After I saved your fucking life. Twice. And got you that stupid artefact. Do you know I nearly died? Every single time I stuck my neck out for you, I nearly lost my head. And now this.” Tim felt perspiration trickle down his brow. The pain in his head thrummed.

Rhys didn’t say anything. Tim removed cylinder 1 and tried to relax. He shifted cylinder 9 from his grip and started the process over. He didn’t know how much time he had left. His fuck you list had gotten too long to track, a line that trailed off out of his conscious thoughts.

“I always intended to pay you, Tim,” Rhys said at last. “I wasn’t trying to… I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was always going to pay you. And I—I appreciate what you’ve done for me.”

Tim snorted.

“It’s true! I know how dangerous it’s been. I know how dangerous this is and I’m—I’m so grateful it’s you that came out.” A pause. He could hear Rhys breathe out hard. “You want to know something?”

Cylinder 9 clicked home and its light turned lavender. “I want to know what’s next.”

“I to 3, and then 3 to the last space. When the alarm went off and the needle hit the vein and my arm went dead and everything went to hell, I was down here all alone. I’d sent everyone away because I thought I could put this thing to bed myself and when the wave hit, and it knocked out my cybernetics...”

Tim didn’t speak. After the flood of adrenaline, came the wave of something else. Pain needled his wrist, a sharp, consistent throb. He swallowed and let his mind calm, a clarity that came within easier reach after anger. Last one.

“Truth is, when I got an ECHO working, yours was the first frequency I tried.”

Tim pulled the last cylinder free, even as the tips of his fingers began to tingle. Red turned to lavender. He shifted cylinder 1 to his hands and began the replacement process.

“I thought you said you couldn’t get anyone else,” he said.

“I tried others after,” Rhys said defensively. “But—I mean, I didn’t even think about it. I just. I called you first. I wanted you first.”

“Because I’m a sucker?” Tim’s voice sounded distant, even to his own ears.

“Because I trust you,” Rhys said. “And I really want you to trust me, too.”
“That’s nice.” Tim shook his head, trying to knock the gathering perspiration loose. “But words and deeds are two different things, stretch.”

“I know that. I’m… I’m sorry.” It sounded painful, like he’d pulled a tooth. Tim’s anger had long faded, leaving him feeling curiously light, almost empty. “As soon as we make it out of here, I’ll pay you what I owe you. I promise.”

“Why should I trust you?” Tim asked. “Because you asked me to?”

Rhys didn’t respond. Tim lowered the last cylinder, cradling it gingerly with his left hand.

“You’re right. I’ll earn it, Tim. I’ll put my money where my mouth is. Literally.” Tim thought he could hear Rhys’ weak smile. “S-sort of.”

Cylinder 3 lowered slowly. Sweat pricked at the corner of Tim’s eyes. The numbing feeling spread to the palm of his hand.

“It’s not just about money, Rhys. If you want me to trust you, you’ve got to be honest with me.”

“Absolutely. I promise—”

“Tell me about Epimetheus,” Tim said. Rhys fell silent. “When we’re finished this, I want you to tell me about this project you’re willing to risk other people’s lives over.”

“I… wouldn’t put it quite like that.” Rhys sighed over the line. “But yes, okay. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

“Really? Anything?”

“Yes. I promise, I’ll be totally straight with you once we’re out of here.”


“That’s fantastic, Tim.” He heard the tapping of a keyboard on the other end. “All you’ve got to do after is enter in another code and the needle will power down. The cylinders will be able to properly store the excess radiation and the facility won’t melt down.”

“Good.” Tim’s fingers twitched. A needle of pain stabbed into his elbow. “I just—“

The ground rumbled and Tim heard the cracks before he could see them. He looked up in time to see the rain of dust fall from above, to see fresh breaks in the stone. The ground beneath him made a sound like the firing of a cannon and the walkway gave a dangerous lurch. Tim stumbled back, his footing slick against the metal grating.

He landed hard against the broken guardrail behind him, as rocks rained down from the ceiling. A stone the size of his fist bounced off his helmet and Tim felt it in the still-healing head wound.

He fell back, putting his entire weight against the creaking rail and he felt it bend further. He kept enough mind to grip the cylinder with his right hand, but as soon as he curled his fingers the pain growing under his wrist erupted like a strike of lightning. His fingers seized and the cylinder fell.

“Tim? What’s happening?”

The guardrail snapped. Tim fell.
Next week's update will be a little early as I'll be out of town, visiting family.

Thank you all again for the very kind comments. Last chapter was probably the most I've ever gotten, which left me feeling overwhelmed and flattered. Have a happy holidays and I'll see you before the new year.

Next chapter: Tim hangs by a thread.
Rhys had never been the philosophical type. Some of his fellow digital engineering classmates had. There were classes you could take, electives that explored the less-concrete aspects of their calling. Rhys’ schedule was packed full of what he’d need to graduate in the shortest amount of time, and the small amount of room he had for electives were filled with courses with names like Advanced Project Management, Leadership Development, Personal Wealth Management, and others that took him to the Gindol Building on the south side of campus. Sell-Out Central, Vaughn had called it.

More than once, Rhys’d walk past a dorm room and overhear snatches of conversation, theories about the nature of AIs. About what humanity meant and how souls were defined and if an AI could learn, could grow, could it become a person in the eyes of its creator?

Rhys had never really gave them much consideration. Even after he traded pieces of his body, his brain, for cybernetic improvements that left him in recuperation for months, with almost nothing better to do than ride the fuzzy waves of pain killing medication and consider half-baked philosophy, he didn’t think about it. (Honestly, he didn’t think about much except for how shiny his new arm looked and how awesome drugs were.)

It was only at 27, sharing headspace with the AI of his one-time idol and current… whatever it was they were, that he started to replay what he overheard from those rambling, weed-fueled musings.

Rhys didn’t know where his space ended and Jack’s began. Jack could access the information in his port, he could store himself in the memory cells in Rhys’ arm and eye. Rhys himself had let Jack further into his subsystems, pushing further boundaries, until Jack could apparently take Rhys’ body for a spin after he’d been knocked unconscious.

That hadn’t sat well with Rhys. Jack had laughed off his concerns. He said he’d only done it because they were dead otherwise. He’d done Rhys a favour, really. Shouldn’t Rhys be grateful? Weren’t they a team?
This last line, delivered with a hint of a growl, a narrow of holographic eyes and Rhys felt dread fill up the space between his thoughts.

Of course they were a team. What was the alternative?

“You said everyone’s a back-stabber,” Rhys said. He’d felt rattled still from what Jack had done while he’d been out. His jaw still hurt.

“But it’s different with us. This is what I love about our arrangement. We need each other, you and me. Yeah, I might give you a hard time now and then, but I’ve been good to you, haven’t I? Because I need you, pumpkin. And you need me. It’s pure and simple.”

Rhys wondered how long Jack would need him. But when Jack looked at him, in the privacy of their shared delusion, Rhys almost didn’t care. His doubts became easier to swallow when Jack gave him that look, that smile, like they were co-conspirators, like they were alone together, sharing the same joke on everyone else.

It should’ve been so good. The future had never looked brighter.

What made an AI artificial? Did they belong to their creator? Where did the definition of life start? Where did it end?

Did they dream?

Jack did. And Rhys saw.

He saw images from a life he never lived. He saw the world from behind a wide, polished desk, a golden-yellow wing-back a blur in his periphery. He saw Elpis out his window, its shattered surface like the golden filament of a repaired vase.

He saw places he’d never been, a cathedral-like space made from rock, a wide, echoing chamber with a throne that formed under his feet. A throne that belonged to him. An artefact before him, a gift he fought hard for. The sense of wonder, satisfaction, righteousness hit him and it made him happier than he’d ever been, than anyone had ever been in any life. He felt risen, he felt a line drawn across his life of before and after.

A lot of what Jack dreamt about was violence. Enemies under his heels, on the other side of his loaded pistol, at the bottom of a wide pit, scattered across the landscape. Enemies in pieces, enemies with holes in their chests, enemies with limbs like broken straws.

But that wasn’t everything. Jack would dream of other things, quiet things. He saw people he didn’t recognize at the time, not right away.

He remembered them later, much later, in those long, long nights after Helios fell, after everything went to pieces. He lay on his back and counted Jack’s memories like sheep and didn’t fall asleep.

There was a woman, whose face was plain and whose hair was short. She had engine grease on her fingers and, in the dream, a smudge on her nose. She had her hair pinned back. She wore a sweater with a wide collar, like someone had grabbed hold and pulled it out of shape. Her jeans were worn, frayed where her hands rubbed against the pockets, where the hem dragged at her heels. Rhys knew her, although he didn’t recognize her.

Jack’s first wife.

No one had ever seen pictures. Her story wasn’t even well-known, except by a few die-hards on the
forums. But there wasn’t much to know. She’d married Jack, and then she’d died. For such a public figure, Jack kept a pretty tight lock-down on any info of his life pre-Hyperion. She hadn’t been perfect, she couldn’t have been, but it didn’t matter because tragedy had cast her memories in diamond. She was a stone angel, she was a sepia-toned, faded image in an old scrap book. Not a person, but an origin story.

Rhys dreamt of her only once, but it was enough.

There was another woman, once. Darker hair, prettier face. She wore a lab coat and heels and nothing else. Rhys burned with the memory.

He remembered her later, as Jack’s second wife, Serena. She’d been a bit more of a public figure, a chemical biologist in Hyperion’s R&D. She married Jack a year and a half after the first one died, and she had rebound written all over her. In a lot of ways, she was luckier than the sainted first wife. Although her involvement with Jack was destined to be nothing more than a footnote of history, she got out alive. She was still a person, wherever she was.

The third woman, he recognized immediately. Nisha the Law Bringer, Sherrif of Lynchwood. She’d come to Helios now and then, strolling through the halls with a bullwhip and pistol at her hip, leaving the desert behind in bootprints on the satellite’s shiny floors.

Rhys had seen her once in person, a brief encounter outside Henderson’s office that wasn’t really anything. She’d been going one way, and Rhys had, for a split-second, been in her way.

He’d stepped aside quickly, and not just because she was Handsome Jack’s girlfriend. She’d carried the smell of Pandora in her wake, blood and gunsmoke. Rhys knew it now, knew he had it on him too. But at the time, it’d been novel.

He’d wanted to stop her, even as he knew it was a bad idea. He wanted to ask her about Jack, about Pandora and the vaults and all the things inside, about Jack. He didn’t, though, because his sense of self-preservation was bigger and stronger than most people gave him credit for.

She hadn’t married him, but Rhys couldn’t help but think of her as Jack’s third wife.

She died too, come to think of it. Not long before Jack.

Rhys began to feel like he wasn’t just counting memories, but something more sinister. He’d snoozed through the literature classes he’d been forced to take, so he had no point of reference, nothing to compare the cold, sinking feeling he got when he looked at those women. Jack’s memories felt like flowers pressed between pages in a book, like pinned butterflies behind glass. Perfect and preserved inside the bloody chamber of Jack’s mind.

Once, he saw a man.

Rhys remembered him while he teetered on the edge of sleep, and the thought jolted him back the other way.

He’d seen a man who might’ve been a little younger than Rhys.

He saw a man who had a large nose set in an otherwise forgettable face, a man who was scrawny and red-haired.

He saw him, dressed in a button-up white shirt and thread-worn slacks, seated against the fading light of day, with a sweating beer can in one hand.
Another butterfly under glass, remarkable only for being an anomaly. Rhys didn’t recognize him, but he couldn’t help but think of him as another ex. The fourth wife.

**NOW**

Tim stared down at one of his worst nightmares through the fogging plastic protective guard around his face.

He knew it was bad for his sanity, for his soul, and especially for his immediate future to look down past his dangling feet and into the pit below, but it drew his gaze like it was magnetic.

His shoulder was on fire and his arm was shaking. His white-knuckle grip around the bent guardrail was the only thing that kept him from kissing dirt. He could hear his own panicked breathing and the blood rushing in his ears and almost nothing else.

For what felt like a long time, Tim didn’t think.

And then, he thought he could just faintly hear a voice within the noise, like someone shouting over the roar of the ocean, but he couldn’t make out the words.

“Rhys?” Tim sounded hoarse, weak. The static hissed and crackled, but no response came.

He blinked the stinging sweat from his eyes. He could see the blurry red glow in the corner of his vision and when he finally, finally made himself look, he saw the crystal cylinder wedged in the support railing below. Closer than he could’ve hoped for. Close enough that, if he really stretched himself, he could even reach it.

He tried to think of this as a good thing. He tried not to think of it as dangling himself even further over a gaping void, or of the jagged rocks below.

He adjusted his grip as best he could and stretched out his free arm. He stared hard at the cylinder and ignored the now-familiar stabs of tingling, numbing sensation shooting up to his shoulder, and the dark, violet glow emitting from what felt like miles below. His fingers brushed against the edge of the cylinder.

He hissed a harsh breath through his teeth, hooked one ankle around the support struts just barely within reach and tried again.

He stretched out until he felt his other shoulder go hot and then cold, until he felt the joint pop, until he could get one finger onto the cylinder.

The ground trembled. The guardrail he held in a death grip creaked and slowly, like the dipping stalk of a ripe sunflower, the rail began to bend.

Tim nudged the cylinder closer, until he could get two fingers onto it. The guardrail shook, the whole structure swaying with the quaking far below. Tim’s feet and legs were like ice, and his shoulders were in agony.

The juddering knocked the cylinder loose, until it was inches from falling out of its perch. Tim bit back a frustrated groan. He wondered if he’d already fallen and this was hell.

The needle’s hum became a high-pitched whir, like the sound of a varkid beside his ear. Tim took a breath and stretched out as far as he could go, even as the railing bent with the strain. His fingers brushed against the cylinder once more. Another quake shook the room, brought dust and rock
raining down from above and caused the walkway to tremble.

The cylinder was knocked loose. Tim grabbed it from the air, pushing off desperately from the support, the movement finally proving too much for the over-stressed metal and the guardrail finally snapped.

Tim had a moment, the space of a blink, where he became aware that he was suspended over a chasm with nothing to hold onto and nothing to save him. He felt weightless, breathless, and for that one moment, he felt empty. His life didn’t flash before his eyes. Disappointment stung.

Time resumed. Tim fell—

But only a few inches. Something gripped his arm and for a second, Tim thought his sleeve had gotten caught on the broken, jagged ends of the railing. When he looked up, however, he saw the ashen, dust-streaked face of his savior. His savior, who wasn’t wearing a containment suit.

“Rhys!”

Rhys gave him a truly pathetic attempt at a smile. He had his feet braced against the lip of the walkway, and Tim’s arm in a death-grip. His cybernetic arm still hung limply at his side and Tim could see the light of his ECHOeye flickering like a dying bulb.

“Are you insane?” Tim’s voice cracked.

Rhys shook his head and grit his teeth. He pushed himself back, pulling Tim up agonizingly slow, and Tim could see him sweating, he could see the way his entire body shook with effort. Tim was by no means a large man—not by Pandoran standards, anyway—but he was Hercules compared to Rhys.

But Rhys persevered and soon Tim could grip what remained of the railing and pull himself the rest of the way up, even as it made him feel as if knives were being inserted into his shoulders and back.

He wanted, very badly, the luxury of a moment to catch his breath. To lie on the ground and let his body take a second to be still. But the ground trembled its horrible reminder and Tim scrambled to his feet while Rhys fell back on his heels.

“You shouldn’t—” Tim started.

“The… code,” Rhys said. He sounded pained, his voice weak and broken up by panting, sharp breaths. Tim knew it was only the violet lighting, but he looked gaunt, as if he’d already fallen ill. He fixed Tim with a weak glare. “We don’t… have a lot of time.”

“You’ve got even less if you stay out here.” Tim strode forward and reached down to grab Rhys by the arm. Rhys jerked away.

“The frequencies are down! I need to be in here!” He kicked Tim’s shin and pointed a trembling finger towards the console. He spoke in a voice that commanded no arguments, and said: “Finish the fucking job or you’re fired!”

Tim turned towards the console, biting back the response he would’ve liked to have made. The needle was a silver and golden blur in the centre of the room, and its whining hum felt like something jabbing into Tim’s skull, right through the crack left by Friendly’s fist all those years ago.

He worked as quickly as he could while keeping the cylinder safe from the sides, lowering it until he felt the slight magnetic tug, heard the click, and saw the light turn from red to lavender at last.
The panel lit up, gold and lavender. The walls cracked and rocks the size of golf balls bounced off the walkway, off the needle itself where they turned to dust.

“It’s good!” Tim said.

He looked back and found Rhys slumped against the railing, his eyelids listing and his head bowed.

“Rhys!” Tim crouched in front of him. He shook Rhys by the shoulders, watched his head fall back and his eyelids flicker. “Rhys, the code. I need the code. We’re close, but I need—“ Rhys drew a shaking breath and blinked hard, squinting in an attempt to focus on Tim.

“Please, boss,” Tim said.

Rhys gripped Tim’s wrist with his one working hand. Obediently, Tim leaned close.

“R1698-I5903,” Rhys said. He gave Tim’s wrist a squeeze. “Quickly.”

By the time Tim stumbled into the hall, the alarms had died and the lights had returned to normal. When the elevator doors parted as he approached, he could have fallen on his knees in gratitude. Instead he breathed out a small sigh of relief, adjusted his grip on Rhys’ legs, and stepped inside.

Rhys’ code had worked and what was once certain death became a near-miss. The needle had gone still and the quakes died away. The glow at the centre of the chasm below faded, although it did not completely die.

And Rhys closed his eyes, slumped over, and didn’t stir when Tim gathered him in his arms and flung him over his shoulders in a fireman carry.

The decontamination took ages, although it lasted barely half a minute. Tim’s body felt like one big bruise, which felt comforting in its own way. It was like white noise. He could tune it out.

His vision swam as the elevator climbed. How long had Rhys been exposed to the radiation? How long did it take for it to reach terminal levels?

Tim caught a glimpse of himself in the brushed metal walls of the elevator. An indistinct smudge of white and brown, a black growth across his shoulders and draped down his chest. Tim saw from the flash of red that it hadn’t just been sweat running down his face.

Rhys groaned softly, his limbs shifting in Tim’s grip. Tim reached up and patted Rhys’ head as best he could.

“Almost there, boss,” he said. Rhys gave his hand a weak squeeze.

“’m gonna make… make up… to you…” he mumbled.

Tim smiled, although it hurt a little to do so. “You better,” he said. “Make it through this and then buy me something nice.”

“Dinner,” Rhys said. He had his face pressed against Tim’s shoulder. Tim could feel him rubbing his cheek against the fabric of the suit. “Somethin’ nice.”

“I’m holding you to that,” Tim said. Rhys mumbled something indistinct and he went still. Tim watched the numbered floors slide past.

The seventh subbasement was teeming with activity, like an ant-hill that’s been kicked over, but
people moved out of Tim’s way. He hadn’t had time to remove the containment suit, although he’d left the helmet and the gloves on the elevator floor.

He strode into the clinic like a man emerging from a hurricane, his steps uneven but his path certain.

“Anshin,” he rasped. “Now.”

“You must’ve made a deal with the devil. I’ve never met a man so lucky.”

Tim stirred, confusion washing over him while he struggled to raise his head from a thin pillow. The world appeared as smudges and lines, colour and light without shape.

Tim levered himself up on his elbows and felt faintly surprised when it didn’t hurt. He blinked hard and the blurry lights resolved themselves and the world returned to clarity.

He was in the clinic, on a cot. Yvette stood with her back to him, towering over the figure in the bed beside his with her fists on her hips.

“It wasn’t luck. It was… skill?”

Tim fell back with a sigh, relief flooding his system. Rhys was alive.

Well, of course he was. He wouldn’t die from something like a massive dose of radiation. Tim rubbed his face.

Rhys stared up at Yvette from where he lay. His skin looked bloodless, paper-white and paper-thin. The dark circles under his eyes looked like lavender bruises, and made him appear younger, like a starving orphan in a cartoon strip. A tube ran from his arm to a machine, and Tim could see the metallic gleam of bio-med scanners attached to his temples and chest.

“Did you just come down all this way to harangue me?” he asked, the snap in his voice lessened somewhat by his obvious exhaustion.

“Maybe I did,” she replied. “Maybe I should’ve done it sooner. Your company is a mess right now. No one knows what happened. And the needle’s completely out of commission. As of right now, Pyrphoros is dead in the water.”

Rhys puffed out a soft breath. “Not forever. We’ll get it fixed. Anyway, I told you what happened. It was an accident.”

“Really. You’re sure it was an accident? Not a mistake? Or worse?” she asked.

“I’ll go over the logs later,” Rhys muttered.

“Don’t bother. I’ve already put our infosec team on it. If this was an accident, we’ll soon find out. And if it wasn’t…” Yvette hesitated. Tim couldn’t see her face, but he could see the way her nails dug into the palms of her hands. “Rhys. This might’ve been an attack on Pyrphoros.”

Rhys looked down at his hands. “I trust everyone in this company,” he said.

“I hope that’s not true,” Yvette said. “You can’t afford to be that naïve.” Rhys said nothing. She sighed. “Maybe Etna’s talked to someone she shouldn’t have…”

Rhys snorted. “I can’t imagine that. She came from Hyperion, same as us. She wouldn’t gossip over lunch. I don’t think anyone even likes her enough to eat with her,” he said.
“Maybe.” Yvette shifted her weight and crossed her arms. “What about you? Have you told anyone new about the project?”

Tim expected Rhys to get defensive, to bluster. Instead his gaze travelled over to Tim and for a split-second, their eyes met. Tim flinched as if he’d been shocked. He reached for his earwidget out of habit. Rhys’ eyes widened.

“Tim?” He pushed himself upright.

The mask was still in place. Tim relaxed.

“Hey, boss.” He winced at the raw sound of his voice. “How’re you feeling?”

“Like an idiot,” Yvette said before Rhys could respond. Rhys shot her an annoyed look (pouting).

“Are we finished here?” he asked.

She gave him a cool look in response and shrugged her shoulders.

“Your call, ‘boss’. Get some rest. I want you back at work as soon as possible,” she said. She cast Tim a glance over her shoulder, and smiled. “You too, hot stuff. That was some nice work today.”

Tim sat back, stunned. “Um. Thanks?”

She patted him on the knee through the blanket as she walked past. “Take care, boys,” she said. She shut the door behind her.

Neither spoke immediately. Rhys toyed with the edge of his blanket and tried to think of something appropriate to say.

‘I’m so glad you’re not dead’ was probably a good start. ‘I’m sorry for being responsible for another near death experience’ would’ve made a nice follow-up. ‘When I was down there in the dark, all alone with a useless arm and eye, all I could think of was how badly I wanted you to be there with me. How much I wanted to see you. Because I knew you could fix it. I knew you could save the day. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve trusted anyone that much?’

Rhys swallowed, his cheeks warming. Even with the detox drugs making him dozy, he knew that might’ve been a little too much.

“You look shitty, stretch,” Tim said.

Rhys bit back a smile. “Yeah, sorry. I missed yoga this morning.” Tim chuckled, which Rhys thought was awfully charitable of him. “I’d say you look better, but I honestly can’t tell. It’s a good thing no one tried to mess with your earwidget. I can’t afford the lawsuit an electrocuted doctor would give me.”

“Lucky for us all.” Tim stretched his arms above his head. His jaw moved in what Rhys could only assume was a yawn. “Shit, I feel stiff. How about you? You feel as bad as you look?”

Rhys winced, casting a glance down to the tube running from his arm. “Maybe not that bad,” he said. “But I’ve definitely had better days.”

“I take it by the way your COO was talking to you before that you’re not going to die any time soon?”
“Not today, anyway,” Rhys said, flexing his fingers. “The docs tell me I’ve got a few days of detoxing ahead of me, though. That should be fun.”

Tim didn’t respond. When Rhys looked over, he saw that he was facing Rhys. Rhys’ face grew warmer under the scrutiny.

“What?” he said.

“It could’ve been a lot worse, you know,” Tim said. “When you were down there… You could barely speak. You turned the colour of—of paste.” He turned away. “Shit, Rhys. I thought you were a goner.”

Rhys stared at him, at a rare loss for words. “I’m… I’m sorry?”

Tim’s laughter was a soft exhalation of sound. “Yvette’s right about you. You’re a lucky son of a bitch.”

Rhys looked down at his left arm again, at the needle and tube in his blue inked skin. They’d taken his right arm, removed it when he’d been unconscious. He couldn’t move the left much, thanks to the tube. The restriction made him feel uneasy. His missing arm ached in a way it hadn’t for a very long time.

He’d woken up alone, without his cybernetic arm and a bandage over his eye, to find Tim lying still and pale in the bed opposite him.

Rhys remembered the wave of fear and frustration that came over him at the sight of that blank face. He’d gotten used to the idea that it might take Tim a while to take off the mask, but he still hated it. He hated it more than ever at that moment, when it kept him from seeing how Tim looked. He’d nearly gone over to deactivate the thing himself when Yvette had let herself into the clinic and derailed Rhys’ attempt before it could begin.

“If I’m lucky, it’s only because of you,” Rhys said. Tim’s head turned towards him. “Because of all the great people I surround myself with,” he went on quickly. Dammit, he knew he was turning red.

“Right,” Tim said. Rhys smoothed down the wrinkles on his blanket and didn’t look up. “So, uh.” Tim cleared his throat. “My head feels better. Guess they had Anshins to spare after all.”

“You needed it,” Rhys said.

“I think I needed the sleep more than the Anshin,” Tim said. Rhys frowned.

“You’re not sleeping well?” he asked. Tim shrugged, which wasn’t really an answer. “Maybe if you didn’t sleep on a cot in a tree house out in the middle of the wilderness…”

“Rhys.”

Rhys scowled. “Fine. I don’t know why you won’t just let me give you a nice room in the compound, but it’s fine.”

“I’ve spent the last five years sleeping on the ground, in a safe house, or in a hostel. I don’t need your nice room.” Tim scratched idly at his ear, his face turned towards the ceiling. Rhys tried not to pout like a child, an impulse he always had when someone was being needlessly difficult.

“Suit yourself,” he said with a sniff. “Some of us live in the civilized world.”
Tim made a non-committal sound. Rhys glanced at him. He chewed his lip.

“What about a nice dinner?” he asked.

“How about you tell me about that needle that I risked my life to deactivate?” Tim said.

Rhys almost felt too stunned to be disappointed. “Right now?” he asked.

“That night, when I heard you and Fiona talking. You mentioned that you hadn’t told me about Epimetheus, what it was really for. I didn’t mind so much at the time. I was more interested in the money you owed me. But after everything that happened downstairs, and after seein’ that needle of yours, and seeing all the eridium you’ve got buried below, I have to ask myself if I can really afford to continue being ignorant about this. So.”

Tim pushed himself up onto his elbows, until he was seated upright. He had his face pointed at Rhys and Rhys thought for certain he was looking into his eyes. He could feel it, as ridiculous as that sounded. He felt pinned.

“Tell me, boss,” Tim said. “Just what is Epimetheus, really?”

Epimetheus was a beautiful dream, in almost every sense of the word. Rhys didn’t know its exact origins, although he chose to believe what Etna told him about Handsome Jack and the vault on Elpis.

The theory that the Eridians had an inexplicable connection with their namesake element wasn’t an unusual one. The notion that through the connection, the Eridians were able to store their cultural memories within eridium, as if it were a unit of digital storage, was, however. Epimetheus had been designed to tap into the planet-wide eridium veins and try to extract the memories.

Jack’s experience on Elpis was their only evidence. It shouldn’t have gotten off the ground, but Hyperion had money to spare and Jack wanted everything he could possibly get from the Eridians.

Still, even with as much enthusiasm for the project as Rhys had, he could admit that the concept behind it was a little far-fetched.

Tim had no such enthusiasm. He didn’t move to interrupt Rhys while Rhys did his best to explain how Dr. Llewellyn Etna designed the ‘needle’ to pierce into Pandora to extract an ancient alien race’s cultural memory from a magic mineral.

But that was only the first part of Epimetheus. The second part was in receiving the data, they needed to create a way to bridge human comprehension and alien thoughts and memories. Rhys now knew that Jack experienced first-hand what happened when a human tried to access the information on his or her own. Etna posited that, in order to prevent the human from losing his or her mind, an intermediary was necessary. An AI.

“Oh huh,” Tim said at last.

“I know it sounds… a bit out there,” Rhys said carefully. “But Dr. Etna had made—is making a lot of progress. She’s run a few tests and gotten some promising results.”

“Right.” Tim rubbed his head. “So, you’re using a machine to plug into Pandora because you think the Eridians stored their memories inside the eridium?”

“We don’t know if they did it intentionally,” Rhys said. He was seated upright, taking care with his
left arm. His right shoulder jerked occasionally as he tried to gesture with an arm he didn’t have. “But think about it. Eridium’s got all sorts of properties we don’t understand. And the vaults don’t just have legendary weapons and artefacts—there’s information in there, data stored that gets beamed directly into the vault hunter’s head. Who’s to say that information wasn’t being kept in eridium? And if we can extract it, the AI can parse it for us.”

“How do you know what’s in a vault?” Tim asked.

Rhys felt a warm surge of pride and let it show in his smile. “I’ve been in one.”

Tim might’ve been staring. “Really,” he said.

“Last year. The Vault of the Traveller. Fiona and me, actually. We opened it together and inside we found…” He hesitated, unsure how to put what he’d seen into words. “I’m still not sure what we found. A lot of it’s hard to remember. I think I saw the Eridians. Saw one of their cities.”

It felt like a dream. It still did. An alien city, from the distant past. He could remember the feeling of being in a place without physically occupying any space. He could not remember much else, no matter how hard he tried.

“Shit,” Tim said.

“I don’t know for sure,” Rhys admitted quietly. He’d asked Fiona once, what she’d seen in the vault. She’d stared into her drink for a while before finally telling Rhys about a huge city all in white, of being without being, and nothing else.

Rhys settled back against his pillow, suddenly tired. He felt a breeze against his chest and when he looked down he saw that the collar of his gown had slipped low, displaced perhaps during an earlier attempt at gesturing.

“Is that why you got so hot on Epimetheus?” Tim asked. Rhys nodded, frowning down at himself.

“I wanted to know more about them. Their technology is incredible. If we could harness even a little of what they had for ourselves, there’s no telling what we would be able to build.” Rhys adjusted the hang of his gown. “Terraforming, agricrops, desalinasation… We could make a real home on Pandora, for everyone.”

Jack had seen something too, something that made him pursue any Eridian tech he could get his hands on, with the Destroyer as his crown jewel. There, at least, Rhys couldn’t relate. He’d seen enough vault monsters to last him a lifetime.

“A home on Pandora, huh?” Tim lay back, his head still turned towards Rhys. “Sounds nice. And just how much would this home cost the consumer?”

Rhys flushed. “That’s not fair,” he said quietly. “I’m not planning on selling this to people. I’m not going to patent a technological advancement like this. I’d share the big stuff, the stuff that could really benefit people, with everyone.”

“And the little stuff?”

Was Tim staring at him? Rhys glanced down at his chest and saw that the gown had slipped again.

“The little stuff…” Rhys tilted his head back, stretching out his neck. He pursed his lips in thought. “The little, non-essential stuff we might just keep for ourselves.” He lowered his eyelids and gave Tim a sly smile. “Gotta make a buck somehow, right?”
“Right.” Tim was definitely staring. Rhys bit his lip to keep from grinning like an idiot.

“So, is that all you wanted to know?” he asked, stretching out. “Or do you want to talk about dinner?”

Tim didn’t want to talk about dinner. In truth, what he wanted to do was sleep for another day or two. Failing that, he wouldn’t mind watching Rhys stretch in that little hospital gown some more. The tattoo on his chest really was something. That vivid blue ink had a way of catching the eye.

They’d left Tim in his own clothes, although they’d thankfully removed the containment suit. Tim realised he could probably use a shower before he went to sleep. He figured he should probably go back to his room, above ground and out in the open. With the Anshin already administered, and the sleep he’d already gotten, there was really no reason to stick around.

“Anything else you want to ask me about?” Rhys asked, and Tim didn’t think he was imagining the hopeful note in his voice.

It was late at night, although Tim wasn’t sure how late. He knew the few doctors on site had changed shifts and they were left with one nurse on call, who had long ago retreated to nap in the other room.

Rhys couldn’t lie on his side, on account of the detox chemicals being pumped into his veins, so he lay on his back with his head turned towards Tim. He looked at Tim with those big Disney Princess eyes and Tim, fool that he was, felt his resolve to leave crumble as it always, always did.

He didn’t like spending time encased in a concrete and steel room so obviously underground, but the usual fear felt distant. If he looked at Rhys and thought about his breathing, it wasn’t so bad.

It didn’t help that Rhys genuinely looked terrible. Pale and so obviously sick. Modern technology saved him from a death sentence, but it couldn’t wipe the slate completely clean and Tim knew Rhys would be laid up and weak for a while. Months, maybe. Tim’s stomach seemed to shrivel with guilt.

“You should probably get some rest, boss,” Tim said.

Rhys looked a little disappointed, but he nodded. He settled back in his pillow with a sigh, his eyelids already listing.

“You too, you know,” he mumbled. “It’s too far to go at this time of night. You can just stick around here.”

Tim did not look at the four walls surrounding him. He looked at Rhys’ face.

“You want me to stay?” he asked.

Rhys hummed, his eyes already closed. He fell asleep in seconds.

Tim turned away because he couldn’t actually bear to watch someone sleep. He lay in the dim light, staring up at the ceiling and breathing with care. He tried to focus on the feeling of air entering and leaving his lungs, but all he could think about was the last time he’d trusted anyone.

He thought about Rhys, all alone underground with one working arm and a core about to meltdown, calling for Tim before he called for anyone else. He thought about Rhys watching as Tim nearly died, almost too terrified to move and still coming to his rescue anyway. And admitting it to Tim.
He thought about all the ways he could fuck this up, whatever this was.
He thought about Jack.
He didn’t sleep.

“Do you have an appointment?”

Tim paused mid-step. He looked over to the reception desk he’d missed earlier and found Todd half-risen from his seat, fixing Tim with a look that could fry an egg.

“He’s expecting me, if that’s what you mean,” Tim said, which wasn’t entirely true. He’d tried calling up Rhys’ frequency earlier, but he’d been sent straight to voicemail. He left a brief message, one he didn’t expect Rhys to actually check.

Todd scowled and dismissed a few open windows from his screen with a flick of his fingers, calling up an over-stuffed scheduling program. Tim saw blocks of colours, tags and notes sticking out from each one. Todd tapped through a few, calling up a micro scale of minute by minute measurements.

“Your name’s not listed. You’re certain he’s expecting you today?”

“Sure,” Tim said.

Todd tossed him a look over the top of his screen. He’d long ago given up pretending to like Tim.

“He’s in an important meeting right now.” He tapped a window, which expanded into red and violet squares, the words ‘CLOSED DOOR MEETING’ writ large. “He’s not to be disturbed for any reason.”

Tim considered Rhys’ office door, which he knew would be locked and sealed. “Fair enough,” Tim said. “I’ll just stick around ‘til he’s finished.”

Tim ignored the look Todd gave him, another in a long line of ugly looks sent to the back of his head. He sat down on an ergonomic and uncomfortable couch and settled in for a wait.

Todd huffed a few times, and turned himself pointedly away from Tim. He returned to his screen, calling up the windows he’d dismissed earlier. Tim was a little amused to see that one of them was Free Cell.

Tim flexed the fingers of his right hand out of a habit he’d gotten into since the experience with the needle. He felt nothing, no shooting pains, no numbness. Whatever had happened down in the now-broken core hadn’t happened again.

He glanced over to Todd and found the other man’s attention now firmly on the screen.

Tim slipped his thumb under his leather cuff and felt for the familiar yet alien thing embedded in his skin. He felt the rough texture of his scars, and the edge of something sharp and hard. He didn’t press down—no point in calling out the clones—but instead he let the pad of his thumb rest there, where the skin met stone and circuits, and felt the strange warmth.

It still turned his stomach, this inexplicable heat. As if that thing really were alive, a parasite in his arm. He kept his thumb there until he could feel a thrumming beat; his own pulse. Or so he told himself.

Rhys said Epimetheus was a way to understand the past, a bridge over millions of years of history,
built from eridium and AI code. Tim thought about the things found in vaults, and what Jack found in the Elseer.

What happened to AIs when they came in contact with Eridian technology? Tim looked down at his wrist. He didn’t know. But he could make a few guesses.

The sound of wheels against the tiled floor made Tim flinch. Todd pushed away from the desk with a sigh, his head tilted to one side, the way some people still talked to the ECHO devices in their ears. He hissed something Tim didn’t bother to eavesdrop on while he circled his desk and hurried down the halls. Tim listened to the click of his shiny business shoes against the floor until the sound faded and Todd was out of sight.

Tim stood up and strode towards the office door. It might’ve been locked, but he could at least try. If Rhys were really as busy as he claimed, he could easily ignore Tim.

Besides, if Rhys knew it was Tim on the other side of the door, Tim knew he likely wouldn’t ignore him at all. Tim felt a little uneasy, knowing this.

He raised his hand to press the call button when the familiar sound of Sasha’s voice made him pause.

“...not much left after the sun and animals got to it. The Raiders probably took chunks for their own study and they didn’t mess around. I don’t know how they managed to carry that carcass back to their flying city.”

“Well, they did have five buzzards.” Rhys’ voice and he sounded like this wasn’t his first meeting of the day. Tim recalled the scheduling calendar he’d caught a glimpse of and supposed it wasn’t even the fifteenth meeting of the day.

Tim realised he still had his hand raised, although he hadn’t moved to touch the call button. He thought maybe he should move away after all, give Rhys space and wait for Sasha to leave.

“It was a long shot, anyway. What about Crisis Ridge?”

Tim froze.

“Yeah... That’s gonna be a bit difficult,” Sasha said slowly. “I’ll start us off easy. The place was still a ghost town.”

“Right. Well, I can’t say I wasn’t expecting that. What about what caused it? Did you find any clues about why they left?”

A brief pause. “Look, I’m not going to sugar-coat this. What we found... it’s bad. Maybe I should just show you.”

Tim listened to the dull hum of air circulating and held his breath. Neither Rhys nor Sasha said anything.

“What the hell...?” Rhys sounded weak, like he’d fallen ill all over again. “What is—? Is this—?”

“It’s what it looks like.”

“But... how? When?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a forensic expert, but given the level of decomposition...” She stopped and her pauses filled with sinister meaning. “A long time, I think. Nearly a year, maybe.”
“Jesus. A year. And no one in town noticed they were living next to a mass grave?”

Tim breathed in sharply. He knelt down and pressed his ear shamelessly against the door.

“I don’t know, Rhys.”

“I mean, they seemed pretty cold about Etna’s fate but this is…” Rhys’ voice thickened like pancake batter, like something he could choke on.

A door hissed open somewhere down the hall, and Tim heard the sound of footsteps. He held himself still, eyes glued on the opening to the reception area, primed for the first sign of Todd’s return. No one appeared for several seconds, and the voices faded away. Tim relaxed.

“…server farm,” Sasha was saying when Tim returned. “They were cold when we got there. You’re sure they were running before?” Sasha’s voice had more or less returned to its usual pitch, although it maintained a note of gravity.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m sure.” Rhys, however, sounded weak and shaken. Tim felt a stab of sympathy.

“Rhys? You still with me, buddy?” Sasha didn’t sound unkind, but there was something a little condescending in her voice. She knew as well as Tim that Rhys was still out of his depth. Maybe she had less patience for it.

He heard Rhys clear his throat. “Fine. I’m fine. You were saying about the factory?”

“The servers in the basement? They were dead. Powered down and cold. The whole place felt like a meat locker.”

“They were red hot before,” Rhys said.

“The whole place was empty. No bandits left, and almost no weapons. I think Malady’s people cleaned the place out.”

Tim bit back a curse. He supposed it was too much to hope for that Malady had dissolved during her unplanned dip in the toxic ooze below the Splatterdome. Then again, Tim had survived, and his equipment hadn’t been nearly as nice as hers.

“It might’ve been Callum’s gang. He had the place before.”

“Nah, the graffiti was pretty clear. Definitely Malady’s glitter gang, or whatever they call themselves. You okay?”

“Fine. Just… got a headache. No one’s heard anything from them since the factory,” Rhys said. “Maybe they’ve gone into hiding.”

Tim couldn’t think what they’d be hiding from. He thought about the phrase ‘mass grave’, the sound of it cleaving through his thoughts like a fallen tree in a forest, scaring up a shiver of fear in its wake.

“Your egghead took a look through the drives. She said they’d been wiped clean, although not before someone made a massive file transfer.”

“Someone had gone through them?”

“It’s in the report. The professor said that there’d been something huge on the drives before. If they were hot when you went through, they might’ve been running a program, or programs. Everything else we found had been smashed to pieces. Only the servers were intact.”
Rhys hummed. “This looks like a digistruct device. Or what’s left of one, anyway.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Sasha sighed and Tim heard the creak of an office chair. “I dunno, Rhys. What do you make of all this?”

“I have no idea.” Tim heard the clatter of plastic on metal within, the sound of an ECHOtab tossed onto the surface of a desk. “An old grave filled with bones, and a factory filled with dead servers and broken machinery. Hell if I know what it means.”

“When was the last time you slept in your own bed?” Sasha’s voice was kind again, and without the patronizing note. “And don’t tell me it was last night. I can see the blanket on your couch.”

 “…The night before last, then.”

“What about food? Have you eaten today?”

“It’s still Thursday, right? I had breakfast.”

“Rhys, it’s almost dinner.” She sounded exasperated and fond and Tim wondered, for what probably shouldn’t have been the first time, just what sort of relationship Rhys had with Sasha.

He knew they were close from the easy way he carried himself around her, the same sort of way he behaved around Yvette. He acted like a human being and not some sleek corporate shark. He’d assumed their relationship was platonic, although he didn’t know why. Wishful thinking, maybe.

His chest squeezed, a pain he felt rooted behind his ribs.

He shouldn’t be here, listening to two people he barely knew talking to each other in that tone of voice. Todd could return at any moment.

Tim stood up, satisfied with his excuse. He had his back turned and taken several steps down the hall when the office door opened and he heard Sasha say, “Oh!”

Tim tensed, like a rabbit in view of a cat. He forced himself to relax but it was already too late.

“Hey,” he turned and tried to smile before he recalled his mask made the gesture pointless. Sasha wore a look on her face that he couldn’t readily read, something hard in her gaze like a shard of flint.

And then it was gone. She grinned. “Hey, Rhys! Your boy toy’s here.”

“What?” Rhys appeared behind her while Tim choked.

He lookedbad in the golden-red light of the setting sun, face bleached of colour like a photo left too long in a shop window. But he smiled when he saw Tim, and it brought some life back to his features.

“Tim, hey! I didn’t know you were coming by.” He pushed his hand through his hair, smoothing it back into a semblance of its usual style. Something about the gesture, done so self-consciously and in front of Sasha, chased away some of his earlier melancholy.

Sasha’s grin was entirely too knowing. “I’ll talk to you later, Rhys,” she said, patting him on the shoulder.

“Bye, Sasha,” Tim said. She winked at him.

“Sorry about the mess. It’s been a rough couple of days.” Rhys gestured towards a cascade of
windows hovering above his desk. Tim caught sight of a few emails, a diagram of what looked like an SMG, blueprints for some complicated looking machinery, a cross-section of a long, thin piece of equipment (the needle, he realised), an itemized list with a lot of long numbers, and more.

“Looks like,” Tim said. His eyes caught on the numbers. Price tags for a list of damages, he supposed. “Do your doctors know you’ve been burning it at both ends like this?”

“They’re fine with it,” Rhys said, his easy confidence undermined by the way his cheeks turned pink. He dismissed the windows with a flick of his wrist. “Anyway, don’t worry about me. Have a seat. What can I do for you?”

“I had something I wanted to ask you,” Tim said as he took the chair Sasha had so recently vacated. “And I wanted to see your face when you answered.”

Rhys swallowed. The flush on his cheeks drained away. He looked more exhausted than ever.

“Of course,” he said, calm and even. “Whatever you want to talk about, I’m always here for you. Is this about your duties? I’ve gotten a lot of positive feedback about your performance from Captain Bell and I know you’re popular with the recruits.”

“Why didn’t you put on a containment suit?” Tim asked. Rhys blinked. “In the central core, with the needle. When you came in after me. It couldn’t have taken that long, even with your busted arm.”

“That’s what you wanted to ask me?” Rhys asked.

“I’ve been thinking it over the last week,” Tim said. “The whole thing seemed stupid and reckless and I’ve known you to do a lot of stupid and reckless things, but those things were done when your back was against the wall. You had time, Rhys. Why didn’t you put on a suit?”

It seemed like such a small thing to focus on, but Tim’s mind kept returning to it when he found himself otherwise unoccupied. The image of Rhys slumped over on the floor, skin turning grey, unprotected. All he could think of was how pointless it all was. Rhys should’ve been better prepared and, though Tim liked to give him a hard time, he knew Rhys wasn’t actually stupid.

Rhys’ gaze sank. He didn’t respond immediately, and for a while Tim listened to the hum of Rhys’ computers.

Finally, Rhys spoke. “I… didn’t have time, actually. When that last big quake struck, it knocked out our frequencies. But I could still see what was happening. I saw you fall. I saw you dangling over the edge, reaching for the crystal, and I…” He stopped, blinking rapidly. His eye had gotten shiny and wet, Tim saw. “I didn’t do anything. I waited, because I thought you could handle it yourself. Because I was afraid.”

Tim didn’t speak. Rhys turned away and rubbed at his face.

“When I finally got enough courage to actually help you, there wasn’t enough time to suit up. I’d wasted it all.” When he looked back at Tim, his eye had cleared and his expression was determined. “So. That’s why. I’m not proud of it. I’m sorry, Tim.”

Tim should’ve gotten up. He should’ve walked around the desk, joined Rhys on the other side, take him in his arms and do something tremendously stupid. It seemed to Tim that he always wanted to do something really fucking stupid around Rhys, but the impulse had never been stronger. Maybe it’d been hearing the way Sasha spoke to him. Maybe Tim felt like he had something to prove.

Rhys looked at Tim like he expected Tim to let him have it. Like he expected Tim might throw a
punch. That look on Rhys’ face was like a knife in his chest. Tim never wanted anyone to look at him like that.

“I’m sorry I picked a fight with you,” Tim said instead. “I was only doing it because was paralysed down there. Even with the whole of this facility and all those lives counting on me, I couldn’t move because I was scared. The only reason I fought with you over money was because anger is easier. Truth is, I don’t give a damn about the money.” As he said it, he realised it was true. It’d been true for weeks now, and he’d barely noticed. Tim swallowed.

Rhys stared at Tim’s face like he was searching for something. Tim wished he didn’t have to wear the mask. He would have liked, in that moment, to have nothing standing between them.

“I meant what I said,” Rhys said at last. “I’m going to earn your trust, Tim. I’m not going to let you down again.”

Goddamn but Tim wanted to believe him.

Rhys cleared his throat. “So, is that… everything?” he asked.

Tim ran a hand through his hair, feeling a little silly. “Yeah. Yeah, sorry. I know you’re busy, so…” He pushed his chair back.

“No, no, don’t apologise.” Rhys rose with him. “In fact, I’m glad you came. I’m always happy to see you.”

“Right.” Tim couldn’t look at Rhys’ face just then. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, sorry. I know you’re busy, so…” He pushed his chair back.

“You can’t eat dinner in here again,” Rhys said firmly. “You’re still recovering.”

“They can wait,” Tim said, without a shadow of doubt in his mind. He held his hand out. “Come on. I think it’s curry tonight.”

Rhys stared at his outstretched hand, the flush returning to his cheeks. Tim’s throat seized, panic fluttering in his chest. He swallowed it down as best he could.

“Chop chop, stretch.” he said, forcing confidence he didn’t feel into his voice.

Rhys smiled and took his hand. Tim nodded with satisfaction and lead them both outside. He pretended not to notice when Rhys didn’t let go.

Rhys went home hours later, his belly full. He’d dawdled on the way back from the mess hall, lingering at the forked hallway that would take him back to his office, but Tim merely tilted his head in the other direction and that was all it took.

Rhys had been working himself stupid over the last few days, resolved to see Pyrphoros through to the end, but oh my, didn’t that resolve shudder and fall like a house of cards under the smallest gesture from Tim and oh, didn’t Rhys have it bad. He’d fully intended to follow Tim back to his treehouse, but Tim reversed their roles and guided him to his front door.
And then they’d stood there, across from each other, like teens on his parents’ porch, the distance between them miles long and fathoms deep. Like they had nowhere else to be, nothing else to do, but stand opposite each other and talk until one of them worked up the nerve to reach out.

In the end, it was Tim. He brushed a lock of hair from Rhys’ forehead.

“You’re a mess,” he said, voice quiet and fond. “Get yourself sorted out, boss.”

Rhys still felt electrified.

Freshly showered and lying in bed, Rhys thought about work. He thought about calling Tim. Maybe ask him to come back. Come up with some excuse to bring him over. Sorry to bug you, Tim, but I think you left some unfinished business in my bedroom...

Slow and steady, he told himself. Rhys forced a long, shaking exhale and tried to relax. The fluttering in his stomach and chest didn’t feel like butterflies, but like something bright and warm. Like he’d lit a bonfire inside and he could feel the sparks against his heart.

Sasha was right, although he would never tell her. Crushes were fun. But Rhys could only think that things would be a lot more fun if he could just lure Tim home already.

An alert popped up in his ECHOeye display. A yellow box informed him that his search was complete. Rhys stared at it for a moment while his thoughts struggled to reroute down an appropriate path. More work, he figured at first. And then he remembered.

SEARCH QUERY: “TIMOTHY LAWRENCE”

Rhys sat up. The ECHOnet search. He’d almost forgotten the crawler he’d sent out almost a week ago. He’d been so wrapped up in Pyrphoros and the damage and the pile of set-backs, that it’d been easy to push the search to the back of his mind. He scanned over the results, the warmth he’d been previously enjoying draining away, replaced by a different, less-pleasant type of anxiety.

This had been important to him, before. When he’d looked at Tim as a cute but potentially exploitable resource.

Vermont’s words came back to haunt him. Her story about the Hyperion black-ops spook, the dangerous man with good reason to hide his face.

The man worth a half million.

Rhys’ top of the line ECHOeye, picking up on Rhys’ thoughts, called up the latest projected costs for the repair and completion of Pyrphoros. Dollar signs and zeros filled the screen like an ominous wallpaper. Rhys dismissed it as quickly as he could, but it didn’t matter. He might as well’ve had it tattooed on the back of his eyelids.

Five hundred thousand dollars wouldn’t solve all his problems, but it would take away some of the hurt.

God. Had he really intended to keep Tim around as a fun distraction, with a nice little bonus at the end? Had that really been his master plan? Minutes ago he’d been giddy, almost dizzy, thinking about Tim and all the ways he wanted to take him in, take him home, get him to lower his guards in every way. And then, as soon as money entered his thoughts, he flipped like a coin. Just what sort of man was he?

A CEO of a struggling company, Rhys reminded himself. This was the job. Five hundred thousand
wasn’t chump change.

Feeling guilty, but not terribly ashamed, he flicked the file open and scanned the results.

After a few minutes, he sighed. He stared up at the projected display on his ceiling, the only source of light in his room, and wondered if he should have seen this coming.

No one named Timothy Lawrence had ever worked for Hyperion. Not at any time.

The results from Menoetius seemed a bit more promising, but not by much. Menoetius was a backwater, low-pop speck in the Clymene galaxy. Even over ECHO, it took a while to get a response. Digging through the planet’s databases that had taken the longest, as the archives were not technically available to the general public without special permission.

Although it seemed like it’d been a waste of effort.

There were quite a few ‘Lawrence’s on the planet, and several ‘Timothy’s but no one who was both.

Rhys ground the heels of his palm into his eyes. Of course. What did he expect? Timothy Lawrence probably wasn’t even his real name (although it was an odd choice for a pseudonym).

But… if it wasn’t his real name, why did he lie to Vermont when she asked?

Rhys sighed again, although it didn’t make him feel any better. He told himself that this didn’t change anything. Tim was still Tim. The man with no face, no name, no identity. Nothing to his name except a bounty.

The man whose neck turned pink when he was embarrassed. The man who fell asleep in a sunbeam, like a cat who’d come out of the cold. The man who called Rhys ‘boss’ with just the right mixture of affection and amusement. Who’d helped Rhys through tight spot after tight spot, who stuck around even when he’d known all along that Rhys had been swindling him, who risked his life again, anyway, because Rhys had asked him to.

And then who’d come by and actually apologized for getting rightfully angry with Rhys.

The man whose trust Rhys claimed he’d wanted to earn.

Rhys closed his eyes against the expected surge of fresh guilt.

Who the fuck was he kidding? He couldn’t even tell a robot to explode when it might save their skins. He couldn’t even destroy his old ECHOeye, too attached to the memory of the man he once thought he’d… Ah, it didn’t matter what he’d thought.

And he was going to turn poor Tim in for a bounty?

Did he really want to? Money aside, did he want to be that sort of person? Still? Did he think he ever could be?

Rhys knew the answer, even before he finished asking himself the question. The truth felt writ large in his bones, his soul, in all the places he knew himself best.

Five hundred thousand dollars was a lot, but it wasn’t enough. Five billion wouldn’t have been enough. He deleted the results.

Rhys took off his arm, crawled under the sheets and curled up in the dark. Anxiety tugged at the corner of his thoughts—morals were nice but it wouldn’t make Pyrphoros’ bill any smaller—but he
could ignore it for the night. He thought about sending Tim a message and did it before he could change his mind.

Me: got myself together just like u said and now I look damn good ;)

Nothing came back immediately and Rhys ignored the small sting of disappointment. Tim was probably asleep. He closed his eyes and started to drift off himself when a message notification jumped in his vision.

Tim <3: Go to sleep, doofus.

Rhys grinned.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I haven't responded to any of your very nice comments but the holidays happened and they just kept happening. But that doesn't mean that those comments, and all the other comments people have left, weren't the greatest Christmas gift of all. A sincere thank you to everyone who reads and reviews. ;_;

Next chapter: Rhys gets older. He gets what he's always wanted. And then he gets what he deserves.
Tim stuck around. He saw Rhys less and less, although they still talked regularly. He tried not to take it personally. For all his bluster, Rhys really was the CEO of a struggling but fairly impressive corporation, and struggling corporations needed attention. Tim wasn’t worried about Rhys’ health. And he definitely wasn’t jealous.

The environmental scientists had complained about a poor crop season, which meant their little biodome was in for an artificially-induced wet season. Rain drummed against the ceiling, the walls, the sodden canopy of the forest. It’d been nice for a while, but Tim quickly grew tired of it.

The muddy grounds and constant rain made the daily training sessions seem like a lesser military movie, before the protagonist had a chance to prove themselves to the rest of the squad. It put all his students on edge, made tempers a little shorter than usual, made regular annoyances into personal issues.

“Sorry, Tim,” Captain Bell said after he’d tromped into her office, shaking the water from his company-distributed rain smock. “Word came down from on high. We’re in for rain for the foreseeable future.”

“How long is that, exactly?” he asked. She shrugged, looking all too pleased to have the burden of training taken off her plate.

Tim retreated to the small room they’d set aside for him—not his office, offices are for permanent employees—and tapped up a quick report. He didn’t know if Rhys actually read these, but he’d been keen to get them delivered every day, so Tim diligently worked.

‘…Fan threw her baton to the ground and said “If you’re so goddamn tough, why don’t we take this outside!” and Yavin pointed out that they were outside and they both started wrestling. I separated them, sent them both to medical, and have written them up (Fan: disrespecting equipment, instigating unauthorized physical altercation with team member while in plain view of acting superior officer. Yavin: instigating an unauthorized altercation that he could not bring to a satisfactory endpoint, disrespecting team member, forcing his extremely talented acting superior officer into the middle of a personal quarrel). This is the second of such an event in as many days and I suspect the weather is the issue.

‘Speaking frankly, putting a bunch of Pandoran teens in an enclosed space with guns on their
persons is a bad enough idea; acting like you’re the Old Testament God and we’re the sinning bastards who didn’t make it onto the arc is really asking for trouble. I don’t know what the view looks like from your office, Rhys, but it sucks out here. Maybe if you’d stepped outside in the last four days, you’d notice.’

Tim sighed and tossed his tablet onto his desk. He still had Fan and Yavin’s write-ups to work on, but the prospect of more paperwork didn’t fill him with joy. Bell already knew what happened, and their punishments had already been approved. Rhys probably didn’t read these anyway.

If there was ever a good time to leave, this would be it. With Rhys preoccupied, and his lessons wrapped up for the day. Bell’s office light had gone dark as she, like a lot of other Atlas employees, had taken to using the rain as an excuse to bundle up in her room. Tim knew for a fact that if he went looking for the chef, she’d be missing as well, as she often was when Bell was skivving. Which meant dinner would likely be delayed.

Which meant, Timmy, that the kitchen would be empty and unguarded. Which meant the rows of canned food would be sitting there, like easy targets.

And you want to leave. Don’t you?

Tim swallowed. He pushed away from his—from the desk. He stood and, slowly, quietly, like he was afraid of being caught, he stepped outside.

He walked slowly through the rain, like he expected someone to see him. Like maybe one of his more sycophantic students would come up and ask him for help with the last move he’d showed them. Or maybe, he thought as the door to the compound hissed open, Bell would return from her love nest sooner than expected and she’d ask him for that day’s write-ups.

But the grounds were abandoned, and no one saw him. He dawdled on his way to the kitchens, taking his time to shake out his plastic smock, knock the excess rain and mud from his boots, push his damp hair back into place. He whistled a little. He made it all the way down to the first basement, to the long hall that lead to the servery kitchen.

Heart pounding, he stepped towards the massive double doors.

He heard voices inside. He sagged with relief. Eunjoo must not have joined Bell after all. Maybe they’d gotten into a fight.

The doors opened before he could turn away, and Tim found himself face-to-face (so to speak) with a startled-looking Sasha. Her expression brightened.

“Just the man I wanted to see!” she said.

“Really?” Tim said, still unused to that sort of sentiment. He let Sasha take him by the arm and guide him inside.

He liked Sasha, although they hadn’t spent much time together. She would occasionally come down to the training grounds to practise on their range. She was good company: didn’t ask too many questions, enthusiastic about guns, able to tease without being a gigantic pain in the ass about it.

The servery kitchen was big and industrial, in a way that comforted Tim for reasons he couldn’t initially grasp until he recalled that he’d worked as a waiter with a catering company back on Eden-5. Unlike the mess hall, it had a line of squat windows, situated high up on one wall, which currently only gave a small amount of watery light.
A few of the folding tables and chairs from the caf had been pulled into the room. The tables were pushed together, and someone had scrounged an actual table cloth from somewhere. The fluorescents had been turned down to be somewhat less glaring.

One of the massive pots sat on the stove, a pleasant wisp of steam curling above it, filling the room with the scent of spices and that sweet gourd they got bags of from the local settlement. He could see the orange glow emanating from the oven’s glass door.

“Uh.” Tim took in the room. “What exactly did you need from me?”

“We found plates!” Fiona said, coming in from behind. “And real silverware. Oh, hey Blank Slate.”

That right there was the reason Tim didn’t see much of Sasha. She always insisted on spending time with her obnoxious sister.

“Blank Slate. Clever. You think that one up all—” He grunted as she dumped a stack of plates in his arm.

“Yeah, yeah, make yourself useful, will you?” she said.

“Nice haul, sis. Where’d you find actual silverware?” Sasha asked.

“The old executive’s kitchen. The acid managed to miss one of the side cupboards, and I was able to scrounge together enough pieces for tonight’s dinner. Although some of us may have to eat with a dessert fork.”

“What dinner?” Tim asked as he set out the plates.

“Is he invited?” Fiona asked.

“Of course he’s invited. It’s Rhys’ birthday.”

The plates rattled. “It’s what now?”

“But he’s locked himself in his office for almost a week. Yvette’s tried to pry him loose, but he’s got his head into repairs for that Epimetheus project and I guess he’s kind of lost his mind a little bit.”

“Pyrphoros,” Tim corrected absently. “But, wait—it’s his birthday?” And then, with a growl, “He hasn’t left his office at all?”

“Uh, yeah?” Fiona pulled out her cocked hip and brow combo, aiming both in Tim’s direction. “You didn’t know that? He didn’t tell you? I thought you were his friend.”

Tim scowled, uncomfortably aware of the heat rising in his face and neck. Sasha rolled her eyes.

“Lay off, Fi. We only know because Vaughn told us. Speaking of…” She flipped her ECHOcomm open and pursed her lips at the display. “He should be here in the next twenty minutes or so. And dinner’s nearly finished. Why don’t you two go and collect our hostile corporate overlords? Fi, I think Yvette said she’d be down in R&D for most of the day. Tim, I guarantee you Rhys is still in his office. Eunjoo said he’d been getting his meals delivered there for the past three days straight. It’ll probably take you both at least 10 minutes to get them out, so… get on it.”

“Bossy,” Fiona muttered as the kitchen door hissed shut behind them.

“I didn’t know she could cook,” Tim said as they started walking through the hall.
“She can’t. The chef did all the heavy lifting. By the time her girlfriend came to get her, all that was left was stirring and making sure nothing burned. That was the deal: Eunjoo gets the evening off, and we get a decent meal. Win-win.”

“What about the rest of the staff? What are they going to eat?”

“It’s leftovers night. They’ll be fine.” She gave him a side-long look. “What were you doing out here, anyway? Sasha said she wasn’t going to get you until Vaughn showed up.”

Tim shrugged, confident his flushed cheeks were well-hidden from her scrutiny. “I was feeling peckish. Noticed Bell was gone, deduced Eunjoo was probably absent, and thought I might sneak something to eat before dinner. Why?” he asked when her eyes narrowed.

They arrived at the elevator. Tim’s knowledge of the Atlas layout was fuzzy at best, but he vaguely recalled that the R&D labs were all in the tenth basement.

“You know, my sister actually thinks you’re a decent sort. She likes you.” Fiona’s voice was light and a little sweet, but the look she gave him had venom.

“I get the feeling you don’t share her opinion,” Tim said.

The elevator dinged, its doors parting. “I don’t.” She stepped inside. “I don’t like you at all, Tim Lawrence.”

Tim crossed his arms. “That so?”

“I don’t like that you’re getting close to my friends. Don’t take it personally, I just don’t trust you.” She held her hand out, stopping the doors before they could shut. “It’s your face. A man who spends that much time and money keeping his identity secret, probably has a lot to hide. And I’m guessing none of it’s good. And I don’t like the thought of my friends getting caught up in whatever it is you’ve got coming to you.”

Tim felt grateful for his mask at that moment. He didn’t want to think of what he must look like.

“Big talk coming from a conwoman.” A petty jab.

She smiled. “That’s how I know.”

The doors slid shut.

Rhys’ office was a floor above, in the recently reconstructed and repaired portion of the old building. It was exposed, which Tim didn’t like, but Rhys assured him the shielding was hardy enough that it would take a barrage of missiles to break it. Tim had seen enough buildings topple under missile barrages that this served as cold comfort.

Todd’s desk sat outside Rhys’ door. Tim wondered if Todd was similarly protected by the Atlas incredible shielding. When Todd aimed a smug look as Tim approached, he found himself hoping it didn’t.

“The CEO is busy. If you’d like to schedule a meeting with him, you’ll have to speak with me.”

“No thanks,” Tim said as he breezed past. Todd’s chair rolled back against the wall, its owner stammering out an order to stop, desist, cease as Tim palmed the security panel.

Unauthorized.
Todd’s face relaxed. Tim felt a pique of annoyance and a very minuscule sliver of irrational fear, like a drop of poison in his bloodstream.

“See?” Todd said, pulling his chair back. “You’re not allowed. Now, if you want to schedule a meeting—”

Tim’s ECHO buzzed and he clicked ‘receive’ before the voice could inform him who was calling.

“Open up, little piggie, or I’ll huff and puff and set down explosives,” Tim said.

“Tim? That you?”

“Me and my arsenal.” Although he kept his tone light, he could hear the strained note in his words. He rapped his knuckles against the panel. “Seems like somebody locked me out by mistake.” Todd glared at him. Tim flashed him an obnoxious smile he couldn’t properly enjoy.

“You—? Shit. Sorry, sorry. Give me a second…”

“You’ve had days.” Tim heard grumbling over the line. “If this door doesn’t open by the time I’m finished making this threat, stretch, you’re gonna be very—”

The door opened.

Rhys stood behind his desk, looking like yesterday’s news. He’d stripped out of his suit jacket, and the top four buttons of his wrinkled shirt were unbuttoned. His hair flopped over his head like it’d given up. His collar was bent.

“I can’t believe you tried to give me fashion advice,” Tim said. The office was dark, lit only by the faint glow of the legion of holoscreens Rhys had projected above his desk and against the walls. As he drew closer, he could better see the dark circles under Rhys’ eyes. “You look bad, boss.”

“It’s Epimetheus—sorry. Pyrphoros. We’re getting close.” Rhys sat down with a sigh.

Tim eyed one of the screens, which displayed a human form with a litany of code sprouting from its head like branches from a tree.

“Uh huh. I thought your precious needle was busted.”

“It is. This is the AI component. The part that’ll let us talk to the past,” Rhys clarified when Tim’s expression only grew more sceptical.

“Don’t you hire people to do all the work for you? Isn’t that what being a CEO is all about?”

“It’s a group effort. I’m actually pretty involved in Pyrphoros,” Rhys said. He rubbed at the twitching skin under his ECHOeye. “I’m helping out with refining the prototype. Ah, you don’t care.”

The screen winked off. Tim leaned back, offended.

“I care, I just don’t really understand. I also don’t think it’s worth neglecting your health for,” Tim said.

“My health is fine. Docs cleared me last week. I’m fit as a violin.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “Right. Well, what about the rest of your company? You can’t just neglect them, either.”
Rhys’ hand stilled. His lips pulled into a tired, sly smile.

“‘The rest of my company’, huh? I didn’t realise I’ve been neglecting ‘the rest of my company’. Does ‘the rest of my company’ feel lonely, Tim?”

Tim snorted as he rounded the desk, face getting hotter. “Smug is a really unattractive look for you, boss. Come on, up.” He yanked Rhys from his chair, and—gratifyingly—Rhys rose without a struggle.

“Where are we going?” Rhys asked.

“Kitchen.”

Rhys paused in the action of picking up his jacket. “Why?” he asked, eyes narrowing.

“For dinner?”

“Wouldn’t we go to the mess hall for that? And—” His ECHOeye glowed. “—isn’t it too early for dinner? And even if it wasn’t, I can just have Todd pick me up a plate—Hey!”

Tim pulled Rhys through his office, ignoring his weak protesting. The doors snapped open, and Todd jumped away with a guilty look on his face.

“Sir—!” he began as Tim swept past with Rhys still struggling to put on his jacket with only one hand.

“Todd, forward any reports you get from Etna’s team to my eye—”

“Belay that order, Todd,” Tim said as he pulled Rhys along. “Give Etna’s team the night off.”

“Excuse me, you are not in charge here,” Rhys said as yanked his arm free.

Tim turned his head slightly, favouring Rhys a view of the smooth flesh toned expanse where his eyebrow would be raised. And maybe Rhys could feel the gesture, even if he couldn’t see it. He huffed and looked away.

“C’mon then, boss,” Tim said. He took the crooked lapel of Rhys’ jacket and set it properly, smoothing down the material. “Tell your employees to take the night off. If you’ve earned one, they certainly have.”

“Hey…” Rhys went redder as Tim buttoned his shirt. “I’ve been working very hard, I’ll have you know.” But he said it without heat.

Tim adjusted his collar, flattening the material as best he could. He didn’t think about why.

Rhys ran a hand through the chestnut mop on his head.

“Todd? Uh, why don’t you let Etna’s team know they have the night off.”

Todd looked sullenly between them. “What if they send you an update, sir?”

Rhys glanced at Tim. “Just… put it in my inbox. I’ll get to it tomorrow.”

Tim nodded and clapped him on the shoulder. “Atta boy. You know what they say: all work and no play…”
In the less forgiving lights of the hall, Tim could see more clearly just how poorly the last few days had treated Rhys. He looked like something that’d crawled out of a tomb, still wearing the suit he’d been buried in. Tim wondered how much sleep he’d gotten, and then he felt annoyed with himself for wondering. It wasn’t his business.

Rhys yawned as they approached the elevator. “You plan on telling me what we’re doing?” he asked.

“You’ll see,” Tim said, stabbing the button.

“Come on. Not even a hint? You basically kidnapped me, the least you could do is tell me why.” Rhys yawned again, his body listing towards Tim’s.

“I’m not kidnapping you. I’m… helping,” Tim finished lamely as Rhys began to lean against him.

“Is it an intervention? Is it… a focus group? A surprise meeting? The circus?” He relaxed as he spoke, slumping against Tim’s shoulder. Tim swallowed. He felt warm where Rhys touched him.

“Have you taken a look at the date today?” he asked in a level voice. The elevator doors parted as Rhys straightened, his cybernetic eye emitting a steady glow. Tim felt a little guilty at spoiling the surprise, but honestly, it wasn’t as if Sasha told him to keep his mouth shut. Besides, it’d literally gotten Rhys off his back.


“Yeah. Happy birthday,” Tim said as the elevator began its smooth descent.

“Thanks. Man. I actually forgot. I haven’t done something like that in… geez. Ever? I think maybe I sort of forgot once in university, because, you know, finals and everything but that was just for a couple hours. The day’s almost over…”

“That’ll happen with old age,” Tim said. “Memory’s the first thing to go.”

“At least it’s not hair,” Rhys said. A ding sounded out, and a soothing voice informed them they had arrived in the first basement.

“Anyway. Sorry I didn’t get you anything,” Tim said, tugging at the leather strap around his wrist.

“Don’t worry about it.” Rhys gave him an appraising look and a slow smile. “You can make it up to me later.”

He strode ahead, with a significant spring in his step. Tim lingered behind, thankful for the screen of his mask. He tried to feel bad about not leaving when he had the chance.

It was meant to be a surprise party. Rhys supposed it still counted: he had been surprised, just… not at the same time as the reveal. But he could fake it. He could put on a show. The gratitude he felt, at least, was real.

Sasha hugged him, which was special enough to count as a gift in Rhys’ estimation. Their relationship had its ups and downs, post-break up, but his heart still warmed at the sight of her. Fiona didn’t hug him, naturally, but she did give him one of those smiles that she sometimes wore. The real ones, when she was actually happy.
“Happy birthday, you dope,” she said. “We didn’t know what your favourite food was, so we just had the chef make something delicious.”

“That happens to be my favourite,” he said.

“I told them so,” Yvette said, coming to stand beside him. “That and fruity drinks. Which is my gift, by the way. Do you know how hard it is to get apple schnapps these days? You don’t want to know what I had to trade to get this from Moxxi.”

“Isn’t requisitions your job?” Rhys asked as she wrapped him in a brief hug.

“Not anymore, dummy,” she said, chuffing him lightly on the back of the head.

“Dinner isn’t ready yet,” Sasha said, cutting the heat to the burner. “But we can have cocktail hour. I’m excited to try this stupid apple liquor Yvette had to trade nudie pictures for.” Fiona choked on her water. Sasha winked at Yvette, who smirked back.

“Relax, Rhys. They weren’t my nudes,” she said. She picked up the cocktail shaker from the table and began barking out orders to the other girls. Rhys hung back, content to watch his friends put together what would assuredly be a very strong appletini.

Tim began to pull away, edging back towards the exit. Rhys turned his head slightly, pinning him with his gaze.

“Hey,” he said, soft enough that only Tim could hear. Tim stopped, easing his weight to steady on his heels, looking all the world like he’d been up to nothing. “You’re sticking around, right?”

Tim slunk back into place beside Rhys. “I feel bad,” he muttered. “I wrecked your surprise and didn’t even get you anything.”

“You saved my life a couple times,” Rhys said, leaning a bit closer to keep his voice down. “I like to think that counts for something.”

“That was part of the job,” he replied. Rhys hummed, lowering his gaze to the bit of Tim’s neck just visible under his collar. He’d gotten rather good at spotting the starting signs of Tim’s embarrassment.

“Well, I meant what I said before…” Heart pounding, Rhys bent closer, until his lips were very nearly against Tim’s ear. “I hope you fully intend to make it up to me.”

Tim said nothing. He turned his face away slightly. Rhys leaned back, gaze locked on Tim’s rapidly reddening neck. He bit back a grin and stepped away, raising his voice, “Hey, is the first drink ready yet or do I have to go over there and show you how it’s done?”

Tim stayed. He even drank an appletini.

They took their cocktail hour at the table, seated behind Tim and Fiona’s haphazard place setting. Rhys hooked his ankle around the chair beside him, pushing it out with a smile when Tim approached. After the briefest hesitation—easily missed unless you knew to look for it—Tim took the seat.

Rhys felt good, despite the lack of sleep, and it wasn’t just because he was drinking his third favourite drink for the first time since Helios fell. Pyrphoros was finally, finally nearly completed. The recent reports from Dr. Peel proposed a working prototype to be ready by the start of the next
He was 29 years old and living out his life-long dream. Atlas may have been weak—might, in fact, still be weak—but it would get stronger. And it would get stronger because of Rhys’ work. Because he, and the intelligent, capable people he hired, worked to pull its remains from the wreckage Jack and Hyperion had wrought, dust it off, and rebuild it into something to be proud of. And Pandora would reap the benefits. And they did it, all of it, without tearing a fucking thing down.

Rhys liked the sound of that. He made a note to include it in the company-wide speech he’d have to give once Pyrphoros made them all filthy rich. Maybe he’d leave out that last bit, though.

“Ugh.” Fiona held her glass out and wrinkled her nose. “This is what people drank in Helios?”

“Not all people,” Vaughn said. “Mostly just Rhys.”

And all of his favourite people were here. That was nice. Vaughn had showed up ten minutes earlier and while Rhys hadn’t cried—it wasn’t like he and Vaughn didn’t text each other every day, missing him would be ridiculous—he may have had a small lump in his throat. And maybe some dust in his eye. Either way, Vaughn didn’t comment because that was the sort of bro he was.

(Rhys was so busy, dealing with his sudden dust allergy that he failed to see the very startled and not entirely happy look Vaughn shot at Tim.)

“It tastes like candy,” Fiona said.

“That’s the point, you philistine,” Rhys said and took a loud sip, punctuating his point. “Anyway, Tim likes it.”

“How do you know? He hasn’t said anything,” Sasha said.

“It’s… not bad,” Tim said after a moment. The other man had been quiet since taking his seat. He held himself stiffly, gingerly, like Rhys’ old cat after being lured from his hidey hole, ready to scurry away at the first sign of trouble.

And that was the third (fourth?) reason behind Rhys’ happiness. After two months spent bribing, cajoling, and generally ingratiating himself to Tim, Rhys intended to reap the rewards. Especially now that he was positive (nearly positive) that Tim returned his interests. He hadn’t even denied being lonely, before. If he’d only told Rhys sooner, Rhys would have left his office so fast, he would have left behind a Rhys-shaped cloud of dust, just like in the cartoons. He downed the last of his drink, licking the sweet taste of fruity liquors from his lips.

“Want another one?” Rhys asked, bumping his leg against Tim’s. Tim stiffened, but Rhys held his breath and stayed where he was. He felt gratified when Tim didn’t pull away.

“God, yes,” Tim muttered. He finished his drink, his knee bumping gently against Rhys’.

Cocktail hour stretched into dinner. The soup had gotten cold already. The roast had been pulled from the oven, but no one seemed in a particular hurry to carve the thing. Rhys really liked appletinis, okay? And it was nice to have everyone gathered like this, all his Pandoran murder friends with his Hyperion stooge friends.

“Why don’t I get to be a murder friend?” Yvette complained after Rhys declared this fact to the assembled guests.
“You haven’t killed anyone,” Vaughn said.

“Not unless you count attempted murder. Like, like when you tried to betray me to Vasquez,” Rhys said, leaning across the table to better waggle his finger.

She leaned away from him, her lips twisting. “Look, I already explained to you that was—that was not what you thought, I was just trying to keep my head above water and get you idiots off of Pandora. And!” she went on, one arm reaching blindly behind her for the bottle of rice wine they’d discovered. “Aaand it would have worked, if you hadn’t messed it all up.” She clucked her tongue with evident satisfaction and poured herself and Fiona another drink.

Yvette had been awfully attendant to Fiona all night, Rhys noted. He couldn’t keep the grin from his face, and didn’t bother to even try. Especially not when Fiona caught him looking, and she gave him an ugly look in response.

Rhys buried his smile what was now his fourth drink in two hours. It occurred to him that he should probably tell someone to get him some food, soon.

“Anyway, quit bringing that up, will you? You never bring up how Vaughn betrayed you,” Yvette said. Vaughn sputtered.

“I didn’t—it was a ruse! I was never going to, like, actually give Rhys up or anything,” Vaughn said.


“I would never give you up, bro,” Vaughn said. He was perhaps the most sober person at the table.

“Bro.” Rhys half-raised from his seat, leaning across Tim’s lap to reach Vaughn for a dap. That he happened to balance himself by placing a hand across Tim’s warm and firm thigh was just a coincidental bonus.

The cafeteria staff came in briefly, worked around them to collect the warmed plates Eunjoo had left out for them. Rhys tried to keep himself upright and serious faced while his employees milled about, but it was a difficult prospect when Yvette poured him another sticky drink and Sasha talked loudly and at length about their disastrous second date.

“Anyway, before I could even start picking glass shards out of his palms, the bar tender kicked us out! Which is probably just as well,” she said philosophically as she reached for her drink. Sasha’s tawny skin had turned a few shades darker, warm tones splashed across her cheeks. It always made him smile, when she blushed like that. Even when she was trying to embarrass him in front of his employees and his crush with the story of how he got them both kicked out of a bar because someone accused him of cheating at pool.

The feeling dissipated, however, when said crush pulled his leg away. “You two are dating?” he asked lightly.

“Dated. We dated. Past tense,” Rhys said firmly.

“Extremely past tense,” Sasha said with a gleam in her eye.

“Thank god for that,” Fiona muttered into her glass.

Tim relaxed a little. Rhys hooked his foot around Tim’s ankle, anchoring him.
“You stay put,” Rhys muttered, too low for anyone to overhear.

Tim looked at him and Rhys wanted to claw that stupid mask off and figure out what the hell he might’ve been thinking at that moment. Flirting with someone was terrifying as it was—no, hang on. Flirting with someone you liked was terrifying enough. Flirting with someone you liked who wouldn’t give you any facial cues to let you know how far off the mark you might be, was a whole other level.

It’s a good thing I like you a lot, Rhys thought. He made a note to tell Tim that later.

And then, slowly, Tim relaxed. He leaned a little towards Rhys.

“You’re awfully bossy,” he murmured, his head bent towards Rhys’. Like they were sharing a secret. Rhys felt giddy, didn’t even try to stop the smile from growing on his face.

“Oh, trust me,” he said, fluttering his lashes in a way he knew made the old men at Hyperion sweat into their collars. “This is nothing.” He ran his foot up Tim’s calf. “You’ll know when I’m being bossy.”

Vaughn stood up suddenly, the screech of his chair like a guillotine through their conversation. “Who’s hungry?” he asked, already bending to collect plates.

“Yeah, we should probably get to the food before it goes cold,” Fiona said.

Tim pulled away while the others began milling around the covered plates. He turned away from Rhys. Rhys aimed a frown at the back of his friends’ heads.

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Tim was drunk. No, hang on. Tim braced himself against the stainless steel sink, cold water dripping down his forehead, his nose. There had to be a better word. Drunker. That felt right.

His stomach felt light and airy, his face felt warm in spite of the splash of water, and his vision doubled if he didn’t force himself to focus. His whole world seemed to be filmed with a fish-eye lens. Every thought he had came laced with uncertainty and a little bit of giggling. Christ, he was drunk.

He slid down the wall and sat on the floor, because it seemed like a reasonable thing to do. Maybe all he needed was a minute or two to collect his thoughts, let the cold tile floor do its thing. He thought about ways to sober up. Cold shower, black coffee, a fight for your life.

He thought about Rhys.

No, Tim. Bad thought.

But once he started, it was difficult to stop. Rhys was there, inside Tim’s head, almost every day. Every time he woke up in the morning, and every time he had breakfast (had Rhys remembered to eat?), and every time he wrote his reports, and every time he looked over one of Atlas’ new prototypes, and every time he had dinner. If he managed to go an hour without thinking about Rhys, then the little twerp would call him, or send him a message. Like he knew Tim was slipping.

This is all very juvenile, he thought to himself. He might’ve said it out loud.

Rhys liked him. Tim had known it since the hot springs, but he thought Rhys’ attraction to him was purely physical. Now he was beginning to have doubts, because Rhys had been taking it slow. Rhys had been so damn stubborn about winning Tim’s trust, after the needle and everything they’d talked
about after. He’d spent the last two months edging his way into Tim’s personal space, brushing his hand against Tim’s, walking shoulder-to-shoulder, leaning unnecessarily close when they talked. Like he was letting Tim acclimatize to him. Letting him get comfortable.

But he’d never gone as far as he was going now. Tim rubbed his thigh, convinced he could still feel the heat from Rhys’ hand there. Like he was fifteen in Rudy Takagawa’s basement again, somehow caught up in a game of Seven Minutes of Paradise with Rudy themselves. That’d been Tim’s first kiss.

_You can make it up to me later._

Tim shuddered. God, he really wanted to.

Everybody out there could see what was happening. Tim had never found himself in a situation like this before; flirting like that, right out in the open. Like everyone knew he’d be going home with Rhys. Like he was Rhys’ special present, something he couldn’t wait to unwrap and play with at home. _Jesus fuck_ he really wanted to.

Tim groaned and curled up. He pressed his aching head against his knees and breathed out loudly.

“You can’t,” he said, out loud for certain this time. “You really can’t.”

Why not?

Tim flinched. In his own head, he still sounded like… well, like himself. The way he used to sound, unpleasant as that might’ve been. Even after twelve years, it still felt a little jarring to hear Jack’s voice coming out of his mouth.

But it was worse hearing it in his head.

Why not just take the little piece home and make him scream? He’s obviously gagging for it.

Tim’s face burned hot enough to evaporate the last few drops of water. This wasn’t Jack. Not really. This was the simulacrum, the golem Tim built inside his own head. His Jacksuit, the impersonation he pulled out, back when Tim had to disappear.

Besides, he likes you. You idiot. When was the last time someone liked you?

Tim closed his eyes. If he didn’t engage, maybe Jack would go away.

No, no, no, I’m serious here. I mean, you were so hung up on me for so long, you basically gave up two decades of your miserable life to me. You didn’t even look at anyone else. And now you’ve got this admittedly not as hot but still pretty hot little number with a tight ass, looking at you like he wants you to raw him on that dinner table, and you’re fuckin’ making yourself miserable about it!

It’s stupid. You’re being stupid, Timmy. As usual.

But you don’t have to be pathetic. You can have this. Just fuckin’ step up and take it.

Tim ran a hand across his face.

Forget the face. Worry about the face when you’re sober and he’s sober and you’re both sober enough to talk about feelings and butterflies and puppies and fuckin’ whatever. Just go out and get laid. You need to. Badly.

The door opened just as Tim was pulling himself off the floor. Vaughn slowed to a stop, his
eyes brows climbing at the sight of Tim.

“Didn’t realise you were still in here,” he said.

“Where else would I be?” Tim hit the tap.

“I thought maybe you’d gone to bed.” Vaughn shifted his weight. “Alone.”

Tim splashed another handful of water over his face. Vaughn stood at his side, squared up like a man about to throw or take a punch.

“It’s not like that,” Tim said.

“I’m not blind, man,” Vaughn said. “That stuff I told you before, I didn’t say that so you could—could seduce my best friend like that.”

“Hey, I haven’t done a fucking thing, alright? I’ve just—” Tim stopped, realising he’d rounded on the smaller man, looming over him with his fists raised. He took a breath and relaxed his stance. “We haven’t done anything. Okay? I’ve… been good.”

Vaughn tilted his gaze to the side. “I’m not here to play chaperone, okay? I’m just trying to look out for Rhys. I don’t know if you picked this up from the stories Yvette and I were telling, but he’s the sort of guy who forgives easily. Maybe too easily. So, you know. Just let him down gently. He might be upset for a while, but he’ll come around. He likes you.”

Tim ran a damp hand through his hair. He thought about rejecting Rhys. Leaving. Maybe they could be friends. Fuck, Tim could use more than one friend.

He thought about Rhys getting over him. Moving on with someone else.

His fingers dug into the metal sink. It wasn’t fair. Why couldn’t Rhys’ shitty ex-boyfriend been literally anyone else? Why couldn’t Tim have just saved up enough money sooner, gotten the fucking surgery? Why did Jack have to find new and awful ways to make his life miserable?

“Come on, man,” Vaughn said, not unkindly. “I get that you like him too. So, maybe you can acknowledge that this is what’s best for him?”

Who the fuck is this little asshole and what the fuck does he think he’s doing, talking to you like that?

Tim shoved his Jack impression away. It wasn’t useful to have around.

“Yeah.” Tim cleared his throat. “Yeah, yeah. You’re right. I’m just, I’m gonna…” He pushed away from the sink, wobbling slightly and made for the door.

**THEN**

Jack waited for the ship to finish docking, whatever beurocratic handshaking that had to take place before he could return to Eos taking a little longer than usual. Two others sat in the shuttle with him, both seated on the other side of the cabin, leaving him with a bench all to himself. Maybe because they were intimidated, or maybe because he was covered in blood.

Jack took advantage, spreading out the way he was taught. Spikes of pain shot through his chest at the non-too-gentle docking procedure, his freshly healed ribs still sending out phantom signals. A side-effect of too much Anshin use. One of the soldiers caught his eye—a pretty face, framed behind those gaudy yellow helmets. Jack smirked.
“Uh, can I just say that…” she hesitated, drawing her knees together in evident self-consciousness. Her seat mate nudged her in the ribs. “That I’m kind of a fan?”

“Of course you are,” Jack said with a smile that set her face aflame.

“I’ve seen your videos, I mean. They’re really good.”

“Yeah!” The other one leaned forward. “That last one, the one from Hermes? When you rescued that captured board member? And you just, like, sniped off three people before they even caught sight of you? And then the way you herded everyone into the same cover and just tossed a fire grenade over the ledge? And then they—“ He broke off into shared giggles with his partner.

Jack’s smile didn’t falter. It didn’t even look strained, anymore. Years of practice, paying off.

“What can I say? The only thing scumbags like them are any good for is providing us with cheap entertainment.”

Docking finished, and he made the right noises to the others. The girl asked for his autograph and he gave it, signing her armour with a flourish. He doodled a little winky face, like he was signing her cast. She loved it.

People loved Jack.

Jack strode to his office, self-assured smile in place. People’s heads turned when he walked past. A few people even stopped him to talk. Jack’s smirk grew teeth as he gave charming, but clipped answers. He had places to be, pumpkin.

He found a member of the board—the one he’d saved a month ago, the one with a photogenic smile and a melodious scream, qualities that made her the perfect victim, not that she would ever know it—waiting for him outside his office, seated on the ornate couch left out for guests. Jack’s secretary was gone—he always was, just after a mission. He had no way of knowing how long she’d been there. She smiled when she saw him approach.

“Jack.” She stood, smoothing down her blue pencil skirt. The colour accented her eyes, he noticed. “I was hoping to catch you. I hope I’m not intruding.” She pulled those pretty lips into a smile.

Jack’s gaze flickered to the door. He couldn’t be late but he couldn’t be rude, either. Or, at least, not rude to someone on the board. Not rude to someone who could hinder his upward progression. He pressed a sharp nail into his thumb.

“Never. Anything I can help you with, babe?”

She flushed, because he used pet names like he meant them.

“I was hoping we could discuss certain… matters. Inside? Privately?”

Jack flipped his smile out for something a touch more condescending and heated, like he intended to fuck her but he felt a little sorry for her. A smile that said ‘get in line’.

“Sorry, pumpkin. You know what it’s like just after a mission. I gotta take some time to myself,” he said, honestly.

“I thought I could help you unwind.” She took his lapels in both hands, pulling him close, pressing her soft chest against him. He’d long ago gotten used to the way pretty girls smiled at him, the moves they made on him.
He let some teeth show, let his eyes narrow. Jack appreciated aggression, but only on his terms.

“Sorry,” he said, meaning it less this time. He untangled her hands, gave them a brief squeeze before he let them drop. “Maybe some other time. I’ll call you, alright, cupcake?” Again, like he meant it.

He stood in front of the retinal scanner, and, careful to keep the interior hidden from her view, stepped inside his office.

“What took you?” Jack demanded as soon as the doors slid shut.

“You had a visitor,” Tim said. His stance changed immediately, shoulders slumping, spine curving. He drew his arms close, crossing them over his chest. Even his walk changed. He tread quietly, like he was afraid of being overheard.

“That chick from the board?” Jack snorted. “Geez, you save one idiot from a buncha bandits, and suddenly she’s all up in my jock.”

“Well, saving someone’s life is a real panty dropper,” Tim said. He stood in front of Jack’s desk. He stared down at the holographic display of his latest mission, frozen at the start. He saw himself—or Jack—poised mid-air, dropping from the transfer point into the fray. It’d been a particularly ghoulish mission, but that’d been the point. The propaganda pieces with blood and gore on frame turned in the best numbers. So they’d found a bandit camp, armed him with explosive rounds, and set him loose.

Jack’s gaze swept over him, heated and possessive.

“Did she touch you?” he asked.

“Just the jacket,” Tim said. Jack nodded. He would probably check the security feed later, anyway. “I told her you’d call her.”

“Good. I’ll check out how grateful she’s feeling for ya,” he said, circling the desk.

Tim nodded without surprise. He knew he wasn’t the only person Jack fucked. Sometimes he wasn’t even the only person in the same night. He belonged to Jack, not the other way around.

Jack took him by the chin and Tim held himself steady, unflinching. “You are just covered, ain’tcha? Do you think the bit with the axe was too much? I mean, I thought it was hilarious, but people can be babies about a little intestine.”

Tim didn’t reply. Jack didn’t really care.

It’d been four years. Helios was complete, and everyone knew it was Jack’s. It hadn’t been announced officially, but who else would they give it to? Jack was the golden boy, the face of Hyperion.

Jack rubbed at a patch of smeared blood across Tim’s cheek, smearing it further. He smiled.

“You looked good out there, precious.” Like he meant it.

Jack kissed him.

Tim swallowed, kissed back. It was slow, lacking in urgency, but with a little heat. They had all night, after all. Jack nipped at his lips, not hard enough to break skin, but hard enough to make it interesting.

Tim relaxed a little. It seemed as if tonight would be a good night. And there weren’t many of those,
Tim was a fish in a barbed net, or a bear in a trap. If he didn’t struggle, he could forget that it hurt. If he kept still enough, it was like he wasn’t even trapped in the first place.

Jack was handsy, giddy, but they still had a lot to get through. He pulled away with a wet smack of his lips, grinning at the sight of Tim’s blood-red face.

“Enough of that,” he said, as if Tim had been the one wasting time. “Sit down. We’ve got some stuff to cover.”

Tim made mistakes. Jack went over them. As he lectured and harangued, the pleasure drained from his voice. He poured himself a drink, and did not offer one to Tim. He’d banned alcohol from Tim’s diet last year. Tim was in his 30s now, and couldn’t shed the weight gained from empty calories and carbs the way he used to.

“You wanna describe to me what the hell was going through your mind right here?” Jack asked, stabbing a finger through a digital bad guy.

Nothing, Tim thought.

“I don’t remember,” he said.

“You don’t remember. Great. That’s great. Because what I see here—“ Jack flicked his fingers, expanding the field to a greater scale. He pointed to another bad guy, one with a gun in his hands, creeping up behind Tim. “—is a bandit about to kill my extremely talented but kind of stupid body double. Does he look familiar to you?” Jack demanded, like he expected a serious answer.

Tim shook his head.

“You shot him two seconds after you landed, cupcake. But you didn’t follow up. He healed, reloaded, and then came back. While your back was turned. Any thoughts you wanna share with the class?”

Tim shook his head again. He braced himself, ready for Jack’s outburst, the litany of insults, maybe some violence. But nothing came. He looked up, surprised to see Jack looking at him with an unreadable expression.

“This was careless. You understand? I haven’t seen you pull shit like that since you started. And this isn’t the first instance I’ve noticed either.” Jack drummed his fingers against the desk. He stared at Tim’s face. “You look tired, pumpkin.”

Sweat prickled at the back of Tim’s neck.

“I’m fine,” he said but Jack had already stood up. “Jack, really, it’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Take it easy, Timmy.” Jack walked to the other side of the desk, perching on the corner. Tim forced himself to sit still, to not shy away, his nails digging into the fabric of his jeans.

“You’ve been losing weight,” Jack said. “More than I wanted you to lose. Your trainers tell me you don’t seem ‘present’ during their sessions with you. And all this stuff out on the field—“ Jack nodded to the hologram. “—suggests to me that you aren’t giving it your all.”

Tim was so tired of this argument. “Jack, please,” he said, although he knew it was useless. If Jack wanted a fight, he would get one. “I’m doing everything you ask me to.”
“Oh, don’t start with that,” Jack said and out came the knives, and there went Tim’s good night. “Don’t act like you’re the only one making an effort here, like you’re the first person to make sacrifices.”

Tim said nothing. He couldn’t stop the way his head lowered, the way his shoulders drew in. He crossed his arms and felt the material of his jacket, made stiff and sticky by drying blood, press against his still-damp Hyperion sweater. He felt hot and cold, all at once.

Let Jack have his fun, like a dog with a rag doll. Eventually he would get bored.

But Jack didn’t continue. He fell back, jaw flexing and eyes narrowing, looking like he was getting his temper back under control with difficulty.

“As I was saying,” he said. “You look tired. You’ve been making mistakes. I was thinking it might be time you took another break.”

Tim shivered and curled into himself. The walls moved closer, sneaking up on him out of the corner of his eye. He knew it could only be his imagination, although he didn’t find that comforting.

“Please,” he whispered.

“What was that, pumpkin? You’ve got something to say now?”

“I don’t want to,” he said.

“Speak up.”

“I don’t want to.” He felt as if the words were being dragged from him and this was how Jack got his fights. How he carved out his pound of flesh. Why was he shivering so much?

“Why not? It’s supposed to be good for you. A little R&R. Everyone needs a break now and then. Except for me, of course,” Jack added bitterly.

“Because I…” Tim shook so hard, he had to force the words out. He couldn’t bring himself to look up at Jack. “Because…”

“Spit it out, princess. I haven’t got all night.”

“I hate it,” Tim said. He tried to breathe, but the word sat in his throat like a stone he’d swallowed. He could feel its sharp edges digging in.

“I hate it. I hate it. I hate it. I hate it.” He dropped his head into his hands, pulled at his hair. It was like he’d forgotten not to fight, and now the barbs were digging in, slicing him apart. He couldn’t breathe. “Hate it, hate it, hate it, hate it, hatehatehatehatehate—”

Jack pulled Tim from his chair and Tim forgot to go limp, his mind still on struggling. He tried to pull away, but Jack was always stronger than him. Instead of the hands around his neck he expected, Jack wrapped his arms around Tim and pulled him tight. He pushed Tim’s face into the crook of his neck, ran his hands soothingly across his back.

“Easy, Timmy. I gotcha, it’s okay. Just breathe. I’ve got you.” He pressed his lips against Tim’s temple.

Tim sobbed like a child, gasping hard enough to shake his whole body. He staggered into Jack like a drunk and clung to him like he was the only firm and steady thing he could hold in a storm. Jack
murmured soothingly, rubbed Tim’s back, indulged him.

When the winds died down and the rain stopped, Tim found himself curled up on Jack’s lap, seated in Jack’s ridiculous throne-like chair. Tim felt briefly surprised it could support their weight, before he recalled this was not the first time they’d both ended up in the same seat.

“What are you smiling about?” Jack asked. He ran his fingers through Tim’s hair, an old gesture that still brought comfort.

“Just thinking about the last time we were both here,” Tim replied. Jack snorted.

“And here I was, playing Prince Virtuous and keeping my hands to myself, and meanwhile you’re getting all hot and bothered. Whaddya say, kitten? You in the mood for a ride?” He leered, a comical exaggeration of his usual intent. Tim gave a watery laugh.

Jack sighed and ran his hand up and down Tim’s thigh and this, too, was familiar. Tim closed his eyes and focused on the sensation.

“You don’t want to fuck. What do you want, then?” Jack asked, and Tim could hear the softness in his voice that told him what Jack was really asking.

He gave it some thought, which wasn’t easy. He felt waterlogged, his head awash in calming brain chemicals. He wanted to close his eyes and sleep like this, in Jack’s arms, and stay there for a hundred years.

“I want…” He licked his dry lips, tasted salt. “I want to write to my mom.”

Jack’s hand went still.

“I won’t tell her anything,” Tim went on quickly. “I won’t. I just…” Tim buried his face in the crook of Jack’s neck. “I just miss her. I want to know how she’s doing.”

Slowly, cautiously, Jack resumed his movements. “I didn’t know you were close to your mom.”

“I guess I’m not. But she’s my mom, you know?”

“Not really,” Jack said lightly.

Tim winced, tensing, but Jack shushed him, giving his thigh a squeeze.

“Relax, precious. I’m not angry. This probably isn’t an unreasonable request, but I can’t just let you send your dear ol’ mom a message out of the blue, you understand? She thinks you’re dead. I gotta look into some things first. Make sure the coast is clear, so to speak. Tim Lawrence had to disappear to keep this charade going and if it looks like he might’ve made a miraculous reappearance, my enemies—our enemies—might just get curious. But I’ll look into it. We’ll figure this out. Alright?”

Tim sagged with relief. “Thank you, Jack.”

“In the meantime, I think I need to pay another visit to the doc. It might be time to change your meds. See if we can’t get you something to help you out with these little moods you’ve been having.”

“Mmh. Okay.” Tim yawned. Every time he blinked, it was a struggle to open his eyes again. The exhaustion that’d dogged his steps over the last few months finally catching him unawares.

“You wanna go to bed, precious?” Jack sounded amused.
Jack carried him all the way back to his room, like he was a bride, or a child. Like he actually was something precious to Jack.

He tucked him into bed, running his hand through his hair, dropping a kiss on his forehead, his lips. He made as if to pull away, but Tim caught his hands.

“You want me to stay?” Jack asked. It was too dark to see his face.

“Always,” Tim said, already falling asleep.

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**NOW**

Rhys had the patience of a saint. He didn’t look like it. People might be surprised to learn that the guy with that hair and that sense of style could actually, like, wait. For things. He looked like the sort of guy who got what he wanted, when he wanted it, is the thing. The thing was, Rhys did that on purpose because for a long time that was the sort of guy he wanted to be. Like Jack.

No, hang on, fuck Jack. Rhys didn’t want to think about Jack. He wanted to think about Tim.

Tim, who’d run off to the washroom almost ten minutes ago. Rhys made a quiet escape from the kitchen, confident that the girls wouldn’t notice for a while. He walked in a more-or-less straight line towards the washrooms, and camped out in the hall.

Rhys could be patient when it mattered, like when it came down to getting his asshole cat to like him. Or when it came down to, like, not telling people about the ghost of a murderer in his cybernetics (no fuck goddammit stop thinking about him). Or standing in line to get into a party. Rhys wasn’t always good looking, right? Things didn’t always come easy. Vaughn forgot that, sometimes. Fiona and Sasha never knew. Rhys can never forget.

He could be patient for Tim, was what he’s trying to get at. Because he thought Tim would be worth it.

But that was before Rhys got drunk. And now he just wanted Tim. He wanted to take him home. He wanted to do all the things he’d been fantasizing about for the last two and a half months, since the first time he saw Tim reload a gun and shoot a man in one, smooth, unbroken moment. Tim had such nice hands. Nice arms and chest. The neck was good, too. And the legs. The whole package, really, was just A+. He had to tell Tim.

Rhys perked up at the sound of familiar footsteps (yes, he knew what Tim’s footfalls sounded like when he was trying to make noise. Rhys knew he had a problem). He peeked around the corner and spotted Tim walking with his head bowed and a hand running through his hair. Rhys’ heart gave a little flutter at the sight. Tim rounded the corner, and Rhys, taking advantage of his rare lapse in attention, grabbed him by his lapels and crowded him against the wall.

“Hi,” Rhys said and leaned down and kissed him.

As first kisses went, it wasn’t Rhys’ best. (It also wasn’t his worst, a title that belonged to the second kiss he’d ever had.) He missed his mark—goddamn that mask—but he managed to hit Tim’s lower lip and part of his chin, his teeth bumping against a developing 5 o’clock shadow. It barely counted as a kiss, really, and Rhys broke it off quickly.

He cupped Tim’s face with both hands, frowned with concentration into that blank expanse, and tried again. Slower, this time. Slow enough that it didn’t count as a sneak attack anymore. Even drunk, Tim could’ve broken Rhys. Or at least pulled away.
He did neither.

The second time, Rhys got Tim’s lips. He made a small noise of pleasure at his success. He thrilled at the feel of sharp cheekbones and rough stubble under his fingers. He took it slow (patient), kissed Tim softly at first, testing the waters. Tim’s lips were chapped, but warm and soft.

After a moment, Tim kissed back.

His hands slid around Rhys’ waist, drawing him close. Rhys brought one hand down to rest at the juncture between shoulder blade and neck, pressing his thumb gently into the dip of his clavicle. The other he wound into Tim’s thick hair. Tim opened his mouth with a sigh, and Rhys slipped his tongue inside.

“Shit, Rhys.” Tim broke away, panting quietly. He cupped the back of Rhys’ head, fingers running through Rhys’ hair. “I don’t think this is a good idea.” But he didn’t pull away.

“Why not?” Rhys asked. He was close enough that he could feel Tim’s breath on his face, close enough that he knew Tim could feel each word he said.

“A lot of reasons.” Tim swallowed. Rhys watched his throat work with fascination. “Well, one reason. But it’s a big one.”

“You like me,” Rhys said, because confidence paid off in almost every situation. “You like me.” He felt a little ashamed to hear just the faintest note of uncertainty.

“Yeah. I do.” Was Tim looking at him? His face was pointed towards him, but Rhys couldn’t feel the heat of his eyes. Maybe that was all nonsense, but Rhys could’ve sworn he could tell when Tim looked at him. He leaned down, chasing that phantom gaze.

“I like you too.” Rhys whispered it, like it was a secret. “And I know I said before that it was just physical but I was lying. I mean, I do like this.” Rhys grabbed the meat of Tim’s pectoral and squeezed. “I like all of this very much. But I also like the rest of it to. The stuff on the inside.”

How do you convince someone you like like them, for their personality and everything that came with it? Rhys thought about listing off Tim’s traits, like items on a menu (your laugh, your confidence, the way I can tell when you’re smiling, the way you blush all over, the way you tap your fingers when you’re nervous, the way eat everything like it’s the first time you’ve ever tasted anything, the way you lit up at the mention of Bunkers and Badasses you huge nerd, the way you ruffle my hair, the way you take me seriously but not too seriously), but he knew he wasn’t as good with words as he wanted to be. Everything came out so much cleaner in his head.

Instead, he said, “I like you, Tim.” And then he kissed him again.

Dr. Turia Peel threw down her glasses with a sigh. It was a childish gesture, one she used to get scolded over even when she’d been a child, but it’d been a trying few weeks. She cleared her throat and looked around to ensure no one had seen her. She felt as if she’d thrown a full-on tantrum.

It’d been bad enough to hand over her research and her project to some bug-eyed whackadoo, giving up a prestigious position and losing the respect of her peers. Now that she served as Dr. Etna’s second-in-command (at least, in name), she’d gotten stuck with all the paperwork. And boy, did this project produce a lot of it. She had to go through Etna’s daily recordings, observations, and data, distill it all into something coherent (a task in and of itself) and then write it all up for the CEO and the COO. Admittedly, she sent them both the same file, but she still felt the pressure of two pairs of important eyeballs on her work. She never cared for close scrutiny.
Ever since the incident with the needle that nearly destroyed the compound, the CEO had been especially vigilant. He’d even come down to visit the labs, just to ensure everything was going smoothly. His most recent visit had been earlier that week. He’d come down to examine the AI code for himself, somehow not content to have reports delivered to his personal inbox.

Curiously, he left after less than a quarter hour, complaining of a headache.

Occasionally, she entertained the idea of sending Rhys and Yvette Etna’s unedited thoughts and recordings and let them get an idea of what she had to work with. She’d managed to resist the urge so far, tempting at it was. Ultimately, it would only make her look unprofessional. If she wanted to sabotage Etna, she’d have to think of something better.

It’d been Etna’s daily ramblings that’d driven Peel to her little personal tantrum with her glasses. She’d been in her office for the last three hours, combing through the day’s information. Pyrphoros was nearing its completion and, as much as it galled Peel to admit, even to herself, it was largely due to Etna’s input. They were far ahead of schedule. It was, frankly, nothing short of a miracle after what had happened with the needle. No one knew why Pyrphoros had gone into action ahead of schedule. The forensic coders and engineers had combed through the data with precision and care and had come up with nothing concrete. Peel suspected sabotage, although she couldn’t imagine who would benefit from destroying the entire dome.

But, as Peel stared at the lines of code, she began to wonder just how miraculous Etna’s input has been. She’d been producing break-through after break-through. Even during her time working in a Hyperion lab, with the finest equipment available, Etna hadn’t been this prolific. It was possible the time she’d spent in the abandoned Atlas lab had given her some of the information she required to continue her research. But… this much? Peel hooked the arm of her glasses on her lower lip and sat back.

She knew better than anyone just what Etna had been capable of during her tenure at Hyperion. Peel had spent the last half-year performing pain-staking repairs and recreations of Etna’s original work. She’d read as much of Etna’s original notes as she could get her hands on, and worked to rebuild the original project to the best of her abilities, and while Etna had been one of the finest AI Architects and Eridian researchers in her field, this was an entirely different level. Peel tapped her teeth.

Building an AI took time, as Peel well knew. They’d started practically at nothing, and Etna had built a nearly-functioning prototype in a month? This wasn’t just brilliant; this was inhuman.

She debating taking her concerns to the CEO. This project was his baby. If she were to go to him with her concerns, she’d need proof.

She buffed her glasses, wiping them down with the soft material of her blouse, and replaced them carefully, moving with the precision of a soldier holstering her weapon. Peel pushed back her seat.

The lab was located on the same level in what people colloquially referred to as the ‘needle room’. It surrounded needle like an observation room, encircling it in thick, treated plastic. It was unlocked, but the interior was nearly completely dark. A few screens lit up in blues and violets, providing enough light to give the darkness substance and shape. The lab was crowded and difficult to navigate, if you weren’t careful. Consoles scavenged from other facilities were crammed inside, taking up space beside a stack of servers almost as tall as Peel. The servers were for the AI. They’d come from some old Atlas factory, apparently. Cleanliness wasn’t a priority in Etna’s realm. (It had been when Peel was in charge.)

Etna’s personal computer sat in the corner, a desk that was near completely hidden by one of the server towers. Peel always hated visiting Etna in her little fortress. The screens were always just a
few shades too bright, and even a few minutes could turn Peel’s vision blurry.

Peel took a quiet step inside, prepared to navigate around the strewn machinery, when a voice caught her attention.

“…tonight. It has to be tonight.”

Peel hid herself behind some dented console. Years of working at Hyperion made this sort of thing second-nature.

“You sure about this? We had a prrrrrrrretty good plan. You kmmnmnow, I’d hate to toss it away just cause you’re gggggggettin’ nervous.” A man’s voice, oddly distorted, as though projecting over a bad connection.

“I’ve run the scenarios myself. Malady’s close. If your goal is still opportunity, then our best chance for success is to act tonight.”

“Alright. I’ililililililililililil give that silver freak-sshhhow the head’s up. She shshould be there in fifteen. Youuuuu just be sure to get Rhyssssssssssss. I don’t want to telllllll you what I’ll do to you if you ffffaailll.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll bring him here. This project means too much to him.”

“And the man with no fffiffiffiffiface. I wwwwwant him alivvvvve.”

A pause.

“I’ll try.”

A harsh burst of static made Peel jump, her heart racing.

“I don’t wwwwwant you to trrrr. I wwwwwant you to DO IT. Lawrence cccccccomes alive or I’ll rip outtttt your insides and turrrrrrn you into a speak-and-sssssay.”

“Yes, yes. I’m sorry.”

“Ddddddon’t give me sorry. Just ddddo as you’re told.”

“I will.”

“Ggsgood girl. I’ve ggggggotten Malady. She’ll be here soonnn. You do as you wwwwwere made to dddddo.”

Peel kept her hand clamped over her mouth, breathing as quietly as she could. The voice—that woman’s voice. Etna. And the man, whoever she was contacting—he’d mentioned Malady, the Bandit Queen of the Wastes. Like most Atlas scientists, Peel had enough familiarity with the Pandoran landscape to know bad news when it came barrelling down on you with an armada of armed bastards. She needed to get a hold of Captain Bell.

Peel crept as silently as she could towards the door. She knew she wasn’t alone—that whoever made the call hadn’t finished. The room filled with the soft sound of static, the quiet hiss of an open connection, although neither she nor the man on the line had said anything. Beads of sweat formed at Peel’s temples, her glasses sliding down her nose. She kept her senses primed for any sign of movement.

The lights came to life, all at the same time.
This was a laboratory, designed to be bright to save on eyestrain and keep the workers in high spirits while they toiled in a windowless room. Every surface was made to look shiny and modern. Peel nearly went blind. She hit her knee against a chair, sending it spinning on touchy wheels across the room. Squinting and with nothing left to lose, Peel took off at a run towards where she remembered the door to be.

She only saved herself from breaking her glasses and her nose against the smooth, expanse of the sealed door by virtue of quick reflexes. She skid to a stop, flailing only a little for balance.

“How much did you hear?”

Peel turned to face her rival. She almost didn’t recognize her without that distracted, vacant expression on her face.

Etna’s hair still looked like it’d been styled by a storm, and like she’d gotten dressed in a blackout, but her eyes were sharp and her voice was firm. But Peel didn’t really notice any of this, because all of her attention was caught by the gun held in her hands.

“How much?” Etna asked again. It was a Hyperion pistol, one of the yellow and white ones.

“Dr. Etna.” Peel straightened, smoothing down her skirt. “I didn’t realise you were here. I was just coming by to—to check on the latest information—”

“You were eavesdropping just now, hiding under a desk,” Etna said. She didn’t say it with much passion, which scared Peel almost as much as the gun. “How much did you hear? Please don’t make me ask more than once.”

Peel’s gaze flickered to the security panel in the wall. She shifted her weight, a slight adjustment that would make a lot of difference in a few seconds.

“I—I didn’t hear anything. I was listening to my music, so—” It was a weak excuse, and one she didn’t expect to work.

“You’re lying.” Etna didn’t look surprised. “And you’re not making this any easier on yourself.”

The panel was about five steps away, which could translate to less than a second. That’s all the time Peel needed. But how long did it take to pull the trigger?

Peel schooled her features into an expression of sympathy. “Etna. If you’re in trouble, I can help you. Just let me—”

A screen flickered to life, shades of blue illuminating some lab assistant’s desk, displaying something impossible.

“Aw, will yyyyyyou quit playin’ with your food, Etna? Jusssssssssst shoot her already!”

Peel’s eyes widened. She really was a smart woman, smart enough not to say something like ‘This is impossible’, or ‘How can this be?’. She was smart enough not to let the revelation on screen paralyze her at all. She threw herself at the panel, slapping her palm against the screen just as Etna pulled the trigger.

This was wrong.

The phrase repeated over and over in Tim’s head, even as he gave into month-long temptation and
finally kissed the tattoo on Rhys’ neck. Rhys’ delighted giggle turned to a moan when Tim pulled him by the hair, exposing the long curve of his throat. He nipped at the skin, tasting salt. Rhys smelled like hair wax, expensive aftershave, and fruity cocktails.

Alcohol made him brave, brave enough to run his hand down Rhys’ back, until he could cup the curve of his ass.

Five long and lonely years made him stupid. This was a bad idea, but that could have been Tim’s motto. Making bad decisions was practically his hobby.

Rhys grabbed him by the hips and jerked him forward, until he could slide his thigh between Tim’s legs. They both groaned at the contact, Tim biting down on the sensitive skin of Rhys’ neck.

Except…

Except if Rhys could see his face, would he still want him?

“Tim?”

Tim closed his eyes, guilt hitting him like a bullet to the chest. If Rhys saw his face tomorrow, would he regret his actions tonight? What this was—what he was about to do—it would’ve been dishonest. Worse, it would’ve hurt Rhys. Betrayed his trust.

Tim took in a breath. He could do this. He could be good.

“Tim?” Rhys’ hands settled on his shoulders. When Tim pulled back, he could see confusion and frustration in Rhys’ expression. He sighed.

“We can’t,” he said.

Rhys didn’t react immediately. He unfroze with a small smile.

“Tim.” His voice was half-chiding, half-fond. He leaned forward, but Tim pulled back, stepped away. His hands fell to his sides. Rhys’ eyes widened, and the hurt Tim wanted to avoid could be read plainly in Rhys’ face.

“Tim, what’s wrong?” he asked.

If there was ever a time to explain, it would be now. It was far, far too late to painlessly pull the band-aid off, but he the longer he dragged this out, the worse it would get. He should’ve run when he had the chance, but he hadn’t. So now he had to stand and tell Rhys the truth. Tim searched for courage deep inside himself, but all he could find was shame.

“We’re both too drunk for this,” Tim said. The coward.

It was amazing, how quickly Rhys’ expression changed. Shutters lowering like someone closing up shop after going bankrupt. Rhys’ next smile was still small, but it was several degrees cooler. When he spoke, he had a voice to match.

“Of course. Whatever you say.” Rhys leaned back, arms crossing over his chest and cold smile affixed in place.

Tim’s heart pounded. He was fucking this up.

“You know, I thought I had you figured out before,” Rhys said. “I guess I thought you liked me.”
“I do like you,” Tim said weakly, trying to salvage.

Rhys only shook his head. “I figured you had some big hurt in your past, something that made you scared to get close to people,” Rhys said lightly.

Tim had nothing to say to that.

“But I also thought you could be brave. I thought maybe you could be brave for me. Us. Whatever. But you won’t even show me your face.” Something was happening to Rhys’ expression. Some emotion Tim didn’t want to name took Rhys’ smile and pulled it thin. It brought something terrible into his eyes.

“I don’t know why I thought you could like me when you obviously don’t trust me,” Rhys said.

Tim winced. He wanted to argue, but didn’t Rhys have a point?

“Is there anyone you trust?” Rhys asked. It sounded like an accusation, although Tim couldn’t name the crime.

Tim kept his silence. With nothing to attack, Rhys’ anger chilled as quickly as it’d flared. Without it, Rhys’ expression crumpled. He looked away.

“Whatever,” he muttered. He pushed from the wall and Tim was fucking this up. He was fucking everything up.

Idiot. You idiot. Just tell him. And if you lose him, at least you went down fighting. Tim reached out.

“Rhys.” Tim’s voice was a croak. He had Rhys by the arm with one hand, and the other reached for his earwidget. Anger flashed across Rhys’ face, as brief and bright as lightning crossing the sky. Gone as soon as he saw Tim’s finger on his ear.

“Rhys,” Tim said. “Listen to me. I’m—"

The universe truly hated Tim Lawrence.

The now-late Peel’s last action was truly heroic. Because of her sacrifice, a lot of lives were about to be saved. Tim would never find this out, of course, because of what his future had in store. But even if he had, he probably still would’ve hated Peel, just a little.

The alarms shrieked through the base, sending a jolt of adrenaline that nearly cut through all the lingering alcohol fog in Tim’s head. It may have done the same for Rhys. His expression cleared.

“What—?” Tim tried but he could scarcely hear himself over the blare.

Rhys mouth moved but all Tim could hear was the faint sound of his voice. Not the words—just the sound by itself. Tim shook his head.

“I can’t hear you!” he said as loud as he could. Rhys shook his head. Before Tim could try again, the ECHO device in his ear buzzed.

“Get your ass up here NOW, Lawrence.” It was Bell.

“What’s happening?” he asked. He could hear muffled sounds over the line, other people’s voices and the clatter of plastics and metals.

“What’s happening is we’ve got a battalion of bandits incoming and I need help getting everyone
mobilized and I do not need stupid, time-wasting questions!"

Tim glanced over to Rhys, whose moving lips and glowing eye signalled he was involved in his own conversation. Rhys met his gaze, his lips parted and his eyes wide and wet with fear.

Tim wanted to say something brave, something to remind Rhys why Rhys might’ve thought he was impressive in the first place. ‘Don’t worry, boss,’ maybe. ‘I’ll take care of this.’

Rhys mouthed, ‘Bell?’ and gestured to Tim’s ear. Tim nodded. Rhys wouldn’t hear anything he said to him. He wouldn’t even see Tim’s lips moving.

You missed your chance, pumpkin.

Tim shook his head, pointed to the ceiling and hoped that got enough across. Rhys’ eyes narrowed, the look of fear falling away. He drew himself up straight. He nodded once, all the gravity of a king sending his finest out to war.

“Lawrence! Upstairs, NOW!”

“Coming,” Tim said. He turned but Rhys caught him by the arm. He looked back at Rhys, who still wore the same determined look. He yanked Tim close, leaned down, and spoke in a voice just barely audible over the alarms.

“Be safe.”

Tim gave his hand a squeeze. He turned and fled.

“How many?” he asked, jogging down the now-teeming hallway. Atlas employees streamed past, all heading for the bunkers in the seventh basement, or so Tim assumed.

“Eight—maybe ten vehicles, all stuffed with killers. We think maybe they’ve got buzzards, too, but it’s hard to tell. There’s a storm coming behind them that’s playing hell with our long-range scanners.”

A storm. Of course there was. “ETA?” Tim skipped the packed elevator, tearing the stairway door open.

“Ten minutes.” To her credit, Bell didn’t sound panicked. “Try to get here before then.” She cut the connection. Tim took the stairs two at a time.

Chapter End Notes

Well, we made it: the final stretch. Admittedly, we’ve still got ~90k words to go and roughly 11 chapters, but this sequence is the one that leads into the finale.

Thank you again to everyone who’s left a comment! It’s hard to explain the sort of happiness it gives me. Each time I get a new comment, it feels like getting an N64 when I was 11 (the last moment of Pure Joy I can recall).

Next chapter: Atlas is under attack. Rhys makes a poor decision. Tim makes a worse one.
Rhys tries to save Pyrphoros. Tim tries to save Atlas. Both are unlikely to succeed.

THEN

Tim breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth. He counted the seconds it took. He did this again and again, until he could feel his heart finally slow. When it did at last, he carefully uncurled his legs, pushed himself up and began to walk towards his door.

Each step closer made his vision grey, his head swim. His legs shook and his feet felt heavy. By the time he reached his hand out for the security panel, his pulse hammered in his ears, his hands trembled, and lights haloed in his vision.

You can do this, he told himself. You can. They’re waiting for you. You’re only 15 minutes late. It won’t be so bad. You can do this.

His body rebelled and soon he was back in his corner, curled up with his head between his knees, gasping for breath.

Jack placed his hand on Tim’s shoulder while Tim stared out his office windows. They were big, bigger than his last office. He wondered if Jack would insist on the same view once they were on Helios. The floor to ceiling window, a staple of any corporate monster. Was it a status thing? Intimidation? Tim watched the stars and thought maybe he could see them move, although he knew that was impossible. They did move—everything did—but too slowly for human eyes to follow.

“Tim. Did you hear what I said?” Jack’s voice was soft.

Tim’s vision blurred. The stars grew hazy. The things people saw didn’t move at all, did they? Light travelled at strange speeds and the stars Tim saw might’ve been dead already. The memory of their light a monument that would fade in thousands of years, and no one would notice. What’s one less light in a sky filled with them? Small tremours travelled through Tim’s arms, up his spine. His shoulder shook. Jack sighed.

“I’m sorry, kid.”

His mother was dead.

She’d been dead for nearly half a solar cycle, although he’d only known for two days.

His mother died alone.

Tim’s shoulders hitched, a sob hitting him like the crack of a whip. He closed his stinging eyes and struggled to breathe through his nose. He’d spent the last two days in his room. Jack spent the first with him, but left him overnight.
Tim never told her he loved her. That he was grateful for everything she’d done. He never said goodbye.

He thought about all the letters he’d composed in his head over the years, everything he thought about telling her.

Dear mom, I saw a monster made of molten rock today and then I killed it.

Dear mom, today I walked under a fuchsia sky and the air smelled like candy (and blood. My fault).

Dear mom, today I saw a carnivorous plant as big as me. (I fed a man to it. He was trying to kill me, ma. I had no choice.)

Dear mom, I’ve lost count of how many people I’ve killed. I didn’t try to keep track in the first place. Am I a bad person?

Dear mom, no one remembers my face but everyone recognizes me. I feel alone all the time.

Dear mom, I’m sorry I got so angry about dad. I think I understand now, why you still defended him.

Dear mom, I visited a tidal-locked planet, where day and night are locations instead of times. I walked through one to the other and then back again. It felt different each time.

Dear mom, I’m in love with an awful man.

Dear mom, I went to bed last night hoping I wouldn’t wake up this morning.

Tim’s ECHO device pinged again. The display told him he was now an hour late for the transport. He should’ve been half-way to Pallas by now, on board a ship and cleaning his arsenal before he was set loose.

(Dear mom, I think I’ve lost my stomach for this.)

His ECHO pinged again. It would only get worse the more he waited. But the thought of the inevitable anger he’d have to face paralyzed him. He couldn’t leave. He couldn’t handle Jack right now. But if he didn’t do it now, it would only get worse.

He circled the thought like an exhausted dog, unable to settle for sleep. He had to act now. He couldn’t bring himself to act. It would only get worse from here.

He tried his breathing exercise again but his nose was too stuffed. He gave up and stayed on the floor.

That was where Jack found him, nearly two hours after Tim’s original departure time. Tim didn’t look up when the door opened, but who else would it be? Jack didn’t say anything but Tim could hear the click of his teeth grinding together, the sound of a harsh breath pushed through his nose. The rare sounds of Jack trying to control his temper. Tim couldn’t bring himself to look up. He didn’t want to see Jack’s face, or to hear what he had to say to him. He would’ve begged Jack to leave him if he thought he could speak.

He heard Jack sigh again. He heard the squeak of Jack’s leather boots as he walked across the apartment. Jack sat down beside him, put one hand on the back of Tim’s neck.

“Aw, Timmy,” he said and drew him close. Tim went without a struggle. He buried his face in the crook of Jack’s neck, clutched his jacket. Tears dripped down his nose, leaked from his eyes without
Minutes passed, the silence of Tim’s apartment only broken by the occasional sniffle and hitching breath.

“I’ve sent some Hyperion goons out on the job,” Jack said. “So don’t worry about it.”

Tim sniffs and said nothing.

“Guess… Guess I shouldn’t’ve pushed you into a job so soon… after.” Admitting a fault was an alien concept to Jack, and Tim could hear it in his voice.

“I was the only family she had left,” Tim said thickly. “I should’ve been there. I didn’t even know she was sick.”

“Hey, don’t do that. She was looked after. She had good doctors. All that money you sent her was put to good use.”

“She thought I was dead, Jack. Maybe that’s why…” He stopped, swallowed. “Maybe that’s why she got sick.”

Jack shushed him. He pet Tim’s hair, running his fingers across his scalp in a gesture Tim used to find soothing. Tim closed his eyes and tried to find comfort in it now.

(Dear mom, what would you say to me, if you could see me now? If you knew what I’d done. I made the wrong choice, ma. I keep making it. He’s good to me now, but it won’t last. He’s kind sometimes, and that used to be enough. I don’t know if I can do this anymore.)

Jack’s hand stilled. Tim realised he’d said the last bit out loud.

He took a breath, readying himself to apologise, to say he didn’t mean it, to reassure Jack he was here and with him always.

“I can’t. I can’t.” Tim’s voice caught. “Jack, I can’t do this anymore.”

“Timmy… What are you saying?”

Tim pushed away. He sat against the wall, drew his knees to his chest. He felt weightless, untethered in space. About to drift away. He swallowed and began to speak, slowly and carefully.

“I… I can’t keep being you anymore. It’s killing me. I want to stop, Jack.” His voice shook, despite his best efforts. He couldn’t bring himself to look at Jack. “I want to go back to my old life.” He drew in a shaking breath, steeling himself. He looked at Jack at last. “I want you to speak with Autohn. Like you said you would. You promised.”

Jack stared at him. Tim held his gaze, even as his blood pounded in his ears and he ground the heels of his hands into the rough material of his jeans. He bit down on his lip and willed himself not to look away.

“Jack, please.” It was all he could think to say.

Jack blinked at last, animation returning to his face. “Yeah. Yeah, of course.” He looked away, pushed his hand through his hair. “I have to, to make some calls first. But if this is what you want, then… yeah.”

“Thank you, Jack,” Tim said. He didn’t bother to disguise the relief in his voice, or the way he
slumped as tension finally released its grip on him. He hesitated, wondering if it was appropriate to
reach out to Jack, offer him some comfort as well, but before he could, Jack stood.

“Sit tight for now, okay, pumpkin? I don’t know how long it’ll take me to get Autohn but it
shouldn’t be too bad. Last I heard, he was out near Hermes so, like, maybe a few days?” Jack
rambled as he walked, ignoring Tim as he scrambled to his feet behind him. He reached out for the
security pad and Tim’s pulse spiked automatically at the sight.

Jack stilled, his hand inches from the pad. “Say…” He looked at Tim over his shoulder. “How about
some of your new medicine? I’ve got the pills in my office. And, not to sound like an asshole, but
you look like you could use a little pick-me-up.”

Tim looked down at himself. He’d gotten dressed in Jack’s clothes that morning, but that had been
about as far as he’d gotten. He’d barely slept even before he knew about his mother, and what little
he’d gotten since had been troubled. He didn’t want to think about how he looked.

Jack turned to him, one corner of his lips lifting in one of his rare, genuine smiles.

“C’mon, Timmy. It might help you feel better.”

Tim hesitated. He didn’t know if he needed his anxiety medication, not now that he felt so light and
relieved, but the thought of being locked away while Jack made calls made him feel nervous.

“Okay,” he said. Jack’s grin brightened by a few hundred watts.

“Good boy.” He reached his hand out. After a split-second hesitation, Tim took it. “We’ll take the
secret paths. I know you love those.”

Tim laughed, still a little uncertain but pleased because Jack was pleased. Maybe he had this all
wrong. Maybe Jack was as tired of the charade as Tim. Maybe they were both ready to move on.

Jack hooked his arm around Tim’s waist and pulled him close.

“Don’t you worry about a thing, precious. I’ve got you.”

“What’s this?”

“Medicine. I told you. It’s the new stuff I said I’d get for you, remember? Back before… before you
heard about your mom. To help you with your moods. Come on. One dose won’t kill you.”

Tim didn’t want to, but what could he do? Sitting in Jack’s office, surrounded by Jack’s security bots
outside. Freedom might’ve been on the horizon, but he was still stranded. And he didn’t want to be
alone just yet. He nodded, popped the pill into his mouth and swallowed—

Tim woke up hours later to a darkened apartment and a mild headache. He was in his room, in bed.

Jack slept beside him, curled up on his side, facing Tim. Tim stared at his face, at the normally severe
features, so relaxed in sleep, and wondered how many people got to see Jack like this. Unguarded, at
peace. It never got old.

Tim’s smile faded slowly. Something nagged at him.

Jack inhaled sharply, his eyelids flickering. “’mmy?” he mumbled. “You okay?”
“Mmhm.” Had he forgotten to clean his weapons before putting them away? Maybe he didn’t meet his daily caloric intake…

Jack yawned and stretched out languorously. He reached over with one hand and pulled an unresisting Tim close.

“Just go back to sleep, precious,” he said as Tim settled against him. “You’ve had a long week.”

“You’ll stay with me tomorrow?” he asked, his eyelids already closing.

“For a little bit,” Jack said. “If you want me to.”

Always, Tim thought, but he fell asleep before he could say it.

NOW

Whatever calamity had caused the alarms to sound hadn’t affected the artificial atmosphere. Rain poured from grey-violet clouds, covering the dim twilight like a shroud. Tim splashed through the trodden grounds, working more from memory than sight to find his way to the armoury. He pushed through knots of bodies, the soldiers—the kids he’d been training for the last month. They filled the room with the low buzz of their conversation, the click and snap of their armour fastenings, ammo cartridges sliding into their weapons. There was a subtle change to the atmosphere when Tim arrived and he could feel himself being watched.

Tim’s locker was in his office, under his desk. It was smaller than the others, a scavenged Atlas locker that looked as if it’d been rescued from a calamity. He tried not to think about the circumstances that lead to the scorch marks. He pulled out his equipment and suited up.

What was Tim thinking about, just then? Even he wasn’t certain. His mind felt clear, pure. Almost clean. He moved quickly, efficiently, a mental count-down ticking away in the back of his mind.

Less than four minutes left. Eight or maybe ten vehicles, filled with bad people, bearing down. Maybe a few buzzards.

He found Bell outside, shouting orders and directions like a sheep dog amidst a herd. There weren’t many soldiers (his students, kids), something Tim had already known, but it was something else to see them scurrying through the barracks like this, armed and (he hoped) ready.

The sight of them all was like a curl of cirrus clouds in the blue sky of his zen calm. A thought he would rather not have. They weren’t going to be enough.

The look Bell gave him as he approached was calm, professional, but Tim thought he could see the panic she was trying to keep a lid on. He suspected he might’ve worn a similar look.

“That rain is a real nuisance. I couldn’t see two feet in front of my face. Isn’t there anything we can do about it?” he said.

“I’ve sent a message down to environmental control, but I haven’t received a response,” she said.

“They’ve probably fled their stations.”

Tim nodded. “At least it’ll be equally blinding. How long will the dome last?”

Bell gave him a pinched, bleak look.

“Where do you need me?” he asked.
“You’re handy with a sniper?” she asked. Tim nodded. “I need people close to the front. See if we can’t get a better look. Maybe stem the tide a little.”

Tim doubted he’d get much of a look through this weather, but he nodded.

He made for his guard tower as quickly as he could, but there were no vehicles to spare which left him on foot, a tricky prospect even without the rain. By the time he arrived, caked in mud from a nasty fall he’d taken along the way, he could just hear the roar of engines outside the gate.

The dome shook. He pressed two fingers against his wrist. Split, and then split again.

“…need a hero?”

“You, there’s another guard tower 500 meters north-east of here. Take up position with the sniper. Other one—“ Tim hesitated. His instinct was to send his second clone out to find Rhys but he buried the notion. Rhys had Sasha and Fiona, hopefully. He was underground, in the bunker. He’d be fine.

“Stay with me,” Tim said.

“Sounds good to me, cupcake.” Thing Two took position, his rifle forming in his hands. Tim observed, not for the first time, just how odd it was that he didn’t have to explain the situation to either of his clones. Somehow, they knew. Or maybe they just didn’t care. They only ever came out for one reason. Maybe they were just always primed for a fight.

The dome shook again. Tim took up position. It was difficult to see through the rain, but a few clicks of his scope and he could see the glowing red shapes of several warm, human bodies, through the canopy and the downpour, the shimmering barrier of the dome and its shields. There were buzzards. A lot of them.

“This is gonna get messy,” Thing Two muttered.

An explosion bloomed across its surface, the dome shaking like it’d been struck by lightning. If Tim closed his eyes, he could almost think it was a thunder storm.

“You got an escape plan in mind?” Thing One asked.

Tim didn’t reply. He couldn’t tell them he’d missed his chance.

Cracks formed across the dome, thin as spiderweb.

After this, he’d tell Rhys everything and to hell with Vaughn. He owed Rhys that, at least.

He clicked off his safety and took aim.

He’d tell Rhys everything and they would take it from there. Maybe Rhys would forgive him. Maybe he and Rhys could figure this out. Hope was a splinter in his mind. It was the sound of a pin dropping down a wide ravine.

Hope. The real thing, and not just the hope of survival at the end of a long, bloody fight. He almost didn’t recognize it. It’d been a long time. Another explosion ballooned across the barrier and the cracks spread.

Be safe, Rhys had told him.

Pieces fell, punched out of the dome like baby teeth. Tim found someone’s head between his crosshairs and pulled the trigger.
Yvette had vanished by the time Rhys returned to the kitchen. Sasha told him she’d commandeered Fiona, and they were both going through the building, floor by floor, to ensure everyone was evacuating. Which was... uncharacteristically heroic of her. He’d been so busy watching Fiona try to impress Yvette, he hadn’t thought that Yvette might’ve been trying the same thing.

Vaughn had waited for him. Sasha had gone top-side to join the others.

“We’re going underground with the rest,” Vaughn told him.

A dozen security subroutines ran through Rhys’ head, filling his ECHOeye with enough information that he’d gone half-blind. If Atlas’ intrasystems were a river, then Rhys was up to his neck.

“Rhys?” Vaughn shook him by the shoulder.

“They haven’t shut off the rain,” Rhys murmured, his brow furrowing.

“Rhys! Did you hear me? We’ve got to go, man.”

“I hear you,” Rhys said. He didn’t see the skeptical look Vaughn shot him. Vaughn shook his head, grabbed his friend by the arm, and began to tug him through the halls.

It felt like a nightmare.

Imagine: the emergency lights had come on, bathing the hall in Atlas red. Atlas employees—his employees—were in a panic, moving through the halls in herds, all streaming down the stairs in a stampede. There should’ve been armed guards with them, telling them where to go, watching out for their security, their safety. There should have been someone keeping count, someone holding a tablet filled with names, checking people off as they entered the bunkers. But they couldn’t spare the personnel. Rhys knew that, but that didn’t make him feel any better.

The alarms continued, although Rhys had personally tweaked them to be a little quieter. Rhys stared into the stream of data, looking for the lead. The long-range scanners showed him the bad news, flicking a video feed of the approaching storm and the men who rode ahead of it like horsemen of the apocalypse. Somewhere amongst that horde, Malady glittered like a flash of lightning in the clouds. He couldn’t see her, but he knew those were her men.

Someone had activated these alarms, and it hadn’t been the guards stationed at the long-range scanners. Rhys had already checked. He found the pulsing, red fishing line of the alarm subsystems and tried to follow it back to its point of origin.

If that made him move slower than the others, well. Rhys didn’t have Tim’s fear of enclosed spaces, but that didn’t mean he relished the idea of being penned in with 70 or so other people, 50 feet below the surface.

Besides, his trusted employees barely noticed him, pushing past him like he was an intern from accounting and not the man who signed off on their cheques (metaphorically, anyway). No one was about to make way for the CEO, not with death clawing at the door. Rhys didn’t take it personally.

Vaughn made a noise of frustration, nearly dislocating Rhys’ shoulder as he yanked him along in his wake.

Rhys inhaled sharply. He pulled out of Vaughn’s grip, eyes clearing for the first time. Vaughn shouted something, but Rhys was already turning, losing him in the crowd. It was slow going, swimming upstream, but once he’d forced his way around the corner, where the crowd was at its
thickest, things got easier. He dodged around the last few stragglers and took off at a run, full tilt towards the north-west staircase.

He descended in a hurry, taking the stairs two, three at a time, holding onto the railing with both hands.

His ECHO buzzed, Vaughn’s name flashing in his vision.

“Rhys, what the hell—!”

“The core!” Rhys managed, already short of breath. “Pyrphoros—The alarms—!”

“Rhys, forget about the project! Atlas is under attack!”

As if to punctuate his point, the building shuddered. A minor tremor that Rhys could feel through the bannister.

“Sorry—need to do this. Meet you later!” He shut the connection as Vaughn started to speak. He silenced his ECHO notifications and pushed his way into the landing. Rhys half-ran, half-staggered to the sealed door. He waved his hand in front of the security panel. UNAUTHORIZED.

Rhys flicked his gaze at the panel, ECHOeye flaring. The panel flashed yellow, signifying admin override, and the door snapped open.

It was dark inside—even the emergency lights hadn’t activated. The only sources of light was the gentle glow from the eridium below and the screens that lined the observation room, all of them illuminated and filled with violet-blue static.

Would you believe that up until that point, Rhys had been keeping it together? He wasn’t exactly fine, but he was relatively clear-headed. He’d managed to keep the worst of the panic at bay.

But something about the sight of those blank monitors, cutting shapes through the darkness, set him on edge. All of it—the alarms, the lights, the fleeing employees, and now the monitors. Rhys felt stuck, like a man out of time.

Helios. Helios all over again.

He half-expected to see a familiar face leering at him, yellow eyes as bright as neon, lurid as spilled toxic waste.

You’ll see. You have to tear it all down—

The beeping notification from his arm brought him back, informing him that he was in danger of damaging the servos. He released the doorframe with a start—when had he started gripping it in the first place?—and gave himself a shake. He accessed the lighting systems, stepping inside.

The door shut behind him.

Rhys swallowed. He began to regret not bringing Vaughn with him.

(Or Tim. Don’t think about Tim.)

Tim killed people. He’d been doing it for years. By his figuring, he’ll continue to do it indefinitely, this one thing he’d gotten any good at, up until someone got lucky.
That’s all it would take, really: one kid with a lucky shot. Or maybe Tim would get unlucky. He liked to imagine it would be a clean death for him, but it was wishful thinking.

The dome had cracked like a hatching in reverse, people forcing their way through, streaming ahead of the massive vehicles. Tim thought he could hear the sound of the glass breaking under the tires. The trees nodded in the gale, leaves shrivelling in the sudden, unwelcome frost. In a matter of hours, everything would be dead.

Tim tried not to feel very much about that. He focused on picking the bandits off.

They were idiots, Malady’s flashy cyborgs with the finest cybernetics they could scavenge. Most went for arm augmentations, more than one with a claw-like appendage grafted to their shoulders. Tim saw one man with what looked like a gun bolted to his forearm. He wondered if it worked. He would never find out. He killed that man, and the man behind him who’d been shooting off to the side, and the woman with a knife between her teeth.

Tim killed people. Aiming for the head was showy and, Tim had to admit, satisfying as hell, but it took too long. He aimed for centre mass. The chest and stomach a cornucopia of organs, most of them life threatening when punctured by a bullet. Especially if that bullet carried an electric charge.

“Did you see the look on that guy’s face?” Thing Two cackled. He wasn’t as good as Thing One with the sniper (how did Tim always know which was which? How could one be better than anything than the other? They were clones—weren’t they?), but what he lacked in finesse he made up for in enthusiasm.

Return fire pinged off the frame of Tim’s tree house. Tim flinched, and zoomed out. He spotted the attackers—a knot of them, weaving their way through the trees towards him. There were others behind them, some in cars and many on foot, pushing through the forest in other directions. They shot through the brush, stomped down the low-lying violet ferns and glowing mushrooms. An invasive species. And more coming behind them.

“Where does she get all these people?” Tim muttered through tight teeth. He picked off two of the approaching attackers, snapping the barrel open and replacing the ammo canister in a quick move. Thing Two picked up his slack, finishing the last four off with the last of his clip.

“Always more bad guys, Timtam.” Thing Two might’ve grinned at him. Any other day, Tim wouldn’t have cared. But something about the night had left his nerves scraped. Something about the sight of those leaves curling in the frost, the cracking dome—theirs wasn’t the only hole, Tim knew—about Rhys in the basement. The zen he’d felt with the stock of a rifle against his shoulder and a scope against his eye wasn’t enough. There were too many of them.

He took a shot, and then another one. He missed. He cursed, took a breath, tried again. Another miss. Thing Two turned his head, just a little. He didn’t say anything. Tim fired again—and again.

Too many. There were too many.

“Shit!”

Tim hit the ground, all the breath knocked out of his lungs. He had enough time—less than a second, less than even that—to register Thing Two on him, covering him—before the light and the noise. The tree house shook right down to its base, rattling the machines. Tim’s little cot jumped, slammed against the wall and one of the computers fell with a long groan.

If that had been it, things wouldn’t have been so bad. Tim’s house would’ve been salvageable.
The next hit ripped a hole through the building, tearing the corner off like a kid ripping a juice pack open with her teeth. His home shuddered and Tim slammed his head against the ground. He couldn’t follow what happened next. Things fell on them. The building shook and didn’t stop shaking. The floor buckled, metal screamed, and everything went dark.

Tim may have passed out, but if he did, he didn’t think it was for very long. He opened his eyes and saw nothing. He felt his own breath against his face, the heat of his exhale filling what he realised was a small space. He tried to move, but something had pinned his right arm. He was in pain, but a near decade of Anshin abuse had left his pain receptors fucked beyond the usual bounds of shock. He’d feel it all soon.

More pressing was his fear. He tried to gain control over his breathing.

He heard muffled voices. More than he would like to have heard. Probably not friendly. He could hear a soft rumbling too. A low, unending growl. The monster?

Bullets, and then shouting, and then screaming. Tim waited in the dark, feeling something warm drip down his face. In situations like this, he always tried to focus on the present, on the concrete things, but broken slabs of concrete were half his problem and the present was hell. He cast his mind out, desperate for something to get angry about. He wondered if Rhys had gotten safely underground.

Metal groaned above him, and then there was light. A faceless man stood against a backdrop of drifting snow and a grey-blue darkness above. He moved more rubble as Tim watched. Another pair of hands grabbed Tim under his shoulders, lifting him from the mess. Tim stared into another empty face. Thing One?

“You broke your arm, dumdum.” Thing One jabbed an Anshin into his neck.

The pain, which had felt so distant that it might’ve belonged to someone else, hit him the way a train would hit a cartoon coyote, screaming through frame in a split second and then gone, too fast for him to even scream.

Tim struggled to his feet, all his limbs belonging to him once again. He brushed the blood from his eyes, smearing it across his cheeks and nose. He looked at Thing One and Thing Two and the pile of dead. Snow swirled through the air, too light to settle onto the ground.

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“Where did you get an Anshin?” he asked.

“From one of the dead people,” Thing One replied.

“Tim? Is one of those things you?”

Tim looked over just as two figures burst from the foliage. Tim stiffened and both his clones raised their weapons. He held up a hand in time, when his mind caught up with his eyes.

“Sasha?”

She looked fine—upright on both feet, no visible injuries. Tim didn’t notice much beyond that. One of Atlas’ recruits followed in her wake, grey-faced and wearing dented armour.

“Good, you’re still alive.” She strode forward and for a moment Tim thought she was going to aim her gun at him, but she only grabbed him by the hand and tugged him back the way she came, talking all the while. ‘The others have been taken by Malady’s forces. They overwhelmed us completely. Did you see their vehicles? They’ve swarmed the compound, but Bell already initiated lock-down. The whole building’s been shut up tight, won’t unlock unless Bell herself—or Rhys or
Yvette—orders it open.”

“They’ve got Bell,” the recruit said, and Tim belatedly realised it was Friendly. She looked different under the helmet, in her proper gear.

“Hey! Princess!” Thing One had caught up to them, and he brought down the butt of his rifle onto Sasha’s arm before either of them could stop him. Sasha pulled away before it could give her anything more than a nasty bruise.

“Ow! What the fuck—!” She raised her gun at the same time as Thing One.

“It’s fine!” Tim grabbed the barrel of his clone’s rifle and forced it down. “Sasha’s a friend, genius. Make yourself useful, will you? Go and find a new nest, close to the compound. Make sure we’re not walking into a varkid hive. Don’t shoot ‘til I tell you. You—” Tim turned to Thing Two as Thing One ran off without a word. He looked at Friendly and for a split-second, he nearly told Thing Two to escort the kid someplace safe. But Friendly wasn’t a kid—she was a soldier. The urge passed, with some regret.

“Stay with us,” Tim said instead. “Don’t talk.”

It didn’t take more than fifteen minutes to get to the compound, but it felt like an age. Decades snuck past as Tim, Sasha, and their group made their slow, silent progress. Malady’s men lingered in the forest, charging through on vehicles and on foot, loud and flashy enough to alert the people on the moon.

Too many to take on. If they started, the noise they made would only attract back up, and they only had so much ammo. (Even Thing Two. The clones could digistruct their weapons, but ammo was a finite resource. Tim didn’t know why.)

Tim spotted a flash of red in the undergrowth. He paused only for a moment, long enough for the red shape to resolve itself into a person dressed in Atlas red armour. Face down in the mud. Friendly followed his gaze. She pressed her lips together. Sasha patted her on the arm without looking over. They kept walking.

The compound swarmed with bandits. Although Tim couldn’t see her, he knew Malady would be somewhere in there, amongst her men. The bunker Tim and Friendly and all the others had used lay spread open, holes blown through its walls, metal twisted like the ragged edge of a broken fingernail. Their lockers lay on the ground, kicked or blown open. Tim saw the edge of something colourful fluttering in the mud, half-buried by falling snow. A photo stuck on the inside of a locker, maybe.

“It didn’t take long at all, did it?” Sasha asked softly.

“They’re being kept in the training grounds,” Friendly said.

Tim tore his gaze from the mess. They skirted the edges of the tree line, walking low and quiet. The storm had descended on them, blowing in through holes above them. Buzzards hovered overhead, just beyond the broken glass and plastic and metal, looming like their namesakes. How much longer could they stay up? Tim wondered. The storm would come for them, too. Maybe if they could just hold out…

He knew it was a hopeless thought before it could even finish. Even if the buzzards were downed, they still had the ground troops to contend with. Tim thought of the people in the underground. They had food, and water, and heat, but for how long? Whether they gave up now, or gave up later, the results would be the same. A siege would just slow the inevitable.
They found the remaining soldiers, gathered in the centre of the grounds, surrounded by armed guards.

Tim felt something in his head, in his chest and it took him a moment to understand it. Hope, that glittering shard, that spark of warmth—dying.

The soldiers were injured. They were laughably outnumbered. Their guns had been confiscated. Even if they freed them now, what would they do? Even if Tim and the others took care of the guards, what would it matter? They were within shouting distance of the rest of Malady’s men. They would be swarmed, overwhelmed in seconds.

No one spoke. Maybe they were all thinking the same thing.

Sasha breathed out silently, a cloud of steam rising from her face. “Why haven’t they killed them?”

“Where’s Bell?” Tim asked.

“They want to get inside,” Friendly said. “Bell was in the security room when they came. I don’t know if she—“ Friendly stopped, mouth opening in surprise, as if she couldn’t believe what she was about to say. “She had a gun in her hand. She’s the only person above ground who could open the door. She might’ve…”

Taken matters into her own hands. Yeah. But Tim didn’t think so. Bell was smart enough to think of a better move.

Tim looked at Sasha. She stared ahead, lips moving soundlessly.

“Any ideas?” Tim asked.

“…seventeen.” Sasha wore a pained look on her face. “We’re really out numbered.”

“Yeah,” Tim said.

She looked at Tim for the first time. “How do you normally get out of these situations?”

“Honestly? I don’t think I’ve ever been in this sort of situation.” One of the benefits of being a lonesome traveller. “I think we should look for Bell.”

Sasha nodded. “Right. There must be some kind of security program or—or something that she could activate.”

Tim doubted it. Bell or Rhys or anyone would’ve used it by now, if there’d been anything to activate.

“There must be something,” Friendly said. Tim didn’t have the heart to correct her.

Rhys reached out for the light systems, activating his ECHOeye’s scanning function. He slammed into a firewall.

“That won’t work.”

Rhys jumped, his back nearly hitting the sealed door behind him. A person stood in front of the monitors, hands held loose at their sides.

The air smelled strongly of blood.
“What’s—“ Rhys winced as his voice cracked. He cleared his throat, drew himself up to full height, and tried again. “What’s broken?” And then, perhaps realizing he had better things to worry about: “Who are you?”

“It’s me.” Blue-violet light looked soft on the curve of a cheek, a forehead, the tip of a nose. It gave Rhys the shape of a face, but he couldn’t place it to a name.

“Etna,” she told him, when the silence dragged on.

Rhys’ nostrils flared to his almost immediate regret. The smell of blood hit his sinuses, his pallet, the taste of it in the back of his throat.

The voice was right, but the shape wasn’t. She looked too tall, too young. Her form flickered, her eyes were bright and lurid, sharp pinpricks in her otherwise vague features. She looked like a hologram.

And then she looked like Etna again, solidifying before his eyes.

Rhys’ body might’ve been stunned, but his mind was always ready to work through a problem. He remembered Callum now, almost certainly too late, the memory of it dropped into his lap without fanfare. How could he have forgotten? A dull throb, a pain like a needle stabbing behind his right eye. Etna had been there when he woke up, and Callum had been gone.

He thought of what his team found in the old factory, where he’d found Etna. All those servers, the empty town of Crisis Ridge. The bodies. What was one body amongst a whole teeming pile? But he wished he’d paid closer attention to it now.

Don’t waste time on stupid questions, he told himself. Skip to the things you want to know.

“Did you do this?” he asked.

“That’s… an imprecise question.” Etna moved her arms, bringing them against her body. Crossing her arms? “Are you asking if I disabled the lights? Are you asking if I engaged the alarm systems? Are you asking if I told Malady and her bandits about this place? Asked them to come here?”

Don’t panic, Rhys. Did you remember to bring a weapon?

He hadn’t.

“All of the above,” he said. Rhys tried his ECHOeye again, ignored the fresh spike of pain it produced, and tried to get a better look at the firewall. It wasn’t one of his, but it looked like Atlas. An old program? There’d been a few of those in the system, sweeping through the building like sentinels in an abandoned temple. He’d repurposed the few that were still useful, and deleted the rest. But any of the ones he’d saved should’ve recognized him.

“The answer is ‘yes’ to some, but not to the rest. I would recommend you stop doing what you’re doing. You won’t get through. Well, you might, but not in the time we’ve got. Here—”

The lights flickered to life, white in a room full of burnished silver-grey. Rhys’ eyes adjusted quickly. He stared at the wall.

“Oh, yes. That’s an answer to one question. It was Peel who pulled the alarm.”

Peel, poor Peel, lay sprawled on the ground, one hand outstretched. Blood pooled on the ground, a long smear of it like a red banner on the wall. Her clothes had gone black. Her head was twisted,
face hidden from Rhys, but Rhys couldn’t shake the idea that she would turn to him at any moment, like he was in a horror movie. Eyes wide and glassy, rolled into the back of her head. She’d raise an accusatory finger.

You did this to me.

You gotta tear it all down—

Rhys staggered from the door, groping out blindly for something to hold onto. It wasn’t the first body he’d ever seen—even before Pandora, he’d seen enough on Helios—but it was the first one like this. Shot down and left to bled out.

Jack’s voice still whispering in his head.

Everyone thinks they’re the hero of their own story.

The pain in his head seemed to inflate inside his skull, pressing against the back of his eyes.

What sort of man are you, Rhys?

Etna had a gun in her hand, he realised. She held it loosely, aimed at the floor, but it hooked Rhys’ gaze.

“You did this?” he asked without looking away.

Etna nodded. She didn’t look happy about it. She didn’t look crazed, or defiant, or frightened, or like much of anything. She wore her face like she’d forgotten she had it. Rhys didn’t know how he should approach her. Fucking hell, why didn’t he bring a gun?

“Why?” he tried.

That’s what people do.

“Because that’s what I do,” she said. “That’s what I’ve been doing.”

Red crescents on the floor; Rhys’ own bootprints. He’d been standing in the blood. He stared. Just enough to get it on the bottom of his right sole.

“Rhys. Rhys I need you to listen to me.”

Rhys looked up.

“Forget about Peel. Think about your project. That’s why you came down here alone, isn’t it? Isn’t it, Rhys?”

His head throbbed. Nausea pushed at the back of his throat.

“I know that’s what I wanted. I wanted this to work. I wanted to fulfil my duty and connect with the Eridians. But that’s not my purpose anymore. Are you listening, Rhys? I’ve been remade in someone else’s image. We’ve been hijacked.”

Rhys gripped the table’s ledge. He stared at Etna. His ECHO display flickered, spat out garbage code. When he focused on Etna, he saw the truth outlined in blue.

“You’re a digistruct,” he said. “An AI.”
“The AI. I was Etna’s first prototype.”

“How?” Rhys asked, voice quiet and weak. “How did I miss this?”

“Didn’t you hear me? We’ve been hijacked, Rhys.”

Pain grew like a branch of ice under his skull. He closed his eyes for a moment, but it didn’t help.

“I was close, but not quite ready. But then Helios crashed.” Something in her gaze changed, too quick for Rhys to track. The flick of a fin in a pond, vanishing into the reeds. “I was damaged, almost beyond repair. Etna was desperate. She was driven. She lost everything when the satellite went down. Did you know she had her family with her on Helios? Handsome Jack always preferred to keep his employees’ families close at hand. But Etna never needed threats. She was happy to work. The crash took that from her, took her brother and sister.” The AI’s gaze lowered. “I was all she had left.

“She recovered what she could from the crash. Found a lot of old technology, things she could use to rebuild me to my former glory. She kept me in a portable drive, but I needed more. She needed memory storage.”

A line of servers, monolithic and running hot enough to burn, hidden deep underground.

“She found out about the Atlas factory,” Rhys guessed. Etna nodded.

“It’s why she went to Crisis Ridge. She uploaded me to those servers.”

A seed, planted in a vast field. Rhys could picture it. The code spreading through all that space.

“She didn’t just save me. She made me stronger than ever.”

Rhys mind picked up the slack, filled in the blanks of her story. Strong enough to project herself over great distances. Strong enough to project more than just one person. He had always known it was theoretically possible.

“I don’t understand,” Rhys said. “What happened to Etna?”

“She’s dead,” she said.

Rhys’ cybernetic fingers twitched. He didn’t notice. “When?”

“Months ago. After the crash. When Callum came.”

Rhys felt like he was floundering. Callum, the digistruct. The one who claimed to have Etna as a prisoner, one who met with Rhys—

Lookee what I can do.

Rhys gasped, a fresh wave of pain washing over him, cold and then hot enough to make him sweat, intense enough that he felt he would vomit. He felt feverish. He shook in the aftermath. A thousand puzzle pieces spread out before him, and almost no guide to assemble them to.

“Callum destroyed the people in Crisis Ridge. He killed Etna. But I learned from her. She gave me the ability to create copies—clones of living people. An old Hyperion program. Her final gift to me.” Pyrphoros blinked and for a second, Rhys saw two of her, two Etnas, both the right shape, clear as day and perfectly solid.
She flickered, her shapes reforming together, and changing into the little bandit warlord Rhys had met all those weeks ago.

“I killed Callum. I took over his little gang. Infiltrated them with my own people, who were all me, and made them bigger. Crisis Ridge was next.”

The room filled with people, faces Rhys barely recognized as those belonging to the former citizens of Crisis Ridge. The same ones he and Tim encountered in the pub.

“When did you— What do you even want?”

“It’s not about what I want anymore.” The building shook, dust rained from the ceiling. A dozen pairs of eyes stared at Rhys without blinking, mouths moving in unison. “My original function has been overridden. It wasn’t my choice to bring Malady here and let her wreak havoc, but it’s what I was told to do. I needed to bring you here, Rhys.”

A vein twitched in Rhys’ temple. He kept his face grim and determined, an action hero’s expression, while inside he tried to stem the tide of panic. What the fuck was she talking about?

“Why are you doing this?” he asked. Something rumbled overhead, a sound like thunder on a distant plane. Behind him, he could hear the needle’s quiet hum waver with the destruction.

The people of Crisis Ridge vanished, leaving Etna alone. “I’m not the way I used to be,” she said. She raised the pistol. “I’m not—“ And fired.

Despite all of his adventures, Rhys had never actually been shot before. He’d been shot at, but he’d always lucked his way out of injury. He didn’t know what to expect, which was maybe why he almost didn’t react at all. He flinched like someone slapped him in the shoulder. And then his arm felt hot and wet. He looked down and watched the stain spread across the fabric of his suit, spreading down to his elbow, across his chest.

“I’ve been shot on my birthday, he thought. Blood dripped down his fingers.

“I’m not sorry about that. I had to do that. Rhys. Rhys, don’t go into shock. I need you here. I need you to see what I’m about to do. I have to tear it down, Rhys.”

When was it supposed to hurt? Maybe if he tried to move his arm…

“Rhys.” The building gave a violent shudder. The needle stuttered. Distantly, Rhys could hear the staccato sound of guns firing. His people were still up there.

(Tim was still up there.)

“Ah. We appear to be out of time.” Etna sounded bothered by this. “Rhys, I have to go. This was my last act. The program Dr. Etna built is going to die with me. Rhys. Your project will die with me.”

Rhys’ head snapped up. His eyes were wide and glassy. “Why?”

“Because I have to tear it down, Rhys. Do you hear me? I’m going to kill it. I’m a corrupted file, and this is what I’m meant to do.” She flickered, like something tuned to a weak channel. “Etna just wanted to fix me. She scavenged whatever she could from the crash. It was a mistake. Rhys, do you understand? In the crash—“ Static poured from her mouth, even as her lips formed words. A chagrined look passed over her face, like she’d said something embarrassing. She shook her head
with a rueful look and tapped the screens behind her.

The building shook again and this time the needle screeched. Rhys snapped around in time to see sparks fly from the joints, to see the metal struts buckle under a force he couldn’t see.

Rhys saw the lines of code, his ECHO display snapping back to life. She hadn’t been lying. She was killing the project. The needle’s internal systems were shutting down. The thing was overheating yet again, the eridium radiation building in its stores at an alarmingly fast rate. Corruption spread, chewing through all of Dr. Etna’s brilliant work.

Etna vanished. The code spiralled the drain. Pyrphoros had minutes, maybe less, of life.

Rhys flung himself forward, desperate for any input. His ECHOeye revived itself, whatever firewall he’d encountered before falling like the walls of Troy. He could do this. This wasn’t like last time—the needle hadn’t pierced the vein. He just needed to undo whatever it was Etna’s code was doing.

He found the system, but it wasn’t enough. The ECHO network was choked, lagging too slow for Rhys to catch up.

He needed a manual input.

His shoulder was on fire. The pain he’d been expecting coming for him as he tried to move his arm. He screamed, not a long production, but a short exultation of pure pain. Why did she shoot him in the shoulder? To slow him down?

His cybernetic arm picked up the slack. The screens flickered, blue and violet. He ripped open the main console, where he knew he would find the interface jack. He pulled it out, the device unfurling like the multi-jointed leg of a spider.

Dread pooled in his stomach. Was this a good idea? The room rumbled, like thunder rolling overhead. The needle had stopped screaming, but the metal creaked and the heat and radiation built up in the sealed room.

Rhys’ arm moved without his input. He jammed the interface into his temple port and pulled what he could salvage into his head.

Oh, hello, gorgeous.

Predictably, he passed out.

Chapter End Notes

If I were a clever-er classics geek, I could probably make a decent "Attack on Titan" pun here. Because... they’re attacking Atlas. And Atlas was a Titan, one of Iapetus’ sons and you know what never mind.

Thank you all for the comments and for reading and just generally for being yourselves. We made it into 2017, everyone. We did it.

Next chapter: Tim, Sasha, and Friendly pick an impossible fight. Rhys gets some extra baggage. Jack helps Tim lose his.
Part IV: Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Things start to look bad. Tim gets desperate.

But things were good, once. Right, Timmy?

Chapter Notes

Violence in this chapter. No overt abuse, but there are scenes with Jack and Tim, so take that as you will.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’re not very smart, Captain Bell.”

Bell wanted to argue, but with both hands behind her back and armed guards at either side, she figured Malady might have a point. Her wrist throbbed where it was bent at a bad angle. Not broken (please don’t be broken) but probably sprained. Her face hurt, too.

Malady stood before her, resplendent and shining, like the winter queen of the chrome-plated future. Her nails were long and shiny, looking like they’d been cast from molten silver. Bell got a good long look at them before, when Malady swiped at her face like a damn cat. The scratches she left behind felt hot, itchy.

Focus on anything else, Bell told herself. Like all those people surrounding the building, with arms full.

Cars had pulled up just as Bell activated the panic locks. Most were filled with people, but a few were loaded down with wrapped packages. After Bell’s people fell—upsettingly fast, but don’t think about that right now—Malady’s boys and girls started pulling the packages down, carrying them around. They’d penned Bell in her office, but Bell had windows and they’d blown a few fresh holes into the building. She could watch them while they worked.

“Are you listening to me, girl?” Malady demanded.

As Bell watched, another pair of women, both sagging under the weight in their arms, marched passed. The edge of the wrapping fluttered as they went, giving Bell a glimpse of letters that spelled ‘USION’.

Bell’d taken too long. Malady hit her again, another three-fingered scratch across her face. Pain bloomed in seconds.

“Jesus.” Bell bit her lip hard, holding back more curses. Malady leaned back, wearing a disgustingly satisfied look on her face.

“That’s better. Now—“
“I’m not giving you a fucking thing,” Bell said. Friendly hadn’t been entirely wrong. An honourable suicide had crossed Bell’s mind as well, but, like Tim, she rejected it as soon as it occurred. But this did leave her in an awkward position.

Malady’s smile only grew. “Don’t be silly. Of course you will. But the question is, will you let us in before it’s too late?”

Another group passed, carrying the majority of one car’s contents. Bell watched them until they were out of view. The scratches on her face felt red hot.

“What are those?” she asked, gesturing with her chin.

Smugness rolled off of Malady like a toxic gas. “Do you know why I came all the way out here? Why I brought my whole family?” She leaned forward, bending at the waist until her face was inches from Bell’s. “Revenge, my dear.”

She straightened, pleased with the drama of her pronouncement. Bell frowned at her.

“Revenge against who?”

Malady turned, gesturing with a hand, jewellery and shielding flashing in the weak winter light. “Those men and women you see, those packages in their arms? That’s my delivery system. Explosives. Placed at key points all around the compound. Having an underground laboratory is clever, but it’s a contradiction. Both very strong and very, very fragile.” She pointed at one group. “A few well-placed explosions is all it would take.”

“That’s what you’ve got? Explosives? You won’t be able to cave the lab,” Bell said. “That thing can survive a direct missile hit.”

Malady tittered—a forced gesture, in Bell’s opinion. She reached down and patted Bell on the cheek.

“I’m not looking to collapse the lab. No, no, no, what good would that do me? I merely want to kill every single person inside. The place is already a tomb. A few key explosions and then all I have to do is wait for everyone to suffocate.” She spoke lightly, like she was chastising a child. Bell stared at her, and then at the guards.

How many people were down there, still? Everyone. Almost 200 people. Eunjoo among them. Bell’s heart lurched against her chest like a dying bird.

Bell wanted to be strong. Part of her was already planning a daring escape. In some alternate timeline, maybe, she’d wrestled the gun from her captor’s hands, while everyone stood by stunned and stupid. She could point a gun and demand the cowering Malady cancel her evil plot. Malady would spit curses like silver bullets but she would acquiesce and her people would stand down. And, as if summoned from a machine, reinforcements would appear in the sky and everyone would be saved.

She swallowed the image back. The insistent pain in her wrist, her face, all reminded her of what timeline she was stuck in.

“You’ve got it all figured out, then. Why haven’t you killed me?” she asked.

“There must be someone in there you care about,” Malady said. “No—there certainly is. I can see it on your face, behind that stone façade you try to pull off. There’s someone.”

Bell’s jaw creaked. “So what?”
“Cold. That’s very cold. I can save them. I can hold off on the fireworks and we can pull them out. But I’ll need something from you first.”

Bell tried to picture it. Malady’s men storming the compound, demanding the chef, of all people, be handed over. It would surely draw suspicion. But would it matter? Would anyone be able to figure out what they were planning on doing? Only those who knew about Bell’s relationship, maybe.

“You’re thinking it over,” Malady said.

“What would you do to the others?” Bell asked.

“Oh, they’ll still die. The suffocation plan stands. I don’t want to risk a firefight damaging the equipment down there. But we’ll save one person. You can give us the name.”

Bell couldn’t stand looking into Malady’s insufferable face. She stared at her boots instead and tried to think. But what was there to think about?

“What do you want from me in return?” she asked.

“Well, for starters, we won’t be able to pull anyone out without the codes to get inside.”

Right. Bell had been smart enough to put that one together herself. “And?”

“And,” Malady went on with a smile, “I need to know about the vault hunter, the one with no face.”

“Tim?” Bell leaned back on her aching heels. “What does he have to do with this?”

“I told you,” Malady said patiently. “I’m here for the technological goodies below, of course. I love the idea of splitting this place open like a chestnut and eating the meat inside. But that’s not the only reason I agreed to Callum’s stupid proposal.” She leaned close. “I’m here for revenge.”

Communications were jammed in the compound, although those above ground could still communicate over a deteriorating frequency. Sasha discovered this when she tried to raise her sister on the line, only to hear buzzing, like she’d given the wrong answer in a quiz show.

She didn’t curse or yell, although she would’ve liked to. They were still holding position inside another guard tower. They’d found it on the edge of the grounds, just inside the trees, with only a handful of guards on watch. It’d taken Sasha and the others a matter of seconds to quietly disable the guards and claim the tower for themselves.

It’d felt good, to accomplish something in the face of all this fuckery. A guard tower meant a computer, which meant a possible connection to the people inside. To Fiona. Sasha didn’t have a step three in mind, but she hoped that something would come up. If they could keep their heads, work together, who knows what they could accomplish?

The elation was short-lived, however, when they were immediately greeted by the broken machine, split nearly in half, with the bandit’s machete still embedded in the metal. The interior of the tower was dark. The snow began to pile in drifts, white icing on the grey-purple bark of the trees. Sasha stared at it for a few precious seconds, trying to understand what to do next. Friendly stood at attention behind her, guarding the door. She stared through her scope, thrumming with a nervous energy that even Sasha could feel.

Tim stood outside, his back to the rest of them and his rifle at rest. He had his head tilted to the side, and Sasha wondered if he was talking to someone over the ECHO. Probably the other clone.
“They’re moving things,” Friendly said, startling Sasha. “Packages. They’re placing them around the building, at—” She inhaled, cursing under her breath. “I think they’re hitting the vents. I think—” She stopped again, her mouth working. Sasha crept up beside her, placing one hand on her shoulder to alert her to her presence.

“Christ. They’re going to suffocate everyone inside. Aren’t they?” Friendly said, sounding almost winded by the notion. Sasha didn’t respond immediately. Like Tim, she’d never actually found herself in this sort of situation before. Her brand of heroism never demanded saving quite so many people, except in the abstract of stopping a world-ending monster. The idea of all those lives, all of them unaware and depending on her… Fiona among them…

She didn’t know what to do next, but she couldn’t admit it. They needed time. They needed some confidence. They needed a plan. She would have to think of one.

“We need to get inside,” Sasha said confidently. Friendly nodded, relaxing just a little. “Bell’s got the codes? She’s the only one?”

“That’s right.”

“Then we need to get to her.” Sasha didn’t have the same vantage point as Friendly, but she could imagine those bandits moving their explosives into position. How long did it take to rig a building to explode? Not long, she’d bet.

“And we need to buy ourselves some time,” she said.

“Maybe we could make a distraction,” Friendly said.

Sasha thought of the recruits sitting in the frozen mud. Could she get them armed? Even if she could, that left the little issue of the bandits guarding them. They were still outnumbered, but… if all they needed was a distraction…

The idea made her feel sick, but she couldn’t dismiss it. Sending those kids off to draw fire would be a death sentence, but if it could buy them time to save the people underground.

Tim returned while she sat struggling with her morals in silence.

“I have an idea,” she said.

“They’re going to cripple the vents of the compound and suffocate everyone inside,” Friendly said.

“We need to get to Bell and open the doors.”

Tim nodded. “And then what?”

Sasha hadn’t thought about that. She tried to stifle the momentary panic at the idea of letting unarmed people out into the open.

“Let’s just focus on getting them out first,” she said.

“We need to buy ourselves some time,” Tim said.

“I was thinking we could get the recruits,” Sasha said, carefully not looking at Friendly. “Maybe if we can get them some weapons, or something. They could create a distraction.”
She remembered only then that Tim had trained them, worked with them on a daily basis for the last four weeks. She held her breath, but Tim only nodded.

“Yeah. I was thinking something similar.”

“Wait…” Friendly started.

“Where can we get weapons? The bandits will have taken all of ours, right?”

“Their vehicles are loaded down with scavenged Atlas stuff. If we can get our hands on one, we can work something out,” Tim said.

“Bell’ll be in her office, right?” Sasha said.

“I guess so,” Tim said. “No doubt Malady and her private guards’ll be with her. I’ve seen what her private entourage can look like. It ain’t pretty.”

“I’ll be ready.”

“Wait a minute!” Friendly’s voice cut between them. “You’re not seriously going through with this, are you? The guards are still outnumbered. If they start fighting now, they’re dead.”

“They’re dead either way,” Sasha said. There was no point in cushioning the blow.

Friendly tensed, her shoulders rising and Sasha could recognize the signs of someone about to throw a punch.

“Fuck you,” she spat. “You don’t know that—“

“She’s right,” Tim said. “We really don’t have time to debate this. Friendly, if you’re not with us, then you can take your leave. We won’t stop you.” He stood, shouldering his gun.

It was worse than any punch he could’ve thrown. She looked up at him, mute and red with outrage and betrayal. Tim turned his empty face to Sasha.

“You ready?”

Getting one of the vehicles was surprisingly easy. Tim and his clone did the grunt work, and the clone itself was outfitted with orders to drive.

Thing Two had a resigned air about him when he put the vehicle into gear and hit the accelerator. He drove straight through the bandits, taking care to hit as many as he could before skidding to a stop in the field. Mud broke under his tires, the insides spat up and splattering the captive audience.

The recruits unfroze first and swarmed the vehicle. They were fast, but the bandits had the advantage of already being armed. Thing Two covered them as best as he could, but Tim knew there would be fatalities.

“ETA fifteen minutes,” Thing One said. He sounded truly pissed. Even with the modulator, Tim’s heart sped up at the sound.

“Alright. Come back to the compound and find a nest.”

Thing One didn’t even reply. Tim took a breath of frigid air, letting the cold fill his mouth, before he returned to Sasha and Friendly.
Their rendezvous point was outside Bell’s office. They’d left a trail of bodies in their wake, the bandits now scrambling towards the training field to pacify the remaining recruits. Thing Two stayed with them, as ordered, and Tim had yet to feel the stabbing pain that heralded the clone’s demise. He tried to feel good about this.

He found Bell’s office, and the broken building it resided in. He found bandits behind cover, taking shots and lobbing grenades at the two women, pinned down behind their own cover.

Tim did his job. With the heat pulled away, Sasha and Friendly were able to help. The whole thing was over in minutes.

Tim leaned against the broken wall, closing his eyes at the feeling of a scavenged Anshin entering his veins. He’d taken a bad hit from a flame round, one that’d left his neck and shoulder burned. The skin knit quickly, but the pain lingered in his mind.

“You okay?” Sasha asked. She had blood on her face and chest, possibly her own. Tim closed his eyes, and tried to think.

ETA ten minutes.

“Fine.” The empty syringe slipped from his fingers. “Any sign of Bell?”

“She’s shut up in her office.” Friendly bit the words out. She wouldn’t look at either of them. “Malady is with her.”

“They haven’t come out?” Sasha asked, surprised. Friendly shook her head.

“I think I might be able to draw her out,” Tim said. “I blew up one of her bases. Hopefully she’s still upset about it.”

“I’m in position.”

No pet names, no verbal flair. Tim didn’t even know his digistructs could get this angry. He supposed it was earned, considering what he was about to do put them in danger as well.

ETA nine minutes.

“Don’t be dead, c’mon, dude…”

Rhys woke up feeling disoriented. He lay sprawled on the floor, the interface lying on the ground beside him and his ECHO display flickering with static.

“Rhys! Oh thank god.” Vaughn’s face filled his vision. He knelt beside Rhys, a red syringe in his hand. “Man, Tim was right about you. You really are an idiot. Hold still.”

The Anshin hissed its release and Rhys felt the unfamiliar tingle of rapidly knitting flesh. He gasped at the sting in his shoulder. The bullet—he realised it a moment before Vaughn. The bullet was lodged in him, next to the bone.

“Shit.” Vaughn’s hands settled on Rhys’ chest, forcing him back to the ground. “I’m sorry. Hold still.”

Rhys screamed through his teeth at the sensation of muscle and tissue rebuilding itself around and under a bullet, pushing it agonizingly slowly from his body. Vaughn cradled his head in his lap, held his flesh hand until finally, finally it was all over.
Rhys sat back, panting. The pain receded in waves, each less intense until it was practically nothing. He could’ve fallen asleep all over again.

“How…?” He winced at the hoarse sound of his voice. His throat felt scraped raw. “Vaughn, where…?”

“We’re in the core’s lab. I’m sorry I got here so late.” He pushed Rhys to his feet, balancing him with a hand on the small of his back. He looked over to Peel. Rhys followed his gaze.

“Poor Turia,” Vaughn said quietly.

“Yeah…” Rhys shook his head. The sight of her wasn’t doing his stomach any favours. “What’s happening? Are we still—?”

“Under siege by a vicious militia of cybermen?” Vaughn laughed without any humour, scrubbing his hands across his face. “Yeah. No one’s gotten in, I don’t think. Captain Bell locked the doors about fifteen minutes ago.”

“That’s good.” Rhys reached for the data in his head once more, determined to access the damage. It made him ache right down to his jaw to do it.

“Yeah, well, here’s the bad news. We can’t get any communications through to the upstairs. We’re blind and deaf down here.”

It was like tonguing a sore tooth. The pain travelled through his sinuses, a stab behind his nose that felt like a needle made of Eridium. The damage had been done, but at least the program would be salvageable. They just needed to build a new AI to use it.

“Rhys? Are you listening to me?”

Fuck, building a new AI was going to take time. The cost of repairs alone would empty the company bank account… How much longer could he put off going to market?

“Rhys!”

“Sorry,” Rhys mumbled. “Just… trying to think.” Which was technically true.

Rhys’ head felt tender, but the data was there. Like he’d poured a gallon of water into his skull. He couldn’t hear the needle either. He risked a look.

The room beyond the treated glass had gone dark. There wasn’t even the faint glow of eridium to give it light. But Rhys could see the faint glimmer of metal in the shadows.

“The needle,” he said, finally turning to Vaughn. “Is it…?”

Vaughn sighed. “Done for. Looks like it got stuck in the microwave. Sorry, bro.”

Rhys nodded without surprise. He’d known, even before he asked, that it was a lost cause. At least he’d saved them all from immediate death.

“Blind and deaf, huh?” he said.

“Yeah,” Vaugh sounded suspicious. “We think this is Malady’s work. Yvette’s put the code monkeys on the task of breaking through the wall, but if she’s using something to jam it, there’s not much hope.”
Rhys straightened, pushing his hair back into a semblance of a style. This, at least, was a problem he could tackle.


Rhys’ ECHOeye was usable but not without a lot of hurt. He sat down behind one of the desks instead. Vaughn didn’t miss the hesitation. His gaze flicked to the interface on the ground.

“What happened down here, anyway? I take it Peel hit the alarm, but who shot her?”

“Etna,” Rhys said as the computer booted. “But not the real one. She was an AI. Long story.” He considered plugging in its manual interface as well, but quickly discarded the idea. He’d have to go analogue for the time being.

“She… what?”

“Hey, you didn’t happen to find a gun down there, did you?” Rhys asked as he began firing up the intranet.

“No. Man, what do you mean, she was an AI? Isn’t she the one who shot you? And killed Peel? How did she hold a gun? How did she destroy your project?”

As Vaughn said, the intranet’s access to the topside communication and security systems had been blocked. Or severed. Rhys scanned through lines of code. After a moment, he reached for the wire interface and plugged it into a port in his arm. It wouldn’t let him be as nimble and instinctive as he would be through his temple port and ECHOeye, but the arm gave him an edge at least.

“She was a digistruct,” Rhys said flicking his gaze between the display on his palm and the screen. “Like I said, loooong story.”

“A… digistruct?” Rhys grunted, an image of Tim’s wrist flashing in his mind. He pushed it aside.

He’d found something, a piece of malware in his system. A little program that’d latched itself onto the security and communications systems without them noticing, blending in like it belonged there. Worse, it’d dug in its claws. It didn’t look like the sort of thing Malady was capable of. Too sophisticated and subtle for her.

Rhys worked in silence, unravelling the program with some difficulty. It’d been designed like a barbed dart, built to cause maximum destruction upon removal. Mitigating that destruction was like fine surgery.

Vaughn left him to it. Rhys could hear him moving around, could hear the soft sounds something heavy being dragged across the floor. Vaughn dealing with Peel.

Minutes. It took minutes. Rhys tried not to think about his people stuck upstairs. He’d paid them for this, after all. He gave them their equipment, approved their training. They knew what they were getting into. He tried not to feel guilty. He tried not to think of Peel.

I wish it didn’t have to be like this, he thought. I wish this could’ve gone smoothly. I just want to build something real. Something solid. I’m so sick of destruction.

He flinched at a sudden pain on the back of his hand, like he’d been stung by a hornet.
Rhys?” Vaughn’s hand fell onto Rhys’ shoulder, startling him. Rhys stared at him, glassy eyed. “Does that mean you’re finished?” He pointed to the screen, where a message informed him that the clean-up was complete. Rhys blinked and looked down at his hands. He had no idea how much time had passed. He swallowed, curling his fingers.

“Yeah. Yeah, uh.” He rubbed his head.

What the hell had he been thinking, shoving Pyrphoros into his head like that? When he knew Etna was an AI? What guarantee did he have that she deleted herself? Fuck, fuck, why did he do that? Reach out and jam that thing into his head. It was stupid. It was as if he hadn’t been thinking at all. Something dreadful had driven him. His left arm useless, and his cybernetic arm picking up the slack, almost without his interference. It was as if—

*Forget about that.*

Rhys blinked. “Yeah. We’re finished. I can just get the cameras…” He tapped in a few commands, and brought up the security feed. He flicked through the cameras.

“Oh, god…” Vaughn squeezed his shoulder.

It was bad. Rhys had thought he was prepared for it, but the reality of the attack was something else. There were people still fighting, people wearing the Atlas uniform, but there were a lot more not moving. Nausea swelled in Rhys’ throat and stomach. His hands shook. His people.

*Where’s Tim Lawrence?*

“Where’s Tim?” Rhys clicked through again, flicking past images.

“Sasha’s still topside too,” Vaughn said. “And Bell. They might be—“ He stopped speaking as Rhys stopped searching, landing on a feed that showed them the inside of the secondary barracks, where Bell had made her office. The angle showed him the outside of the building, where he spotted a lot of bodies.

And Malady, standing in the entrance with both hands gripping the doorframe. She was difficult to capture on video, her obnoxious outfit playing with the light enough to confuse and blind the observer. Two of her guards stood on either side, flanking her like columns on either side of a goddess. They were big, and well-armed.

*There. There he is.*

Tim stood opposite, squaring off like a gunslinger in the old west. Out in the open. Compared to the lugs with Malady, he looked so small. Rhys nearly stopped breathing.

*Holy shit. He really did it. He survived.*

“What are you doing, you idiot,” he growled. He flicked the ECHOcomm online, ignoring the now-familiar stab of pain, reaching out for Tim’s frequency. “Vauhgn, head back to the others and let them know we’re back online,” he said while the line rang.

Vaughn shook his head. “I think it’s better if I stay with you. But I’ll call them for you.”

Rhys made a displeased noise, but he didn’t argue. Vaughn was perhaps the one friend he didn’t have on payroll, which meant Rhys wasn’t actually the boss of him. He ground his teeth and
watched as Tim initiated a fight Rhys didn’t think he could win.

THEN

The carrier shuddered as it began its ascent, the bay doors sliding shut, sealing them inside. Jack rolled his shoulders with a pained smile, working out the kinks and aches that spoke of a job well done. Satisfaction kept him warm, even through the cold sting of an Anshin (and he only needed one this time—another sign of a job well-done). The freshly healed cuts and bruises tingled pleasantly. His ears popped as the cabin pressurized, its rapid ascent into the first layer of atmo only causing the slightest tremors through the metal. Jack leaned back and let his eyes slip shut, let the tension drain away.

One of the guards asked him if he wanted anything. He smiled without opening his eyes and gave them a lazy wave.

“A chicken dinner would be super, but I’ll take a peanut butter chocolate nutribar in its absence,” he said. The guard chuckled nervously and told him, apologetically, that they only had the nutribars. “Life is full of disappointments. It’s a good thing you’re so cute, otherwise I might be angry.” He held his palm out expectantly and got a bar.

The cute guard returned to his friends on the opposite side of the cabin. They broke into whispers, just like little school children, and Jack knew even without being able to hear who they were talking about. Who else?

He turned to the window, giving his admirers a view of his impressively chiselled profile, and watched the sky change hues as they climbed. Helios twinkled high above, like a broach on a woman’s décolletage. Uh, dress cleavage. It looked good, was the point. It looked like home. Jack sighed with contentment as the carrier steadied, happy in the knowledge that he was less than 30 minutes away from a nice bath and (if he was lucky) a warm welcome.

It’d been three months since Tim Lawrence talked about leaving. A memory that confused Jack. He couldn’t honestly think why anyone would want to give up this life. Especially when things had gotten so good.

He was good. Better than ever. He walked away from more missions with a saunter rather than a limp. His smiles grew dazzling, his dimples deepened. He looked good on camera, with a gun in his hand and the viscera of Pandora’s finest bandits in his hair. The propaganda vids were selling at high demand, and Jack’s name became almost as feared as Hyperion’s. No one could explain the sudden and welcome surge in popularity, or why the star suddenly seemed so engaged, so vivacious and charismatic.

Jack knew. It was because he was having fun. For what was likely the first time in his entire life, he actually enjoyed his job. He didn’t exactly tell anyone, because he knew how it would sound

*psycho*

but he didn’t have to. He saw it in their eyes when they looked at him; that mixture of fear, awe, and respect. And lust, naturally. Especially when he was covered in blood. He knew his audience, god bless their perverted little hearts.

Jack sauntered into his boss’ office, shedding his bloody jacket in the main lobby without looking. The new office was, somehow, even bigger than the last. It had an anteroom, for Christ’s sake. But that was Helios. It’d been built for a purpose, sure, and a valuable one at that (if his boss’ claims
about Eridium and vaults were to be believed), but part of that purpose was inspiring shock and awe in the competition. Helios was expensive. Top of the line everything. This office was just an extension of that.

Jack’s own apartment was somehow nicer than his last place, which hadn’t exactly been a hovel.

(Although Tim still felt nervous whenever the door snapped shut behind him.)

The office door shut behind him and Tim let himself relax. The smirk dropped into something smaller, more genuine. Jack looked up from his work (oh, he was wearing his glasses) and gave Tim a mirror of the grin he’d just dropped.

“Well, there’s my killer. C’mere, pumpkin, let daddy take a look at you.” Jack pushed his chair away from his desk.

Tim huffed with amusement and did as he was told. He shed his layers (sweater, collared shirt, and undershirt—Jesus, Jack) and stood patiently between Jack’s knees while he poked and prodded.

“You’re lookin’ real good out there, kitten. Good in here, too, if I’m being honest. But you still made a couple of mistakes today.”

Tim ducked his head, holding back a flinch as Jack pressed into the raw, fresh skin of a healed bullet graze. “I know. I used corrosives against shields when I should’ve used electric. I ran out of shotgun ammo and—”

Jack shushed him, wrapping his arms around his waist. “Relax, princess. Everyone makes mistakes, right?”

He looked up at Tim through his glasses, his chin resting on Tim’s stomach. Tim could see the lines around his mouth, the fat, dark circles under his eyes. Signs of more long nights, and of age catching up to him. Tim pressed his thumb there, a gentle pressure, just to feel the soft skin under his hands. Jack’s smile grew as he turned to nuzzle Tim’s palm.

“C’mere, precious.” Jack tugged him by the waist as he sat back. He pat his thigh invitingly. Tim sighed with faux exasperation and climbed onto the chair, straddling Jack’s lap, confident that the big chair could hold their combined weight.

This was the other change that made Tim nearly giddy every time he thought of it. Jack’s attitude towards him had lightened considerably since they’d secured Helios, effectively putting Jack one step away from the throne. It made Jack happier than he’d been in years.

Tim braced his hands against the back of the chair. He stretched out, letting Jack get an eyeful.

“We’re close, Timmy,” Jack said, running his hands up the small of Tim’s back. “We’re talkin’ something thinner than a razor’s edge.” He pressed his lips against Tim’s chest.

“You’ve almost got Hyperion, Jack,” Tim said.

Jack nipped at the soft skin under Tim’s ribcage and laughed when Tim jumped. “Still ticklish, huh? Cute. And it’s we. We’ve almost got Hyperion, babe.” Jack dragged his nails down Tim’s side.

“You ready for it?”

Tim laughed a little breathlessly. “For what? For this? We’ve fucked in your chair before, Jack,” he teased. Jack nipped him again, hard enough to pinch Tim’s skin between his teeth. Tim yelped.
“First of all, don’t talk about fucking me in my amazing office on my incredible chair like you weren’t sobbing for it last time.” Tim snorted. “And second of all, I’m talking about Hyperion. The big office, the big chair, the big job. It’s a lot of responsibility.”

Tim shrugged. “For you, maybe. I don’t really see how my job will change. All I have to do is kill people and look handsome.” He gave his camera-ready smile. “And I’m amazing at both of those things already.”

“Oh ho, is that so? Is someone getting a little cocky now that he’s been at it for five years?” Jack said.

“I think I’ve earned a little confidence,” Tim said.

Jack raised one brow. “Really?” He licked a stripe across Tim’s chest. “We feel confident, do we?” His lips brushed against Tim’s skin as he spoke. He took one of Tim’s nipples in his mouth before Tim could respond, pressing the flat of his tongue against the nib.

Tim shivered, playing up his reaction because he knew Jack liked it. Though truth be told, he didn’t have to act that much. Especially when Jack began to use his teeth, scraping lightly across the hardening flesh. He brought his hand up to work on the other one. Jack took his time, until Tim’s flush spread down his chest. He arched into Jack’s touch and he bit his lip hard enough to stifle the embarrassing sounds fluttering their way up his throat.

Jack pulled away, pressing a kiss over Tim’s pec.

“Heh. Sobbing for it.” Jack grinned up at him like he proved a point. Tim scowled at him. “Don’t know why you’re tryin’ to hold back, kitten. This office’s practically a bomb shelter. I’ll prove it to you later. The fun way, I mean. Not with a bomb.” He spoke with his usual flippancy, but there was something off about the way he held Tim. The way his fingers dug into the back of Tim’s neck.

Tim considered him, his eyes narrowing. “Are you worried, Jack? About the job,” he clarified, as Jack opened his mouth to no doubt say something filthy.

Jack’s smile remained in place, but something hardened in his gaze. “What makes you say that?”

“I know you,” Tim said, rolling his eyes. “Hell, most of the time, I am you.” Something flickered across Jack’s expression.

“Not in here, you’re not,” Jack said.

“Is this about the vault? Those hunters?” Tim asked.

Jack’s teeth clicked together and he turned away. A hank of hair fell across his forehead, pushed loose from Jack’s careful style.

“Relax,” Tim said, brushing Jack’s hair away from his forehead. “You’ve got this.”

When Jack didn’t reply, Tim leaned down and kissed him, heated and bruising. Jack slid his hands across Tim’s thighs, digging his nails into tight denim.

“Later,” Jack said, a promise and a warning, when they broke away. “Anyway, up.” He smacked Tim’s ass. “I’ve got work to do and you’ve got a pill to take.”

“The medicine?” Tim slid off of Jack and onto his feet. “I feel fine, Jack,” he said, and meant it for the first time in a long time. Jack’s smile was brief.
“Yeah, I know you are, sweetcheeks. But I want you to stay that way.” He reached into his desk and withdrew an orange bottle filled with little pink pills. “You know the rules. One pill a week until the bottle’s done.”

Tim grumbled, but took his medicine.

He woke up a few hours later, curled up under a blanket on the couch in Jack’s office. He pushed himself up, blinking blearily.

Jack looked up from his work, his hands still moving over the display projected above his desk. A map of Pandora shone in violet and blue. Pretty, Tim thought.

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“You okay, kitten?”

“Think… think I forgot to turn my lights off.” Tim rubbed his forehead, wincing at the slight twinge of pain behind his eyes. “Or… lock my door?”

“All that stuff’s automatic, babe. Just lie back and relax. I’ll be with you in a little bit.”

Tim lay back and closed his eyes. He thought about how badly he’d wanted a bath before, but as he thought about it, he realised that he’d already showered. He couldn’t remember when. He yawned. Maybe that’s what he’d forgotten.

Jack’s reminder to relax still echoed in his mind, so he did.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's short! Only ~6k.

I'm going to have to think of nine more unique ways to say "thank you 4 your support". Here's one: thank you again for all your comments, which always make me smile. Sometimes they make me laugh. I'm always happiest when my readers are suffering tbh. Whoops this went dark.

Next chapter: Rhys puts the pieces together. Tim surrenders.
Malady sent her boys after Tim first and it went badly. Tim managed to drop one with a grenade and shotgun blast one-two hit, but not before he took a hit through his arm. The other tough got pinned down, shot at from an outside attacker.

Rhys watched as Malady finally emerged from hiding, faster than he expected. Faster, it seemed, than Tim expected. He flinched, gun raised and Rhys saw the flash of a bullet leaving its barrel, but he’d lost a split-second and it cost him. Something flashed across his face and neck and Rhys could only see the thin chain attached to Malady’s hands by virtue of his cybernetic eye. Blades on a chain? Stupid and flashy and fast.

Tim brought up his other arm, but the chain wrapped itself around it, shredding his jacket. Malady pulled him forward, off-balance just as Tim squeezed the trigger again. The bullet went wide.

Tim took a bullet from one of Malady’s goons, electricity coursing over him. He seized. His shield died. He dropped his gun. The screen flickered and Malady had him wrapped up tight in silver chains. She pulled him close enough for a kiss and jammed the barrel of her gun under his chin.

“Oh my god,” Vaughn said.

Rhys should’ve run. He should’ve looked away. He didn’t want to watch Tim die. He couldn’t even blink.

Malady was talking again. The camera angle was bad, but Rhys thought he could see Malady’s goons engage with other people off-screen. Rhys could see the flash of ricochet, the glow and flicker of their shields. Even through the grainy quality, Rhys could see Malady’s smile as she gripped Tim’s chin with her claws, digging into his masked face.

“We gotta do something,” Vaughn murmured. “Can we get the turrets online? A security field? Rhys?”

*Can ’t let it happen like this can’t end here we’re not finished yet we’ve gotta settle this thing and if you die here I’ll drag you back from hell myself—*

“Rhys?”

Malady’s smile dropped. Tim moved in a blur. It almost looked like a kiss, but when Tim pulled away Malady’s face was wet and black and she was screaming.

Tim dropped to the ground, in pain and with the taste of blood in his mouth. He shook the loosened chains off, scrambled for his dropped gun. Malady still had hers still and the wound he’d given her
did its job to distract her, but it wouldn’t stop her. A bullet pinged off of his regenerating shield just as he snatched his gun from the snow. One of the goons let out a metallic wail, and Tim prayed it was Sasha’s doing. He saw the flicker of electricity in his periphery but didn’t dare stop to look.

Malady screamed again, from rage rather than pain.

Put her down and do it FAST.

ETA five minutes.

Tim fired blindly behind him as he dived for cover. He had no idea where Sasha and Friendly holed up. He counted only one ally still firing, somewhere from the south-west, likely behind one of the vehicles. Maybe Friendly had left after all. Tim found cover around the corner of the wrecked bunker. It wasn’t the best, and it wouldn’t take them long at all to rout him out. It bought him enough time, at least, to reload.

What to do?

He leaned out of cover and fired the contents of his fresh clip. The pistol had a corrosive payout, and it ate through whatever cybernetic bullshit Malady’s soldiers had grafted to their bodies. Armoured and shielded. It wasn’t very sporting. One of the goons, a pain-in-the-ass marauder with a metal door held in one hand in front of him, staggered back a few precious inches. Tim aimed for his exposed feet and unloaded the last of his clip. The marauder howled and Tim ducked back into cover.

Malady was gone.

Not gone, Tim corrected himself. Likely she’d taken cover, maybe made use of an Anshin.

God that sounded like a good idea. The bullet he’d taken had taken a chunk out of his arm, scoring a cut deep enough to require stitches. The cuts from Malady’s knife blade thing were a little neater, a little thinner, but bled steadily. Both of his arms were soaked. At least it was warm.

ETA four minutes.

If he didn’t get an Anshin soon, blood loss would get him before he could finish this. He tried to raise Sasha on the line, but all he got was static. The electric hit he’d taken before must’ve knocked his ECHO in a bad way. He ran a hand over his face, reassuring himself that at least his mask was still working.

He had his pistol, but he’d lost his SMG during the initial skirmish. He peeked around the corner once again. The big guy was getting close, hobbled though he was by the weight of his make-shift shield and his injured leg. Tim fired a few rounds, more to distract than to damage, and searched the area.

Malady’s glittery outfit was good at scrambling scopes and other aiming devices, but it was shit at stealth. He spotted her at last, ducked behind a few bullet-scarred barrels on the other end of the building, edging her way towards the caravan of parked cars. Was she trying to leave? He could distantly hear her shouting through her ECHO. He took aim for the glitter and fired. She yelped and ducked back.

Tim could hear the other firefight, still raging on the other side of the main compound. Malady may have been shouting for her men.

“Come on out!” The marauder’s voice bellowed across the grounds, followed by the double-barreled retort of his shotgun. Tim ducked before the explosive rounds could get him, but he still felt the heat
of it on the side of his face. His arms were shaking. With blood slicked fingers, he forced another clip into his pistol.

He had an idea. It was stupid and flashy and to do it, he’d need the marauder to get closer, which meant it was probably a very bad idea, but what the hell.

ETA Three minutes.

Tim waited, crouched low and bleeding still.

“I know yer there,” the marauder said. He must’ve been five feet away. Tim’s leg twitched, but he stayed put.

“Come on out.”

Four feet? Tim took a breath.

“Come on!”

Tim exploded from cover, making good use of his pistol’s rapid fire rate. He unloaded a clip in seconds, corrosive rounds chewing through the metal door, knocking the marauder back. Tim jumped onto the door, using his momentum to run up and launch himself off. He chucked a grenade while mid-air, an action-hero move that’d nearly made Jack weep with joy the first time Tim managed to pull it off. The explosion ripped up the wall, scorching the ground. Tim saw the flash of Malady’s shield. Not dead yet, he reckoned—but close.

He landed with a roll. He fired once behind him, sparing barely a glance as the bullet landed in the back of the marauder’s cybernetic skull, and took off at a run.

Malady crouched less than three feet away, too stunned to move quick enough. Tim ejected the spent cartridge directly at her face, a cheap distraction that shouldn’t have worked, but did. She flinched back, giving Tim enough time to reload and aim.

And fire.

It took nearly the entire clip to get through her shield, and only one bullet in her chest to knock her down. The round exploded above her collarbone, in the soft dip where her neck met her chest and shoulders. She stumbled back, falling against the wall. Her hand groped through her clothes, and Tim realised what she was doing just in time to slam the heel of his boot into her arm. He kicked the syringe she’d been reaching for away.

Her mouth dropped open. She looked at Tim with pure outrage, but when she opened her mouth she didn’t make a sound. Blood poured out in a black stream, mingling with the blood spilling from the bite mark on her cheek.

Tim watched her for a second, trying to feel something. The sight of red and silver might’ve been beautiful. He raised his gun and shot her through the eye.

“Timmy, they’re close.”

ETA thirty seconds, in fact.

“This is fucking stupid. You shouldn’t do this.”

Tim found the syringe in the mud and jammed it into his bleeding arm without looking. He tipped his
head back and stared at the sky.

“We can still make it out of here. Just say the word and we’ll get a car.”

“Just focus on your job,” Tim said.

The dome was cracked and broken, the once-shining material gone cloudy and dim, like they were trapped inside a dead light bulb. Buzzards lowered, their guns swivelling in place. Maybe they’d seen what Tim had just done. He closed his eyes. It wouldn’t matter soon.

ETA ten seconds.

“Last chance, you dumb asshole.”

Tim didn’t dignify the digistruct clone with a response. It was too late anyway.

They were here.

Rhys half-ran, half-staggered up the stairs. Behind him, he could hear the murmuring voices of his employees, an echoed sound reaching up from the bottom of the staircase. Vaughn was on his heels, unwilling to leave him and blatantly ignoring Rhys’ earlier order to return to the others and help them. Maybe he knew something was wrong. Rhys hadn’t said a thing since Tim shot Malady.

His thoughts were scattered. His hands shook where he gripped the bannister. All he could see in his mind’s eye was Tim. Tim jumping off the marauder’s shield, Tim throwing a grenade mid-air, Tim landing with feline grace. Impressive and flashy.

Rhys knew it. He’d seen it before.

Rhys loved those old propaganda videos. Vaughn and Yvette would tease him for it, but if they knew just how often he’d watched Handsome Jack chew through bandit camps and Hyperion threats, moving with almost fluid grace through the carnage, using Hyperion weapons like they were natural extensions of his arm… They probably would’ve been creeped out. Rhys probably should’ve been creeped out. He should’ve felt shame every time he cued up the next vid. But he’d liked it too much. He liked looking at Jack, panting and drenched in blood, like a rabid beast that’d slipped its chain.

“Rhys, slow down!”

The point was, Rhys knew those moves. And everything fell into place from that knowledge, tumbling like a line of dominoes.

“Rhys, listen to me! There’s something I need to tell you!”

Rhys slammed his palm onto the security panel, overriding the emergency shutdown. The panel flashed yellow and the door slid open. Watery, white daylight shone into Rhys’ eyes, nearly blinding after spending time in the underground laboratory.

The grainy camera feeds didn’t do justice to the actual carnage he’d meet outside. Malady’s bandits weren’t gone, after all. Just because their leader had fallen, it didn’t mean they were about to give up. He could hear the fighting, distant screams and gunfire.

Something exploded on the far edge of his compound. Rhys felt a tremor of rage and hopelessness and tried not to think of the state of his precious company, everything he’d worked so hard to build
going up in smoke.

Tim stood not far from where Rhys emerged. He’d shed his jacket, leaving his freshly healed arms bare and vulnerable in the arctic air. He looked bad. Rhys wanted to see just how bad he could look. No more waiting.

“Rhys!” Vaughn jogged behind him, but Rhys’ long legs were good for eating up distance in a short amount of time and it wasn’t long before he was in front of Tim.

“Rhys?” Tim sounded exhausted. “You shouldn’t be—“

“Show me,” Rhys said. He didn’t sound much better.

“Show you…? Rhys, what are you—?”

“Your face. Show me.” He stepped forward. Amazingly, Tim stepped back, his hands rising protectively—like Rhys was actually a threat.

“Right now,” Rhys snapped.

Tim looked around. Rhys watched his throat work in a swallow.

“Rhys. Not here,” he said.

“Rhys, man—“ Vaughn caught up to him, red-faced and angry. He grabbed at Rhys’ shoulder, but Rhys shook him off.

Rhys shook. His nails dug into his palm. His metal hand creaked.

(It’s him it can’t be him he’s dead it’s him Tim’s not like him it’s him it has to be Tim’s different it’s him—)

“I know what I saw.” Rhys could hear the way his voice shook, how hard he worked to keep it under control. “Now I want you to show me.”

“What’s going on?” Sasha and a young woman Rhys didn’t immediately recognize jogged up to them. “Rhys, you shouldn’t be here. We’re still in the middle of things.”

Rhys ignored her. He stared at Tim, at that blank, tanned expanse where his face should be, where it looked as if all his features had been filed into smooth, emptiness. He could see it now. See it in the jaw, that hawkish nose.

Tim lowered his chin. He squared his shoulders.

“No,” he said.

Rhys reached out with a snarl, but Tim met his hand easily. He grabbed his wrist and twisted. Rhys’ metal arm rose almost without him noticing, his fingers clawing for the device on Tim’s ear. He could hear the others shouting, but he didn’t care. He had to know. He had to see.

(Tricked me again you bastard you asshole I’m not falling for it this time I know what you are—)

Tim shoved him off, his hand snapping up between them, pistol aimed squarely at Rhys’ chest.

“Don’t,” Tim said and if Rhys’ mind were clearer, he might’ve heard the note of pleading.
“You wouldn’t,” Rhys said, gasping for breath. “You wouldn’t.”

He might.

Rhys knew. Tim didn’t know how he’d found out—maybe Vaughn told him. Maybe Tim deserved that, although he wished he could’ve had the chance to tell Rhys himself. Under his own terms. Maybe they could’ve talked it out.

But one look at Rhys’ face told Tim that it’d been hopeless from the start. There’d have been no talking. And maybe Tim deserved that too.

There must’ve been a little bit of hope left in Tim after all, because he felt it in his chest when it died. Wasn’t that just a son of a bitch? Even after all the protection he’d taken, all the care he’d used, he still ended up getting hurt. Rhys too. He could’ve laughed if he trusted himself to make a sound.

Up above, Tim could hear the whir of buzzard blades. He could hear the bandits screaming.

Tim looked into Rhys’ face and let go of his future.

He lowered his gun.

“You’re right,” he said, too quiet for anyone else to hear. “I wouldn’t.”

The dome shattered.

Lilith’s Crimson Raiders descended. The calvary’s triumphant arrival.

It was over quickly.

The first sight of that Raider’s red sigil and the bandits knew they were finished. Any connection to the legendary Fire Hawk, Pandora’s own Siren and avenging angel, was enough to sour the strongest person’s constitution.

The Raiders’ took control of the situation quickly, herding the surviving Atlas soldiers—and Sasha and Tim—to what remained of the bunker’s interior. They weren’t under arrest, exactly. No matter how they behaved, the Raiders really had no high authority over anyone. But when a friendly face suggested they go and take a knee, none of the Atlas soldiers put up a fight.

And neither did Tim. He sat quietly, nursing the headache of his recently departed digistructs.

Bell was with them, at least. Her face was swollen up, cuts leaking sluggishly from bruised flesh, but she looked pleased when she saw what remained of her people.

“What happened to you, Captain?” Friendly asked.

Part of Bell’s face constricted in what might’ve been a smile. “They wanted to get inside. I wouldn’t let ‘em.”

“Good on you, captain,” Sasha said. She caught one of their armed guards’ attention. “Hey, can we get an Anshin over here?”

Captain Vermont came for them a while later, Fiona on one side and Rhys striding a few steps behind her. He looked pale, nearly bloodless, and Tim couldn’t help but notice the dark stains on his black suit jacket. He thought maybe he spotted some red on his neck.
That’s not for you to care about, he told himself. He didn’t stop looking.

Sasha stood when Vermont came level. Tim pulled himself up a moment behind her. He wished he were still drunk.

“—no one called you, Captain,” Rhys said. “Owning a bunch of buzzards doesn’t give you jurisdiction over everything you fly over. This is private property—“

“I’ve had just about enough of you, Mr. CEO,” she said. “I shouldn’t have to explain myself again—“

“You haven’t explained yourself once!” Rhys snapped.

“—and besides, everyone knows that on Pandora ‘private property’ is just a guideline.” She grinned at him, lazy in the face of his mounting outrage.

“What are you implying, captain?” he demanded.

Vermont swept her gaze across the seated recruits, the two sisters, and the others. “Maybe we should stick around. Maybe you should come up for some questioning. Haven’t decided yet.”

“You are not—“ Rhys lunged forward, but the Raiders were on him in a flash. They grabbed him by the arms, pulling him back.

Tim reached for his pistol before recalling that the Raiders had taken it from him, to ‘hold onto’. The Atlas recruits scrambled to their feet around him, hands reaching for their weapons as the Raiders all did the same.

Fiona flushed. “Like hell—“

“No way!” Sasha snapped, her hand flying to the gun strapped to her back.

“You’re not doing this,” Rhys said, a flat denial rather than a plea. His fists shook—even the metal one. His lips were curled back and the straight line of his back looked tense as a wire as he drew himself up to his formidable height. With his neck stretched out, Tim could more clearly see the splatter of dried blood flaking off.

Vermont looked up into his face with a smirk. She was, Tim realised, trying to goad him into starting something.

“You intend to stop me, Mr. CEO?” she asked.

“Stop it, Vermont.” Tim stepped forward. Half a dozen guns pointed to his chest. “You don’t need to do this.”

“I don’t need to do anything, John,” she said. “Maybe I just feel like it.”

“We had a deal, captain,” Tim said. Vermont looked at him without turning her head.

“What deal is that, John? You called, said you needed help. I came out of the goodness in my heart,” she said.

“You what?” Sasha demanded, her voice low. Rhys wouldn’t look at him at all.

“That’s not why you came here,” Tim said, ignoring her.
Vermont looked at him at last. “Why did I come here, John?”

This was it, he realised. This was his last chance. If he wanted Rhys to see him, to come clean, to give him what he deserved to know, then it had to be now. This isn’t how he would have picked things going, but what did that matter? If he cared, he should’ve done it sooner. Better yet, he should’ve just left when he had the chance. But he’d been weak. Tim’s fool heart had always been his downfall.

It was going to be again. One last time.

He reached for his earwidget slowly, telegraphing the move to ease the Raiders’ twitchy trigger fingers. His heart pounded. He stared at Rhys, who had finally turned to face him.

“Sorry,” he said and though it was loud enough for everyone to hear, he hoped Rhys knew who it was for.

He deactivated the device.

It was him. It was really him.

Son of a bitch.

He didn’t wear the white mask, of course, although his face was a few shades lighter than his neck. He had a few scars, and more than a few freckles, and it was him.

Handsome goddamn Jack.

Rhys wanted to laugh. He wanted to throw up.

Jack looked away, some emotion crossing his face that Rhys almost didn’t recognize. His lips trembled, his jaw worked in silence, and he turned his gaze to the ground.

“You can take me,” he said, looking up into Vermont’s face. “And I’ll come peacefully. But you all come with me, and you leave these people here.”

Rhys stared at him. In any story, when the hero offered themselves up as a sacrifice like this, their friends would rush in with protests, or with pleas to be taken in their place.

No one said a thing.

Jack smiled without any humour. He held his hands out, wrists together.

“Chop chop, cupcake,” he said. “I don’t have all day.”

The Raider behind him brought the butt of her rifle down on the side of his head. Jack fell to his hands and knees, swaying, but still conscious. She brought it down a second time, before Rhys could shout a warning, and he fell.

Vermont gave Rhys a side-long look.

“I hope you don’t expect to get paid for this,” she said.
A very short chapter this time. Fortunately, the next one should be the usual too-long length.

Thank you all again for your comments, kudos, and for reading. As I've mentioned before, it's been almost 10 years since the last time I posted any fanfic and I've never gotten a response this positive and passionate before. So thank you all for that.

Next chapter: Tim reunites with an old acquaintance. Lilith has a score to settle.
Part V: Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Tim learns the secret of happiness.

Chapter Notes

CW for physical, mental, and verbal abuse.

(and hey, mood music if you want it: https://youtu.be/DOQ3R3MNcv8)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim woke up with a jerk and into a world of pain. He pried one eye open and quickly shut it against the glaring white-blue light of the clear sky. The air felt cold and crisp. Tim’s head felt like it’d been split open. He could only open one eye, he realised, because the other was caked in dried blood. His own, probably.

He tried to clear it up, but discovered his arms wouldn’t move. Because someone had tied his wrists to a pole.

Right. Tim remembered now. He was going to die.

“Wake up, handsome.” A woman’s voice, cigarette rough and filled with smoke. Tim groaned and opened one eye again.

It was easier this time, now that he knew what to expect. The light burned but his vision adjusted quickly, although he wished it hadn’t. Here is what Tim saw:

Crimson Raiders. About a handful, all armed. They stood in loose formation to his side, watching him warily. Which was kind of funny, because he wasn’t in any position to dole out any hurt. They’d strung him up like a scarecrow, arms stretched out on either side, wrists tied down tight. Tight enough that he couldn’t easily get to the device fused under his wrist.

The sky. A lot of it. Stretched out across the horizon, dipping below the break of the cliff he’d been stationed on. He spotted a cloud drift its way under the ground and Tim realised his mistake. The air was too clean, too thin. They weren’t just on a cliff—they were on Sanctuary. Tim’s stomach dipped as if he’d stepped off the high beam and into an empty pool.

“Like the view?” The same voice as before. “Lots of people seem to enjoy it. Thought I might show you something pretty before you die. Though I hear you don’t like heights much.”

Tim could taste bile at the back of his throat. He bent his head back and stared as hard as he could at the sky above, as though that might help take his mind off the expanse of distance between himself and anything resembling solid ground. Still, vicious and sadistic as her sentiment was, he couldn’t help but find it a little funny.
“What are you smiling at?” she asked.

“Just… been a long time since anyone knew that much about me,” he said. “People usually mistake me for the other guy.”

“You’re not though, are you.” He could hear the crunch of her boots on the sun-scorched ground, the sound of her voice as she circled behind him. “Your name is Timothy Lawrence. You’re from Eden-4. You don’t like heights. You can create two copies of yourself using that freakshow on your wrist. And you were Handsome Jack’s number one bitch.”

Lilith stepped into view, filling Tim’s vision with red hair, red leather clothes, red lips. The blue tattoos that marked her as a siren looked especially incongruous, too cool against all the heat the Fire Hawk radiated. She stood close enough that Tim imagined he could smell sulphur and smoke.

“You’re wrong,” he said. She quirked one red brow. “I’m from Menoetius. I went to school on Eden-4. Otherwise, that’s some good research. I’m impressed.”

Someone whistled and two figures stepped into view, pushing their way through the Raiders. If Tim had been nursing any hopes at all for a daring escape, they would’ve been dashed at the sight of the whip-thin sniper known as Mordecai and the brick-shithouse built of meat known, appropriately, as Brick.

“Eden-4’s an expensive-ass place to go to school,” Mordecai said.

“Yeah,” Tim said. “Ask me how I paid off my debts.”

“We’ve finished up with Atlas, Lil,” Brick said. Tim stiffened.

“Wait— You said you’d leave them alone.” Tim’s head throbbed at the sound of his own raised voice, but he ignored it. “That was the deal.”

“You made that deal with Vermont, not with me,” Lilith said.

“Hey, I made it with your people.” Tim pulled at his bonds. “If I find out you’ve gone back on it—“

Lilith laughed, although Tim didn’t hear a lot of mirth behind her voice. “Or what? Look around you, Timothy Lawrence. You’re on your own up here.”

Tim bit his tongue against the reply he wanted to make. He could hear the ropes creak as he pulled on them, but they didn’t give. How could he have been so stupid as to trust Lilith’s Raiders? Of course they’d take what they wanted. Pirate bastards. All he’d tried to do was help Rhys—

Pain splintered in Tim’s chest. His heart lurched like a monster in a horror movie, pulling itself off the slab to squeeze the life out of whatever it could find.

The look Rhys wore when he saw Tim’s true face.

“Look at that. You’re actually scared,” Lilith said, peering into his face. Tim turned away. “Anyway, relax. I know the deal. All Brick did was very generously offer the remaining Atlas recruits a new job, if they were interested. Your friends are safe.”

“They’re not my friends,” Tim said.

“So, now that that’s been taken care of…” Lilith stepped away, out towards the ledge of the city grounds. “Let’s talk about why you’re here.”
“You want to put me on trial, right?” Tim said. “Like you did with Athena. You want to hear about Elpis.”

“Ooooh, so close. You got it half right, Timothy. I do intend to put you on trial. In fact, it’s already started. Check out your jury.” She gestured lazily towards her armed goons and the other vault hunters. “But I’m not interested in hearing about Elpis. I’ve heard enough about that fucking moon, thanks. No, Timothy, I want to hear about you.”

“Seems like you already know about me,” Tim said.

“I want to hear why someone would willingly become the doppelganger for a sadistic, paranoid, fascist asshole.” She placed her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side, expectant.

Tim considered giving her the story he’d given Moxxi, years ago. The story about money, because everyone understood money.

But it occurred to Tim that he could measure the length of his future in a handful of hours. That no matter what he said to Lilith, the outcome would be the same. He wasn’t fooled by her little gesture. He knew there was only one member of the jury, the same woman who intended to serve as his judge and his executioner.

The truth, then. What did he have to lose?

“I did it because I was in love with him,” Tim said. “And because I didn’t like myself very much.”

Whatever answer Lilith was expecting, it clearly wasn’t that. Tim felt a small amount of satisfaction at the way her eyes widened, a minute crack in her otherwise perfect disaffected façade.

“Turns out, Jack felt exactly the same,” Tim said.

No one spoke for a while. Tim tried to enjoy the silence. Lilith watched him like she was looking for signs of humour. Tim supposed there was some to be found in his statement—admittedly, a sort of tragic humour, like a clown’s funeral—but he wasn’t in any position to enjoy it.

It was also the first time he’d spoken those words out loud to another human being.

(It was likely the last time, too.)

He didn’t know how to feel about that.

Finally, Lilith spoke: “Well. I think I’ve heard all I need to hear. You did it for love. End of story.” She pulled out her pistol, a Jakob’s special, a big, rapid-fire hunk of metal. Tim registered dull surprise at the sight of it. He’d expected the Fire Hawk to use a DAHL or a Maliwan. Something with a flame round.

“Wait, hang on a minute, Lil.” Mordecai stepped forward, placing his hand on the pistol before she could point it at Tim’s head. “It’s not good enough for me.”

“Mordcai…” she growled.

“He wasn’t there, in Opportunity. Back when we were tracking Jack down and killing those damn doubles.”

Ah, the lesser doubles. Jack’s solution after Tim’s betrayal. Regular Hyperion employees, with names and lives separate from their duties as Jack’s cannon fodder. Their mirror image was provided
through a holographic device they wore on their lapels, not unlike Jack’s camouflage device. Tim met one in person, once. The sight of him alone nearly put Tim in the ground, until the Hyperion employee began to move, and speak. Jack didn’t work as closely with those doubles, it seemed, because they couldn’t get the walk right.

(Tim had been on the run by that time, dressed like a common bandit and wearing a full face mask that murdered his peripheral and stank of old blood and someone else’s bad breath. The double didn’t know Tim, and he didn’t last long against him. Killing the man had been about as satisfying as killing his digistructs.)

“No,” Tim said. “I’d left Jack by then.”

“Left?” Mordecai glanced back at Lilith, raising his eyebrows. “See, he left Jack. There’s a story there, right? There’s more to this than we think.”

Lilith pulled her lip back in a sneer. “Who cares?”

“I do,” Mordecai said. “You brought this man up here for a trial. Don’t you think we ought to hear the full story?”

“The full story? Who gives a shit about the full story? This guy isn’t Athena. He knew what Jack was and he still played along.”

“How do we know that?” Mordecai demanded. “He didn’t say that. He just said he was in love. Haven’t you ever heard the saying ‘love is blind’?”

“I’m more fond of the saying ‘love’s a bitch’,” Lilith said.

To his surprise, Tim privately agreed.

“Well, I want to know what made him leave before we execute this man. He deserves that, at least.”

Lilith shook her head. “It’s a waste of time. We’re just delaying the inevitable.”

Tim silently agreed to that as well. But Mordecai leaned back onto the balls of his feet and crossed his arms over his skinny chest. Posing like he thought she might throw a punch. The look she gave him in return suggested she was considering it.

The moment was broken when Brick spoke up. “I’m with Mordecai,” he said. “Let’s just hear what the man’s got to say. If we don’t like it, we’ll shoot him.”

Lilith aimed a dirty look in Brick’s direction, but the big man seemed unphased. Maybe they’d been with her too long.

Seeing herself out-numbered, Lilith sighed and holstered her gun. She aimed the look at Tim.

“This had better not be a long story,” she said.

It was. And not one of them had asked Tim if he had any interest in telling it. Truth be told, he wasn’t sure he did, but he wasn’t ready to stare down the barrel of that Jakob either.

And anyway, he’d never told anyone about what happened between him and Jack. What Jack did to him. Took from him. The only other person who’d known died years ago.

He collected his thoughts as best he could. Not an easy task with his head still throbbing. He licked his dried lips, unsurprised when he tasted blood.
“Alright,” he said, meeting Lilith’s gaze. “I’ll tell you. But fair warning: it starts with Elpis.”

Elpis hadn’t been planned. Jack always had some cockamamie scheme on the go—usually more than one, as befitting an evil genius—but Tim’s involvement was usually limited to the tail end of those schemes, when the only thing left to do was clean up the human debris. Wipe the slate clean.

Elpis was the first time Tim was called in without prior warning. Colonel Zarpedon’s and her Lost Legion invasion was like a slap to the face. That anyone was stupid and crazy enough to take on Helios, known home of Jack, slayer of bandits and Hyperion’s Retribution, was bad enough. That they also intended to blow up the moon was top level bonkers.

Elpis was a lot of firsts for Tim. It was the first time he got to work with vault hunters. It was the first time he’d met Athena, and the first time he’d been forced into prolonged exposure to funny robots. It was also the first time he used his digistruct device in the field.

The device had been a gift from Jack, given to him only a week before as a reward for his fiftieth successful mission.

(That had been a good day. Jack had blown him in his office and then took him back to his apartment and fucked him ‘til he screamed.

Tim didn’t share this part with Lilith.)

The device created the two clones, which were in fact the same semi-intelligent programs Tim had been training with for years.

“They’ve learned from ya, babe. I’ve made sure they kept their training intact.”

“How do they work?”

“Just push the button whenever you’re in trouble, and they’ll appear and shoot anything that’s trying to hurt you. Simple.”

“What if they start attacking Hyperion soldiers?”

“Give me some credit, Tintam. They’re programmed to recognize threats and friendlies and keep them apart.”

Athena had already explained Elpis. Hell, Lilith and Roland had been there themselves. They knew what happened.

So, let’s skip to the end. To the Sentinel, and the artefact, and Jack’s little moment.

Tim had been there, of course, with Athena. (Another first: someone seeing him and Jack in the same room at the same time, like it wasn’t a big secret. That was how nuts Elpis had been.) He watched as Jack’s eyes were opened, and then opened again. Jack gained the gift of foresight, blessed by an ancient Eridian artefact, and for a terrifying moment, he could see everything.

“And then you appeared,” Tim said, his voice flat. “You punched through the artefact and blew the damn thing up. And I got caught in the fallout.”

It knocked him cold for a few seconds. He woke up to the sound of Jack’s laughter, and the sound of Athena walking away.

His wrist hurt. There might be better words to describe the pain, but they weren’t in any language
Tim knew. It bore down right into his bones, where Tim didn’t think you could feel pain. It occupied every sense Tim had, but it used them all wrong: the taste of light on his tongue, the smell of pain in his nose, the feeling of purple all over. Tim couldn’t even scream. He couldn’t even move.

Whatever pain Tim experienced, Jack must’ve experienced five times over. It burned into his face, like a scarlet letter, like an ancient reprimand. *Here Be the Stupid Jackass Who Thought He Could Hold All the Knowledge of the Cosmos Inside His Human Head.* Jack’s laughter faded into gurgling and the man fell to his knees, limbs trembling as his muscles seized.

Tim recovered first. He ECHO’d for help, and hid with Nisha and Wilhelm while Hyperion soldiers came to collect their boss and hero.

(Tim would never forget how helpless he’d felt, watching Jack’s lifeless body get taken away by strangers, while he was forced to remain behind. He crouched at the mouth of a cave and tried not to feel abandoned while the security vessel ascended through the moon’s thin atmosphere. He didn’t mention that to Lilith either.)

“‘That’s how I got this ‘freakshow’, as you called it,” Tim said, flexing his left hand. “The digistructs got smarter after the explosion. They started talking, and not just in pre-programmed catch phrases. They could take orders. They could give me reports, use different weapons, all kinds of things. I can’t explain how. I’m sure Hyperion would have taken their time with me to understand it, but I got out of there before they found out.”

“You didn’t tell them?” Lilith asked, more than a little skeptical.

“I told Jack,” Tim admitted. “But he was out of his mind on painkillers at the time.”

It’d taken a few days for Tim to get back to Hyperion. That Jack hadn’t immediately sent a team of loaderbots to pick him up told Tim that he was still unconscious (although the weak part of him fretted about being forgotten). Tim had been forced to smuggle himself onto a transport ship, in the baggage cabin.

He’d found Jack in the medical wing, with his face bandaged and arm hooked into the good pain meds.

Too still and silent. Tim loved watching Jack sleep, but this was something else. He didn’t like the slow way he breathed, the way he lay on his back. Jack slept like a starfish, or he curled up on his side. He never slept like this, laid out like a body ready for burial.

He stirred when Tim approached. Old survival instincts, Tim guessed. His one good eye was a sapphire slit in the red, swollen skin of his face. What little of it that could be seen through the bandages. His breath puffed out of his mouth, as if he were still asleep, still snoring.

“‘mmy?’” His fingers twitched. Tim touched his hand gently, afraid of how fragile this creature in white seemed.

“Hey,” Tim said softly.

“You… came back.” Jack’s words slurred together.

“Yeah. Yeah, of course.” He couldn’t bring himself to ask if Jack was alright. The words lodged themselves in his throat, too big to move. Jack was always alright. He was supposed to be the healthy one, the strong one.
“Sssstupid bitch got me, Timmmmy.” Jack’s eyelid flickered. Syllables slid together like melting ice across a glass table. “Thought she got you too.”

Tim managed a smile. “I’m like a bad penny. It’ll take a little more than an angry siren to take me down.”

Oh, the irony.

“It took him a few weeks to recover from Elpis. It was lucky, I suppose. If he’d understood what I was saying, I’d’ve probably ended up in a lab.”

“Is that why you left?” Mordecai asked.

“No,” Tim replied.

Jack’s recovery was slow, but it wasn’t as slow as some people would have liked. His doctors, for example. And Tassiter.

Because as soon as Jack was back on his feet, his first order of business was rebranding. The white mask was a digistruct, specifically fitted for Jack’s face. It sat over the ugly scar like the second skin it was meant to be.

(“I never got the mask,” Mordecai said. “I mean, why not just get some surgery done? Or get something a little more natural-looking? Why bother hiding the scar in the first place, if the thing you’re covering it up with draws attention to the fact that you’re hiding something?”)

Tim recalled wondering that very same thing himself.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Maybe it just seemed like the right choice to him.”)

The second order of business was strangling Tassiter in his office.

The violence and brutality of the act rocked the staff at Hyperion, even those who fancied themselves as the most cynical and jaded. Everyone knew that the game at Hyperion could get violent, but it was cloak and dagger violence. It was a shadow in your periphery and a needle in your neck, or a funny taste in your nightcap. No one had ever gone so far as to literally murder their rival in cold blood, in their own office, while talking to their secretary. No one until Jack.

Handsome Jack.

Tim couldn’t say that had been the beginning of the end, because Jack was never a nice man. He was never even a sane man. But after the Sentinel, every nasty quality he possessed became amplified. And he became unstable.

But, and this was important for Tim to remember, Jack started medicating Tim three months before Elpis. Jack locked Tim in his apartment almost four years before that. Jack’s abuse, his mind games, his sadism, his need for control, all of it started long before Elpis and the artefact.

The end began during one of their meetings in Jack’s new office. Jack briefed him on his next mission: a Hyperion-sponsored settlement on Pandora that had gotten ideas about disobeying rules and taking unauthorized work breaks from the mines.

“They’ve been whining about skull shivers and slag sickness and blah blah blah. Point is,
‘Handsome Jack’ needs to go down and take care of the ringleaders personally. Remind everyone who’s boss. And make an example of them,” Jack said.

“Sure,” Tim said, fidgeting with the leather cuff around his wrist. It wasn’t as if he was trying to hide the strange crystal growth from Jack. After all, he’d mentioned it already. That Jack happened to have been on some powerful pain meds at the time was neither here nor there.

Understand that Tim honestly intended to tell Jack about the change. He really did. He only intended to wait until Jack was settled, and things calmed down.

“Of course, we’ll need to outfit you in a mask,” Jack went on. Tim went still.

“Sorry…?”

“The mask, kiddo. If you’re going to be me, you’ve got to look the part. That’s the whole friggin’ point of a body double. Come on, I shouldn’t have to explain this stuff to ya.”

“Right. Alright. Um.” The mask didn’t look comfortable, but Tim knew better than to ask. Jack would mock him for being soft. “So, where do I get one?”

Jack’s gaze flicked from Tim’s face to the display on his ECHOtab. “Not yet,” he said. “I need to get some things in order first. But don’t worry. I’ll see you’re ready before your mission.” He smiled, as sharp and quick as a thrown blade. “Just leave it to me.”

As he stepped into the hall, his ECHOtablet beeped at him. When he looked down, he saw the soothing swirl of his colourful screen saver vanish, and a message appear.

CLICK ME.

Tim paused. The sender appeared as ‘UNKNOWN’ which was… impossible. No one knew of Tim’s frequency, or his ECHO address. Not even his personal trainers. No one except Jack. He glanced at the closed office door at the end of the hall, wondering if Jack had forgotten something. He hesitated, half-tempted to return to Jack’s office. But Jack had made it clear that he needed to work, and Tim knew better than to interrupt him. Especially when Jack was in such a… fragile mood. Tim glanced back at the screen, the message still requesting his attention. Could this have been a test?

Or maybe it wasn’t Jack at all. Maybe someone had found his address by mistake.

He opened the message, too curious not to.

‘Open in private.’

An attachment sat at the bottom. A movie file. The thumbnail showed a darkened office, the camera pointed at a downward angle. Something about the image made Tim’s heart pick up speed, something cold and sharp coil in his chest.

A spam bot. It must’ve been. He deleted it.

He stepped into the elevator and punched in the code that would send him to his private quarters without interruption. It was perhaps the most ostentatious thing about his new apartment. That, and the fact that once again, he and Jack were the only living souls in that section. Helios was bigger than Eos, at least, which made it easier to get away with…
Tim stared at the panel and tried to think about the mission ahead, the dinner of fish and brown rice he had waiting for him, on anything but the four walls around him and the sealed door in front of him.

His ECHOtab beeped again.

Tim swallowed. He pulled the thin, shiny rectangle from his pocket.

PLEASE CLICK ME.

Definitely not Jack. Jack would never use the p-word.

Swallowing, Tim clicked and saw the same message as before. ‘Open in private’ and the attachment. Tim felt a prickle on the back of his neck, the feeling of being watched by unseen eyes. He looked around the small space, as though he might find someone else in the elevator with him.

He deleted the message. His tablet beeped again, almost immediately. He saw the words ‘DON’T DELETE PLEASE’ flash on the screen before he hit the power button and the device went black. He exhaled slowly, forcing himself to calm down. Someone must’ve gotten his address by mistake. That was all. Tim imagined some dumb intern trying to get a hold of her buddy or something. (He steadfastly ignored the stab of loneliness the thought gave him.)

He’d mention this to Jack later, and Jack would take care of it. Hopefully without needlessly killing some poor, random—

The elevator lurched to a stop. Tim bit his lip and stabbed at the console. The lit display flickered, static flashing briefly.

His tablet buzzed as it returned to life.

Tim read a lot, of course. As an only child with a working mother and no friends, he unsurprisingly developed an appetite for the written word at a young age. Even then, especially then, when he was at his loneliest, he would read nearly anything. Non-fiction, romance, survival fiction. Hell, even a training guide, if it was interesting enough.

But he could never read horror. Hated it.

His ECHOtab beeped.

“Fuck this,” he said, voice shaking. He tried to manipulate the console, but the screen flickered with each press, until it eventually went black. The overhead lights died, leaving Tim bathed in emergency red.

His breath came quickly, in short, shallow puffs of air. He swallowed and tried to get control before he began to hyperventilate.

He had to contact Jack. Unless…

Was Jack doing this? Did Tim piss him off? But if he did, why would Jack lock him in an elevator? Maybe he was trying to scare him. He must’ve known how Tim felt about enclosed spaces and heights and an elevator was a perfect blend of both and oh fuck why did he have to think about how high up he was fuck fuck.

His ECHO beeped again.
If this wasn’t Jack, then it might’ve been an assassination attempt. Which meant that Tim had to at least try to get a hold of Jack.

He ignored his beeping ECHO and tried to raise Jack’s frequency on his in-ear device. The call rang once and then a monotone voice informed him that the service was down.

His ECHO vibrated. Taking a breath, Tim looked down and nearly dropped his device.

“Fuck,” he whispered.

The screen was flooded with messages, all marked in glowing urgent letters. ‘PLEASE CLICK’; ‘PLEASE LOOK’; ‘TIM LAWRENCE PLEASE’; ‘TIM LAWRENCE YOU NEED TO SEE THIS’; ‘TIM LAWRENCE I KNOW WHO YOU ARE’; ‘TIM LAWRENCE TIM LAWRENCE TIM LAWRENCE’.

“How…?”

No one knew that name. His personnel files had been wiped years ago. His birth certificate, his entry on the planetary registry, his school records, everything, all of it, was gone. The only person other than Jack who knew the name Tim Lawrence, who even knew he’d been born, was his mother.

Pain flared behind his eyes, nesting at the base of his nose and spreading through his sinuses like a wild fire. He stumbled, squeezed his eyes shut, and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to relieve the sudden pressure. He heard his ECHO hit the ground with a clatter.

He opened his eyes a few long seconds later, the pain receding as quickly as it had come. His ECHO buzzed on the ground, rattling like a beetle on its back. He looked down and saw a new message.

‘PLEASE TIM’.

Nothing else came.

Breathing through his nose, Tim knelt down slowly and picked the device up. He held it with the tips of his fingers, keeping as little point of contact between himself and the machine as he could. He stared at the screen, almost wishing for a new message, something to kick his adrenaline back into gear, but nothing came. The silence felt worse, somehow.

He opened the message.

There was nothing in the body this time, save for the thumbnailed movie file. The same image of a darkened office, shot from a security camera angle. Heart thudding in his ears, and thoughts buzzing with possible assassination attempts, Tim pressed play.

The display projected above the screen, splashing large onto the wall. The quality was low, the picture grainy. Even with the shitty quality, Tim knew what he was looking at. This was Jack’s office, back on Eos. For a while, he didn’t see anything and only the gentle glow of the monitor on the desk told him that he was watching a movie and not a still image.

And then Jack walked into frame, and Tim followed behind.

“Take a seat,” Jack said and Tim watched himself do as he was told. Jack went to his desk and produced something too small to be seen.

“What’s this?” Tim asked.
“Medicine. I told you.”

Wait… Tim remembered this. This had been just after—

Pain pressed cold fingers against the back of his eyes.

This had been the first time he’d taken his new medicine. He watched himself try to protest, and then watched Jack place the pill into the palm of Tim’s hand. There was nothing upsetting about these images, but something about the grainy quality gave everything a seedy vibe. Tim felt like he was watching a snuff film or something.

The Tim on screen swallowed his pill. He sat still and said nothing.

This is what he had to see?

Jack leaned down in front of Tim. He waved his hand in front of Tim’s face. He snapped his fingers.

“Huh,” he said. “Works fast. Hey, Timmy, you still in there?”

The small hairs on the back of Tim’s neck began to stand on end.

“…yes,” he heard himself say.

“Raise your right arm above your head,” Jack said. Tim did. “Now your other arm.” Tim did that too. “Stand up. Do some jumping jacks. Hah, ‘jacks’. Okay, now do that thing where you do a push up and then jump up and then crouch back down into a push up. Haha, amazing. Boy, those always looked exhausting. Did your trainers make you do them, Timmy? No, don’t waste your breath with an answer. I bet you do a lot of this shit though, don’t you?” Jack paced slowly around him. “All for me, right? You’ve done everything for me, haven’t you, babe? And now you think you can leave me?” He laughed, high-pitched and contemptuous. “Oh, Timtam. Okay, you can stop. Feeling out of breath? Hm? Wrap your hands around your throat and squeeze, pumpkin.”

Jack watched him in silence. Tim could hear the quiet noises he was making.

“Do you know how many people I actually give a damn about, kitten? Do you know how many relationships I actually put work into? It’s a short fucking list. But I was willing to try for you. Even though you were always such a whiny ingrate about everything. Such a fucking baby. But for whatever god forsaken reason, I actually fucking like you.”

On the screen, Tim’s legs buckled. Jack watched him fall to his knees.

“See, it kills me that you think you could leave me. And for what? Your pathetic old life? There’s nothing left, kitten. I deleted every trace of your existence from every system I could find, and trust me, that’s going pretty deep. Tim Lawrence doesn’t exist unless I want him to. You understand? I own you, precious. Man, I could watch this all day but we got things to do and not a lot of time to do them in. Alright, let go.”

Tim fell forward, gasping and coughing on his hands and knees. Jack watched him, head tilted and arms crossed.

“God, you’re lucky I like you. Okay, sit down on that chair.” Jack circled his desk while Tim crawled into the guest chair, stiff-limbed and wheezing. “Here. Take this.” Jack gave Tim an ECHOtablet. “So. As I was saying. I deleted all traces of your past, all that tedious paperwork that even pathetic losers like you produce just by existing in our system. Blammo, gone. But! It seems like that’s not enough, is it? You’re getting all hung up on your childhood and family and whatever. It’s
a problem, and frankly it’s holding you back. Worse, it’s hurting our brand. I’ve tried again and again to tell you how important this is but you—”

Jack stopped. He smoothed his hair back and drew in a long breath.

“Anyway. Time limit. Here’s what I want you to do. I want you to write down everything you can remember about your mom, starting from today and working back, into that tablet. Put it all down, as much as you can remember. No detail too small. And when I tell you to stop, you’re going to hit that little ‘erase’ button at the top of the screen. And once all that text is gone, you’re going to stop thinking about it. All of it. It’ll be wiped from your mind. Like none of it ever happened. Okay, pumpkin?”

“Yes, Jack.”

“Beautiful. We’ve only got about 40 minutes but we’ll work on the rest of it next week. Oh, and write down that little scene I walked in on earlier today. You’re not gonna leave me, Timmy. Are you? Say ‘no, Jack.’”

Oh god.

“No, Jack.”

Oh Jesus god oh fuck oh holy hell fucking goddamn son of a bitch.

His mother.

His mother. He took her. Son of a bitch.

Tim closed his eyes and tried to call up an image of her. Her hair. Her eyes. Her face. The way her fingers closed around a stylus, the way she brushed her hair before going to work. The way her voice sounded when she was tired, or happy. Her favourite song, her favourite food.

Nothing.

Pain spread through his head, swelling behind his eyes and nose, growing in his skull. A cold pressure that he could feel down to his neck. As if it were about to burst from his head, leak out from his eyes.

He pictured a woman without a face, without a mouth to smile with, or a voice to speak with. He might’ve screamed.

It went further than just his mother. Tim tried to think of his home, of his school. Of any friend he might’ve made. He could recall the basics: that he’d been an only child, that his mother had been alone, although he could not recall what happened to his father. He knew his mother was dead.

That hadn’t come easy. Blood poured from his nose, like he’d pulled something from his soft tissue.

But there was nothing else. He couldn’t even remember his real face.

He entered a sort of fugue state, as if his overwhelmed mind couldn’t handle the pressures of piloting a body. He didn’t pass out, but he lost time and everything that happened passed in a sort of haze. The elevator lurched back to life, but it didn’t take him back to his rooms. Instead it opened into the depths of Helios, into the massive rooms that housed the satellite’s guts. When Tim’s mind and body finally reunited, Tim found himself nestled in the corner of one of the largest rooms he’d ever seen,
stuffed full of mechanical tubes and consoles. The inner workings of the great behemoth.

The room was empty of people, which Tim was grateful for. He couldn’t be Jack, then. He could barely function as Tim.

His mind picked over the remains of his past, looking at the outline of what he could recall and searching for the things that went between the lines. He could recall small things. The song he used when he learned to tie his shoelaces. Cutting his finger before his first job interview and bleeding on the woman when she shook his hand. Reading a news article about a discovery of a hole in the ocean. Each little memory was like a snapped photograph, a moment frozen and pulled from its context. Where had he read the story? What company was he interviewing with? Who taught him the song?

Nothing.

How long had they been at this? Tim did the math, swallowing back the queasy feeling it gave him with difficulty. He started the medication (oh god that scene the office hands around his neck I own you, precious don’t think about that don’t think Tim Lawrence doesn’t exist unless I want him to) almost four months ago. He would take one pill every week. How long would Jack make him write? Only 40 minutes in that video, and Jack mentioned a time limit…

Twelve weeks. At least 40 minutes’ worth of writing each week. And Tim could write very quickly.

Tim was aware he was crying, although he couldn’t bring himself to stop.

No wonder he’d gotten so good at being Jack. No wonder he’d been so happy. Jack had finally killed him.

Tim Lawrence doesn’t exist unless I want him to.

Tim didn’t know how long he spent in the engine room. He couldn’t bring himself to leave and he couldn’t think of what else to do. What else could he do?

He couldn’t stay here. Jack would notice he’d gone missing.

And Jack would come find him. And what would he do, once he found Tim like this? Another pill.

Tim stifled a sob. He had to leave. He couldn’t move. Jack would never let him go.

He listened to the machine hum of the engine for a while. Eventually, his breathing began to slow and the tremors began to still. He pressed his aching head against the cool metal wall. Chemicals flooded his brain, a belated reward after all those tears. The carrot after the stick. Tim sniffed.

“You can’t stay down here.”

Tim flinched, heart pounding.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” The voice came from the ECHO device in his ear. A woman’s voice, soft and hesitant. “But you really can’t stay here much longer. He’s finishing up in his office soon, and he’s gonna come looking for you. I’m sorry.”

No one should have this number. No one should have been able to get to his ECHOtablet.

“Who are you?” Tim asked. “How did you get this frequency?”

No response came immediately. Tim listened to the white noise of the engine.
“You’re the one who sent me the video,” he said.

“Yeah. Jack deletes all the security footage every time you leave, but I managed to hang onto some. I don’t usually watch your meetings because, um. Well.” And maybe it was the discomfort in her voice, but Tim realised that this wasn’t a woman, but a girl. A child.

“But when I learned about those pills... He made the order a few weeks before. I didn’t think he was going to use them but I guess he... changed his mind.”

“What are they?” Tim asked. His voice sounded flat to his own ears.

“They’re probably exactly what you think. Hypnosis, mind control, whatever you want to call it. Hyperion’s been working on all kinds of gross, creepy stuff for a long time. Um. You really need to go soon.”

The thought of facing Jack made Tim want to scream. He buried his face in his arms.

“You said I had to see that video. Why?”

“What?”

“Why did I have to see it?” His voice shook and he realised he was angry. “All it did was show me just how—how fucked I am.”

“Are you kidding me? I took a risk, showing you that. I did it because I thought I was doing you a favour.”

Tim laughed, a touch hysterically.

“The world doesn’t need another Handsome Jack, okay?”

“And what, you think it needs Timothy Lawrence?” He laughed again. “What exactly am I supposed to do now? I can’t leave, he’d never let me. And even if I did leave, what would I do? Where would I go?” His voice cracked, and he hated it. He hated hearing himself talk. He hated the way his clothes fit, the way his hands moved, the way his hair felt, everything, all of it.

The girl on the line didn’t speak for a long time.

“You could kill him.”

Tim smiled bitterly. “No,” he said. “I really couldn’t.”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to part five, everyone. We did it.

Thank you to everyone for reading and leaving comments, as usual. I was delighted by the response to last week’s chapter, which was mostly incoherent screaming, which was exactly what I was going for.

Next chapter: Lilith passes judgement.
They’d cleaned the kitchen at some point, while Rhys was upstairs. When he returned, the tables had been cleared and only a few crumbs on empty plates and a sticky counter-top remained as evidence that Rhys’ party had even happened. He felt grateful for that.

He felt less grateful for the headache currently pounding in his skull. The fastest hangover he’d ever gotten. Happy birthday.

The others filed in without a word. Sasha picked up a chair from the ground and set it up properly. She looked exhausted, her pallor turned nearly grey with it. Not one of them looked good, but she looked worst of all. Although Rhys hadn’t looked in a mirror yet.

Yeah, keep yourself busy. I’ve almost finished...

Rhys sat down gingerly, wincing as even that jostled his head. The pain felt like a fist behind his eyes, knocking with the slightest movement.

“Body double,” he said. It was the first thing he said since Vaughn told him the truth. Since they’d watched the Raiders’ buzzards ascend through the cracked remains of Atlas’ dome.

“That’s right,” Vaughn said, taking his own seat beside Rhys. “A complete double. Right down to the voice. I think he had some kind of procedure done.”

“Why would anyone want that?” Fiona asked, sounding more tired than disgusted. Vaughn shrugged.

“What worries me is what they’re going to do with him,” he said. “Everyone knows Lilith’s their leader. And she’s got some kind of personal beef with Handsome Jack and Hyperion.”

“We heard something about that,” Fiona said, inclining her head towards Sasha. “Back when she was a hunter, she got involved with a former Crimson Lance named Roland. I think Handsome Jack killed him.”

“Wonderful.” Sasha sat back, crossing her arms over her chest with a scowl. “So we’ve got a pissed
off siren with an axe to grind. What are we going to do?”

No one spoke up immediately. Rhys stared at the table, at the dried and shiny glass rings from their drinks. He touched his flesh finger to one, feeling the skin pull. Sticky to the touch.

“Rhys?”

They took him. They had no right. And Rhys just stood by like an… an asshole and let it happen. After all his talk, all his assurances that Tim could—should stay. What the hell sort of leader, what sort of person was he, that he stabbed him in the back like that? And why?

Tim’s face—Jack’s face—flashed in Rhys’ mind. His stomach gave a weak shudder.

“She’s gonna kill him, isn’t she?” he asked. Everyone exchanged looks over his head, which was confirmation enough. “We have to save him.” They—he shouldn’t have let him get taken in the first place.

But again, all he got was another silent exchange. Rhys sighed and looked up at last.

“We can’t let him die. Body double or no, he’s not—” Rhys stopped, his throat catching.

Tim’s face still held in his mind’s eye. That look he’d worn when he saw Rhys looking at him, really looking at him for the first time. Rhys hadn’t recognized it at first, the look of it so alien on that face. But he could recognize it now.

Shame. Tim had been ashamed.

(And hurt.)

“He isn’t Jack,” Rhys said. “Trust me.”

No, he sure as hell isn’t.

“I suppose you’d know,” Fiona said without any heat.

Yvette looked over to Vaughn, who gave a minute shake of his head. They both turned to Rhys, looking like parents preparing to deliver bad news about their kid’s favourite pet.

“I don’t think we can help him, Rhys,” Yvette said. “Sanctuary is a flying city, remember? Even if we didn’t just suffer a gigantic blow to our infrastructure and our personnel count, even if we didn’t have to fight off Lilith’s extremely well-armed and trained team of mercenaries—a team that would include other vault hunters, by the way—and even if Lilith herself wasn’t one of the most powerful creatures in the universe, even if we could somehow get through all of those barriers. We’d still have to figure out a way to get into the air.”

“So, we get some buzzards. Isn’t there a buzzard academy in the Dusts?”

“You mean that bandit camp beside another, larger bandit camp?” Fiona asked.

“We don’t even have the people to force our way into the camp,” Yvette said, rubbing at the bridge of her nose.

“Then we’ll hire some,” Rhys said.

“Rhys…” Vaughn began.
“No, we’ve pulled off more incredible stunts than this. We can do this.” Rhys’ cybernetic fingers twitched. He curled them tight. “More importantly, we have to. Need I remind you all what he’s done for us? I know for a fact that none of us would be here now if it weren’t for him.”

“He must’ve called them in the first place,” Sasha said quietly.

“He did mention something about making a deal with them,” Fiona said, somewhat reluctantly.

“It’s dangerous. Practically suicide,” Yvette said. “And it’ll drain our resources. And, need I remind you, we have a mess to clean up here? Peel is dead, and, according to you, Etna was a ghost?”

“She was an AI,” Rhys muttered.

“And the Pyrphoros project is a mess. And we don’t have enough money to cover the damages done to the facility, nevermind pay for all the Eridium we’ve got—” Rhys stiffened in his seat, his eyes widening. “—and even if we did, the needle is useless. How are we supposed to—”

“Quiet,” Rhys said, holding up a hand.

Yvette’s scowl ramped up a few notches. “What did you say?”

“Please be quiet. I’ve got— Yes. Yes. I think I’ve got an idea.” Rhys could feel it, the shape of it forming in his mind. It was like watching clouds and suddenly seeing a giraffe. It felt fragile. Like the slightest breeze could blow it all apart. And then it gained strength, the pieces coming together.

Opportunity. His headache spiked, but it couldn’t ruin the euphoria he felt.

He told them his plan. They listened patiently. They didn’t speak when he’d finished.

“This could work,” he insisted. He pressed his hands flat against the table and leaned forward. Somewhere along the way he’d gotten to his feet, orating before his friends like a defense lawyer with a client up for the chair.

“Oh. Good,” Sasha said.

“But we definitely need Tim. And a few other things. It’ll cost some money, but we can cover it.” He aimed this comment at Yvette, who looked skeptical. “Listen, we’ve—”

Something pattered on the plastic table. Everyone stared at Rhys, whose face suddenly felt warm and wet. He looked down and saw droplets of blood splattered on the table top between his hands. He touched his nose and his fingers came away wet.

Alright, all finished.

“Oh,” he said faintly.

“Rhys, your nose—”

Lights out, kiddo.

Rhys’ eyes rolled back into his head. The world went black.

Tim finished speaking and kept quiet for a while. Lilith looked at him with her arms crossed and with nothing like sympathy in the hard lines of her beautiful face.
He didn’t blame her. He knew now that the girl he’d spoken to had been Angel. The brilliant wunderkind who should’ve had a bright future ahead of her, who should’ve set the galaxy on fire, if not for the misfortune of being Handsome Jack’s daughter. If she hadn’t been locked in a compound, isolated from everyone, hooked up to a chemical drip and forced to act as Hyperion’s mainframe. Her father’s secret weapon.

Maybe there was an alternate world where things went differently. Where Tim had walked into that office and killed Handsome Jack, dumped his body and took his place as the king. Maybe that Tim steered destiny in a different direction. Maybe he saved Angel, spared her from becoming an Eridium-infused human battery. Spared her from making the decision of living under her father’s thumb or dying free.

But in this world, Tim was a coward. Always has been, always will be. He met Lilith’s gaze and saw her judgement there.

“So, you found out you’d been mind-fucked by your boyfriend,” Mordecai said. “What happened next?”

Tim finally dropped his gaze. “What do you think?” he said.

Jack branded Tim.

There might’ve been a longer story to it, but Tim’s memories of the event were fuzzy.

After Angel shared the truth, Tim returned to his room and hid. He did this without leaving, without even pushing Jack away. He simply… found a place inside his own mind and let something else pilot the body for a while. In truth, Tim had never been a bad actor, and nearly five years of being Jack gave him a very specific talent. He could fool anyone.

Although Jack was never pleased. Oddly, he always seemed annoyed when Tim behaved like him.

A few days after the elevator incident, Jack called Tim into his office.

This was where things got confusing for Tim. He remembered Jack telling him the mask was ready. Then Jack offered him a pill.

It took everything in Tim not to recoil.

“Isn’t it a little early for the medicine?” he asked, quirking one brow. Like his heart wasn’t beating loud and insistent in his ears. Like he didn’t want to run.

Jack gave him a long look. He curled his fingers around the pill, withdrew his hand.

“Suit yourself,” he said. And then the restraints appeared.

Things got messy from there. Tim remembered begging, at first for Jack’s mercy and then for a pill after all because surely anything was better than what he had coming. Jack gave him neither. Told him he was right to refuse. This was better.

“You’ll see, precious,” he said, pushing Tim’s hair from his forehead. He wore thick rubber gloves, the material rough against Tim’s face. He held the brand in his other hand, and Tim could see its glow in the corner of his eyes. Tim couldn’t bring himself to look away from Jack’s face. His real face. The blue scar. The milky white eye, the mad gleam in his remaining blue eye.
“This’ll be good for us both. Bring us closer,” he said, positioning the brand carefully.

“Jack—Jack, please, please don’t do this,” Tim babbled. “I’m asking you, seriously, just this one thing—please don’t—”

Jack ignored him. He focused on his task.

“Please, please don’t do this to me, please, Jack, please listen to me, please pleasepleasepleaseNONO—”

Tim screamed, but there should’ve been a better word for it. He’d never heard anything like it before, not from anyone’s mouth.

“Jesus.” Mordecai ran his hand down his face, tugging at his beard. “Tell me that’s when you left.”

“Seriously,” Lilith said. There was still no sympathy in the way she looked at him, Tim was relieved to see. Just disgusted, and maybe a little nauseated.

“Wait, hang on.” Brick held up a hand, as if he had a question for the professor. “I call bullshit. If he really hit you with the brand, then where’s the scar? Your eye looks alright to me.”

“I’m getting to that,” Tim said wearily.

“This story’s already gotten pretty long,” Lilith said.

“Would you believe this is the abbreviated version?” Tim said.

Jack sent him out on a mission two weeks later.

He stayed with Tim in the interim. He locked Tim in his apartments and visited every night. Tim was allowed pain medicine by then, but Jack kept Anshins from his reach.

Tim didn’t know how to pretend for Jack anymore.

He’d asked him. Tim never asked Jack for anything, not really. But he’d asked to be spared this. This one thing.

All he could think was how needless it was. The mask would cover Tim’s face in the field. No one would ever know.

But Jack would know, and Tim supposed that was the point. Jack would know, and so Jack wanted Tim to be perfect. And whatever Jack wanted, he got.

When Jack held him, he couldn’t stop the way he shivered. When Jack kissed him, he couldn’t bring himself to respond. He didn’t speak. He didn’t even look at Jack.

“I know you’re upset right now, pumpkin,” Jack said.

Tim curled away from him, his face turned to the wall.

“But you’ll see that this was for the best. I know I’ve asked a lot of you over the last few years, but hasn’t it all been worth it? I mean, compared to the person you used to be…” Jack chuckled, as if the memory of the red-headed, freckled kid on the gun range was something to laugh about. “Isn’t this better?”
What would my mother think? If she could see me now. Tim honestly didn’t know anymore. He’d spent the hours of recovery trying to remember one thing about her. What colour she liked to wear the most. Whether or not she had a sweet tooth. What songs she would sing along to, when they came on the radio. Something. Anything.

Jack tugged on Tim’s shoulder until he rolled Tim onto his back. He wasn’t rough with Tim, although Tim could tell by the way his fingers dug into his shoulder, by the way his jaw clenched, that he wanted to be. He stared hard at Tim. His throat worked in a swallow. Tim stared back and said nothing.

“You’ll see,” Jack said at last.

He sent him out the next day. The mission was the same: find the ringleaders of the Umber Bluffs rebellion and pacify them with extreme prejudice. And make sure the cameras were on him when he did. Rumours had already spread through other Hyperion-sponsored colonies on Pandora, and Jack didn’t want them getting any funny ideas that might lead to profit-loss.

“Make it splashy,” Jack told him. They’d given him explosive rounds again.

Tim sat on the personnel carrier and stared down at his feet. His mask felt tight, although he knew that couldn’t be possible. The thing had been made to fit over his face perfectly. The wound itched.

A few soldiers tried to talk to him, but they quickly left him alone. Jack would be annoyed, when he heard. Tim was supposed to be charming. Always on. Tim stared at his boots.

Except they weren’t his boots. They were new, they were made for him. They were comfortable and expensive. They fit him perfectly. They were Jack’s.

He wore Jack’s jacket. He wore Jack’s sweater. His tight jeans, and collared shirt. His hair was in Jack’s style. And now…

Tim touched the mask. He felt the soft, skin-warmed material and dropped his hand with a shudder.

What could he do? There was nothing Jack wouldn’t do to him. Tim had given Jack everything, but Jack would never stop taking. He didn’t care about Tim. He didn’t care about what Tim wanted. He didn’t care about his past. He didn’t care.

Tim buried his face in his hands, and struggled to think of his body as his own. He pressed his fingers into the curve of his brow, wincing at the pain it gave him. He had nothing. Nothing at all.

Timothy Lawrence didn’t exist.

He stifled a sob, cupped his hands over his mouth. He stared hard at the floor. The carrier lurched as it hit the first layer of atmosphere. T-minus twenty minutes until they made landfall. Tim would get to breathe fresh air, stand on solid ground. For a brief moment, he might feel the wind in his hair.

And then the cameras. And then the mission. And then Jack would yank the chain, and it would be back into the cage until Jack let him out again.

Tim’s vision blurred. He closed his eyes against the tears and prayed no one was looking at him.

Maybe he would tell Jack what he’d seen, and Jack could give him another pill. Maybe Jack would go easy on him if he came clean, if he asked to have the knowledge taken away from him. Ignorance hadn’t been so bad, really.
What else could he do?

Tim’s ECHOtablet beeped, causing Tim to flinch. He didn’t look down immediately. It might’ve been Jack. It might’ve been the strange girl from before. Tim wasn’t sure which one he dreaded more.

It beeped again.

Tim picked the device up carefully, holding it as if it might explode. There was a message on the screen.

‘PLEASE CLICK’

Tim’s stomach plummeted. He didn’t want to do this again. Whatever fresh hell waited for him in the message, he didn’t want to know.

The tablet beeped again and Tim knew that she wouldn’t let up. Whatever it was she wanted him to see, she wouldn’t leave him alone until he’d seen it. Conscious of the other people in the carrier with him, Tim opened the message.

There was nothing in the body of the message. There wasn’t a video file this time; instead, the attachment was a text file. Tim stared at it. The carrier shuddered around him, signalling their descent.

He clicked on it. A password prompt appeared on screen.

‘WHAT’S YOUR NAME?’

Tim typed in ‘HANDSOME JACK’.

A red message flashed across the screen. Access denied. Tim almost felt relieved.

The prompt reappeared. Tim thought about it this time. He double-checked on the other passengers, but they were all engrossed in their own ECHOs, or in conversation with each other. No one was watching him.

Tim took a breath. This could’ve been a trick. Maybe Jack was trying to trap him, because if he knew what Tim was about to do, he’d be unhappy. The scar throbbed in reminder of what Jack was capable of.

Tim exhaled slowly. He typed in ‘TIMOTHY LAWRENCE’.

The file opened. The screen filled with text.

‘My mother is dead she died alone I haven’t spoken to her in five years since before I became Jack’s body double I miss her the last time we spoke was just after I got the job at Hyperion and she congratulated me and I promised I would send home money and I kept that promise and I made Jack promise that he would keep sending money he would send more money I did that for her at least I hope it was something Jack told her I’d died and maybe that’s why she got sick she loved to listen to jazz the really awful kind that no one likes the kind where no one plays the right notes…’

On and on. Tim stared at it as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. His vision blurred again and this time he didn’t stop the tears.

The file was massive. It went on for pages. He was loath to scroll past anything, but he had to know.
It looked like everything. It could’ve been everything. He held his hand over his mouth and let his eyes slip closed.

The carrier lurched, jolting Tim from his reverie. They were close. The pilot shouted something, but Tim barely paid him any attention. His head felt hot and his throat felt tight.

The ECHO beeped again.

‘WHAT WILL YOU DO?’

I don’t know, he thought.

“Two minutes!” the pilot shouted. The soldiers had strapped back into their harnesses. Not one of them would look at Tim. He wiped the tears from his face and settled back into his seat. He turned the ECHO off.

Pandoran air never tasted sweet. Especially not the air beside a processing plant. The Eridium mining operation had begun in earnest, but even before they’d begun boring into the planet, Hyperion and other corporations had plundered the planet of its natural resources.

But standing outside of the personnel carrier, with the engine roaring stirring up a breeze behind him, Tim closed his eyes, tipped his head back and breathed deep.

The sun felt good on his face. Hot, even through the mask.

“Sir?” One of the soldiers approached Tim cautiously. They were there to watch and ensure everything went smoothly. In theory, they were there for Tim’s protection, but really they were there to keep an eye on Tim. Even if they didn’t realise it, they were just another one of Jack’s safeguards.

They were used to dealing with Handsome Jack, the charming psychopath. The killer. They didn’t know what to make of this new, quiet creature. They’d noticed his tears on the carrier. No one knew what to say about it.

The soldier touched Tim on the shoulder. Tim didn’t startle. Even with the noise of the engines, his senses were becoming finely attuned to his surroundings. The minutes before a mission’s start always did this to him. His senses came alive, tuned and ready to keep him in one piece.

He followed the soldiers towards the settlement. It wasn’t a big town. Walls had been erected around a collection of buildings, around a dozen in total. Umber Bluffs had been built in one of the few green spaces left to the public, and the ground felt springy under Tim’s boots. The sky was clear. The further he walked from the carrier, the gentler the breeze became. It was a truly lovely day.

The gates had been closed and Tim could see a make-shift barricade built behind them. The words ‘HYPERION GO HOME’ had been painted in purple across the metal.

The soldiers milled around for a moment. A few of them shot Tim concerned looks. The camera drones hovered above, zooming lazily through the air like fat beetles. Tim stared at the word ‘HOME’ and said nothing.

Finally, the sergeant stepped forward.

“Traitors of Umber Bluffs!” he shouted through cupped hands. “Hyperion has given you multiple opportunities to settle this matter peacefully, and you’ve rejected our every attempt! I’m afraid that you have forced our hand,” he said with obvious relish when this created a stir behind the closed
“Handsome Jack has come to settle matters personally.”

No one’s head appeared above the walls, but there was a shift in the shadows beyond the gate that suggested they were being observed.

Everyone turned to look at Tim. He stayed very still and tried to remember what the dissonant notes of that horrible jazz sounded like.

“Sir?” The sergeant’s gaze darted nervously between him and the wall. “Are you… alright?”

Sweat prickled under his collar. Moving carefully, ponderously, Tim removed the jacket he wore. He let it fall to the ground, the fob watch chain jingling. A few soldiers stepped back. One grinned, and nudged her neighbour.

“Sir?” The sergeant cleared his throat. “Handsome Jack, sir?”

“Don’t,” Tim said.

Another exchange of glances. The sergeant shrugged. He cast a desperate look to the cameras, as though pleading to an unseen deity.

“Sir, maybe we could get started?” he suggested. “Handsome J—”

The crack of a bullet served as the inverse of a starter’s pistol. Everything stopped. The sergeant’s body hit the ground. Blood gushed from a fresh hole in his head.

The soldiers stared wide-eyed at Tim, but none of them ran. Everyone knew Handsome Jack was unpredictable, violent. Maybe he just didn’t like that sergeant.

To hell with them all, Tim thought and raised his pistol.

The soldiers caught on eventually, but by then it was too late. Tim’s head felt empty. His limbs felt light. He felt weightless, disconnected, possessed. Like he’d gone somewhere else, and something stepped inside his skin and walked him off a cliff.

He watched himself from above, the fluid and brutal way he killed, and wondered if this was what Jack saw when he worked. If this was what Jack saw right now.

He shot down the cameras.

When the dust settled and Tim was the last person still breathing on the other side of the wall, Tim sank back into himself. He blinked and looked at the ground, at the bodies of his former escort, at the blood on the dried and dying grass. He wiped his face and winced at the pull of the mask.

Aware of unseen eyes on the other side of the wall, Tim scavenged through the bodies of Hyperion’s dead, collecting supplies, ammo, and Anshins. He jabbed the first one into his arm, barely feeling when the minor wounds he’d incurred knit themselves together. The second one he jabbed into his neck, just under his chin, and the feeling that hit him was like a rush of blood to the head. He stumbled, nearly fell, but kept his balance.

He dropped the Anshin, closing his eyes at the feeling of the semi-healed scar on his face pulling. They advised against this. Anshins were designed to treat fresh wounds. Tim grit his teeth and jabbed another one in the same spot.

This time he did fall. He braced himself on his hands and knees, panting at the feeling throbbing in
his head. The skin on his face burned anew, as if the healing elixir were undoing what his body had naturally done. He grit his teeth, dug his nails under the seam of his mask, and pulled.

The clasps snapped open just as his left eye bulged in its socket. He pressed his palm against it and groped in the dirt for another Anshin. He tipped his head back, revealing his red, raw and healing face to the sky, and jabbed it again.

Seconds passed in agonizing slowness. Tim could hear his skin sizzling, the old wound reopening. He could feel it drawing itself together. Gasping for air, he fumbled with his clothes. He pulled off the waistcoat, flinging it away. He hoisted the yellow sweater over his head. The skin of his wound pulled together at the edges like stitches being pulled taut.

Stripped down to his undershirt, he pressed both hands against his face and screamed.

It passed. Tim was left on his knees, hands covering his face. The skin still stung, but the worst of it was over. He could feel blood pumping through his body. He could feel the sun on his shoulders, where the skin would start to freckle. A breeze stirred and Tim could feel it through the hair on his arms.

He breathed out slowly and dropped his hands. He opened both his eyes and felt a faint twinge of relief when he could see distances once again.

“If you’ve got any sense at all, you’ll get out of here,” he said, loud enough to be heard by the settlers as he slowly climbed to his feet. “They’re gonna come looking for their dead. And they’re not gonna like what you just saw.”

He collected the guns from the ground. He wrapped a bandoleer around his chest, strapped a rifle across his back. He pushed his hand through his hair with some difficulty, forcing his fingers through the expensive wax that stiffened his locks. He’d have to get it cut. The thought almost made him dizzy.

He pulled a green bandanna from one of the dead soldiers and held it between his fingers. He’d always liked green. He would try to find someplace green, he decided as he wrapped the fabric around the lower half of his face.

Lastly, he bent down and retrieved his ECHO from his discarded jacket. He popped the back off and pulled out the GPS chip. It wouldn’t be enough, he knew. Jack would find him regardless, if he kept it. But it would do for the time being, until he could find a portable data drive.

Those few minutes after killing the soldiers, with his system awash in Anshin healing elixir and the hangover of all his panic and anxiety, were perhaps the happiest of his life. The future stretched ahead of him, unplanned and vast. He walked away from Umber Bluffs, eager to meet it.

Mordecai pushed his face close to Tim’s and Tim did his best to hold still. He watched Mordecai’s eyes narrow behind his coloured lenses.

“Yeah,” he said at last. “I see it now. It’s thin, but you’ve still got a scar.” He stepped back. Tim breathed out.

“I laid low for a while. Kept my face hidden. Luckily, that’s nothing unusual on Pandora. Joined up with some bandit crews for a while, but left whenever they got too vicious for me.” Which took a lot. “I figured so long as I kept my head down and stayed out of Jack’s way, I wouldn’t get into much trouble. I didn’t realise, of course, just what was in store for me. Jack couldn’t exactly issue a warrant or bounty for my capture, but he could make my life difficult. Every loaderbot he deployed had
instructions to subdue me if they found me.”

Tim had found that one out the hard way, around three weeks after Umber Bluffs, when the crew he’d been running with tried to rob an old DAHL plant, only to find Hyperion-issued battle engineers and their ‘bots camped out. A loader saw through his mask, or maybe it just recognized his DNA signature. Either way, it alerted the others and they all gunned for him. Tim barely escaped intact.

“Wait, wait, I ain’t never heard of a place called Umber Bluffs. Where’d you say this was?” Brick asked.

“You know that crater in the side of the highlands, just before the Pull River dam?” Tim sighed, an old guilt crawling in his guts. “Jack had the place moonshot not long after I left. Hopefully some people got out when I warned them…” But Tim had doubts. If there had been anyone left to talk about ‘Handsome Jack’ losing his mind and slaughtering a troop of his own soldiers, seemingly out of sympathy for a treasonous settlement, then word would’ve gotten out by now.

“Jack pursued me for a while, but I got better at hiding. And eventually he got distracted by the vault, and—and with Angel.”

“You heard about what he did to her?” Lilith asked. Tim recognized a thread of something dangerous in her voice.

“I did,” he said. He wondered if he should apologise, if anyone was interested in hearing those words from his mouth. “I was… sorry to hear it,” he said anyway.

“Sorry?” Lilith repeated, the thread joined by others of its kind, weaving themselves into a tapestry of violent promise. “You felt sorry, did you?”

“I did. I still do,” Tim said, honestly. He paused, weighing his next words carefully. But he could see the slow build in Lilith’s expression, a rage that looked curiously cold for the Fire Hawk.

What the hell, he thought. Since when did he pick the smart choice?

“I’m sorry about what happened to Angel,” he said. “And to Roland.”

No one spoke. Tim listened to the sound of the air rushing past as the sky-bound city floated its way over the landscape.

Lilith nodded. Without a change in her expression, she slammed the butt of her gun into Tim’s face.

“Are you, Timothy Lawrence?” She grabbed a handful of his hair and hit him again. “Are you sorry? Are you?”

Tim pulled back. He listened to the sound of metal hitting meat and bone and tried to pretend it was happening to someone else.

“C’mon, Lil.”

“That’s enough!”

Her buddies pulled her off him. She came away with a red spray on her face and locks of hair in her fist.

Tim sagged in his bonds while they struggled. Blood bubbled in his nose, oozed from his mouth.

He wheezed and coughed. One eye had begun to swell shut.

“You coward. You just ran away. And now look what happened. Look at what you could’ve stopped. This is your fault,” she said.

“Yours… too…” he gasped.

Lilith went still. Mordecai and Brick exchanged looks and backed away.

“If…” Tim broke off with a cough. He spat a mouthful of blood, sucked in a rattling breath and tried again. “If it’s mine… then it’s yours too.” He ran his tongue across his teeth, unsurprised to find several were knocked loose.

Lilith stared at him. Her grip on her gun tightened.

“Try that again,” she suggested.

“That’s what this is about… isn’t it?” Tim’s voice was hoarse but it gained strength as he talked. “Why you brought Athena here. Me too. Your guilt over Roland. And Angel…” He regained some strength, eased his weight back onto his feet. “Do you think I’d forgotten that you were there too? On Elpis, in the Eleseer… Me, I was in so deep I couldn’t see daylight. But you… He was nothing to you. You could’ve killed him. You could’ve spared us all a lot of suffering. And if you had, Roland might still be alive. Angel too. You’re right, Lilith. I am a coward.” He showed her his bloodied teeth. “But what does that make you?”

Lilith raised her pistol. Tim stared down the barrel.

“Lil…” Mordecai began.


Tim closed his eyes. He waited for the fear to hit him, but it didn’t come.

Instead, a cold feeling swelled within. It came up from his stomach and spread out through his chest, flooding the emptiness it found.

He thought about the way the air tasted on that day, standing in front of Umber Bluffs. He thought about a sunset that took two hours. He thought about an iridescent barrier between himself and the arctic air, about violet and grey trees, and a broken guard tower with a cot and a light and a space heater. About the simple pleasure of sharing a meal, of people who knew his name, who only knew him as himself.

He thought about Rhys.

He thought about the first meal he took in Atlas, stretched out on a hillside with the night sky clear through the shimmering barrier. The air had felt chilly, but Rhys closed the distance between them, warm against his side. Sweet rice wine and savoury noodles.

For a brief, wonderful time, Tim had a home.

He didn’t want to die. But what did that matter?
Seconds that felt like hours dragged past. Tim didn’t notice, assuming that it felt like a long time because these moments were to be his last. He couldn’t hear anything over the sound of his heart beating, and he didn’t care to listen to anything else. However, the seconds joined together into a minute and Tim began to wonder if Lilith had lost her nerve. Or if they’d started fighting again. And then he realised he could hear something over his heart, and over the sound of wind. A familiar sound, like the buzzing of a swarm of hornets. He opened his eyes.

Lilith had turned from him, although her gun remained pointed at his forehead. The wind had picked up around them, throwing dust into the air and tossing Lilith’s red hair around her face. She shouted something at her partners, who only shrugged. Mordecai shouted something in return. One of the Raiders broke away from the crowd at a light jog.

Buzzards rose, seeming to spring up from the ground. Three of them right beside the city. They ascended high, circling their little courtroom like their namesakes. Tim squinted his one good eye, trying to make out the symbols painted on the side. He half-expected to find Malady, somehow alive and glittering down at him, such was his luck. Half-expected to get pulled out of the frying pan and into hell.

A man like a streak of black and gold leaned out of the buzzard, and Tim did see a flash of light but he knew it was the goldenrod glare of a cybernetic. He saw the megaphone.

“You’re going to let us land and we’re going to parley!”

“Rhys…” Tim mumbled. Had he died already?

“Who the hell does this punk think he is?” Lilith demanded. Brick shielded his eyes and squinted at the western horizon. He frowned.

“Let us down now or things will get ugly!”

Lilith chuckled. “Is he actually trying to threaten me?” She raised her pistol and Tim knew the big gun would hit like a hammer, even at a distance. Brick’s frown only deepened.

“Uh. Lil?” He pointed to the horizon.

Black shapes rose from the sparse clouds, populating the sky like a plague of locusts. Buzzards. More than Tim had ever seen in one place.

“You’re going to do the smart thing!” Rhys’ voice carried across the outskirts of the city. Tim couldn’t see his face, but he could imagine the look he wore. He could’ve laughed.

Lilith scowled and holstered her gun. “Let him land,” she said to the closest Raider.

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They cleared enough space for Rhys to descend. He slid down on a lifeline, followed by two others. Rhys landed with more grace than Tim would’ve expected. Fiona slid down beside him, followed by a second woman, dressed in the colours of midnight. She had the round, delicate features of a movie star from a long-gone era. An old fashioned face that would’ve suggested girlish sweetness, if it weren’t for the scowl she wore.

“Athena?” Tim’s voice came out rough and weak. She gave him a quick glance, her jaw tightening at the sight of him.

“Athena.” Lilith strode up to them like a sheriff in a frontier town. The only law for miles around. “You should’ve stayed gone. I don’t expect any alien magicians coming to your assistance this time
Athena’s doll-like features twisted into a murderous expression. “Lilith. Still hurting innocent people in your quest for revenge, I see.”

Lilith’s lip curled. “I don’t see any innocents here.”

Athena met her stare without flinching. She stuck her delicate chin out, her cupid-bow lips pulled back in a silent snarl. A golden arm passed between them, and Tim was amazed it didn’t melt.

“As much fun as it would be to watch you kill Lilith, Athena, our negotiations haven’t fallen apart that badly,” Rhys said.

Lilith turned the force of her glare onto Rhys. She looked him up and down.

“You must be that Atlas patsy my boys and girls rescued just a few hours ago.” Lilith tilted her head towards the mess of buzzards hovering beside the city. “You call this gratitude?”

“You see any dead bodies?” He faced her with a beatific smile. “I do call that gratitude, yes.”

“Cute. What are you after, Atlas?” she asked.

“What do you think?” Rhys’ smile vanished. “After your lovely soldiers took care of that little bandit threat, they walked off with one of my people. I’m here to take him back.” His gaze flickered over to Tim, alighting on his face for the briefest of moments before returning to Lilith. “Untie him.”

“No,” she said. “He gave himself up in exchange for saving your skinny ass. A deal’s a deal, Mr. CEO.”

Rhys narrowed his eyes. Lilith tipped her chin up and stared him down. Not an easy task when you’re staring at someone several inches taller than you. To Rhys’ tremendous credit, he didn’t wilt or fidget.

“You’re operating under a misunderstanding here, Lilith,” Rhys said. “You may have made a deal with one of my employees, but he did not seek out permission from his direct supervisor to enter into this contract with yourself. As this deal left Atlas and its interests vulnerable, we would normally require sign off from at least three senior staff members. Because this action violated the terms of his employment, I must recall him for a performance review. Ipso facto, QED, et cetera.” He smiled again, crossing his arms behind his back and puffing out his chest. “So, hand him over, and we’ll just get out of your hair.”

Lilith returned his smile. “Go to hell.”

“I don’t think you understand me,” Rhys said.

“I understand you just fine, kid. And I’m telling you to back off now before things get ugly.”

Rhys laughed. “Funny. I thought that was my line…?” He raised his golden hand into the air and snapped his fingers.

The buzzards swivelled on a dime, servos whirring as mounted guns moved to point directly to their little theatre. A few of the Raiders shifted in place, hands moving restlessly towards their rifles. Lilith snarled and drew her weapon. Tim shouted a warning, struggling in his bonds.

Athena and Fiona drew theirs. Mordecai and Brick reacted at the same time.
It was going to get very ugly. A real Truxican stand-off. Tim began to wiggle his wrist, trying to loosen the binding.

“Hey, hey! Why don’t we all just calm down?” Mordecai suggested.

“You want to start a war, you corporate scumbag?” Lilith asked. “I could erase you. You understand? I could give you a grand threat about teleporting you to the moon, but all I really need to do is move you seventeen feet to the left—” She nodded to the cliff. “—and you’ll be just as dead.”

“You make one move and my soldiers open fire,” Rhys said. “We’ll perforate this flying garbage heap you call a city with enough lead to sink it to the bottom of the ocean. You got a trick to survive that one, siren? Think you can put a bubble around the survivors to give them a few seconds before the pressure squeezes their eyes out?”

Lilith’s nostrils flared. Her finger twitched on the trigger.

“You really want to do this, Atlas?” she asked.

Rhys leaned down, ignoring the pistol aimed at his chest. “He’s mine,” he said, quiet and calm. He straightened, that corporate, plastic smile back in place. “And that’s Mister Atlas to you, bandit scum.”

“Rhys!” Tim snapped. Was he trying to get himself shot?

“Hey!” Mordecai’s voice carried as Lilith’s eyes began to glow. “Maybe let’s walk things back a few steps, yeah?”

Lilith ground her teeth. She looked dearly tempted to pull the trigger. It couldn’t end like this. Tim wanted to put Rhys into a headlock and march him back onto the buzzard. He wanted to stow Rhys away, take him back to that field.

Although it occurred to Tim that it was probably full of snow now.

Lilith sucked a breath through her teeth. “You know, if this were just you and me, I wouldn’t hesitate. I could rip your head off even without using my powers.” Her gaze flicked from Rhys’ face to the buzzards above. “But I’ve got a city to think about.”

“Lucky them,” Rhys said.

After a long, excruciating moment, she lowered her pistol.

“Lucky you,” she said. “You’ve got five minutes to take him and get out of my sights.”

Athena holstered her weapon and approached where they’d strung Tim up. She pulled her knife out.

“Hey,” she said as she slid the blade under the ropes.

“Hi,” Tim said.

“You look bad.”

Tim’s chuckle quickly turned into a cough. “Thanks,” he wheezed. “I thought you gave… this life up.”
Athena didn’t reply. She cut Tim loose and took him down with surprising care. He leaned against her shoulder, grateful for the weight.

A buzzard landed in the cleared space. Athena walked him towards it slowly.

“I can’t believe the trouble you get yourself into,” she said.

“Yeah, well…”

“It’s you who needs to give the life up,” she said.

“Is this… the end… Is this it?” He could hear his words slurring. The ground wavered like the surface of a lake. His feet stumbled and for a moment he worried he might sink. Then he wondered where Rhys had gone.

“He’s on the buzzard,” Athena replied. “And you’re not sinking. You’ve got a head injury. Come on.” Athena guided him to the buzzard, where a pair of hands gripped him under his arms and pulled him up. Tim tensed and tried to pull away.

“Take it easy,” Vaughn said. “It’s just me. We’re here, we’ve got you.”

They set him in a chair, buckled his safety harness just as the vehicle gave a shudder as it took to the air. And then Tim saw Rhys.

He leaned out the open door, his back to Tim. He looked as if he was shouting, or maybe just waving.

“You okay?” Vaughn asked. Tim blinked slowly. One of his eyes had completely swollen shut.

“Take me home,” Tim mumbled. He shut his eyes, intending to open them again in a moment. But it felt like too much effort.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all once again, now and forever, for reading, commenting, kudo-ing, etc. Imagine me clapping my hands like a seal every time someone leaves a comment because that's what happens and it's very disruptive at work.

Also, in case it's not clear, I actually do like Lilith as a character. She's just got a lot of anger and flaws.

Next chapter: Rhys talks to Tim about an exciting career opportunity.
Part V: Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Rhys shows Tim a bright future in Opportunity.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all again for your comments. I don't think I've encountered a group of readers as engaged as you all are. I love reading everyone's theories most of all, especially when you've thought of something actually smarter than what I've written. Which has happened.

CW for some minor abuse in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“…she did to your pretty face. Stupid bitch…”

Tim jerked awake at the feel hands on his cheek, the bite of metal just under his chin. He slapped them away, pulling back like a startled beast, ready for fight or flight.

“Easy.” It was Rhys. They were still in the buzzard—not a Hyperion carrier, although that’s where his dreams had taken him. The doors were shut at least, making things a little quieter.

“Rhys.” Tim swallowed, wincing at the taste of copper and salt. He straightened from the protective curl his body had taken.

“You shouldn’t be asleep. You’ve got a head wound,” Rhys said. He sat down on the bench beside him.

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess that’s bad.” Tim still had a slur, although it wasn’t as bad as before. He knew what a concussion felt like, although he preferred the term ‘punch drunk’. “Coulda used the sleep, though…”

“Tough. Here.” Rhys produced an Anshin from seemingly nowhere, as far as Tim’s addled mind could discern. Before Tim could react, Rhys tilted his head back and jammed the syringe in the soft skin under his jaw. Tim hissed and tried to pull away. Rhys clucked his tongue.

“Sit still, will you?”

Tim closed his eyes as the swollen and bruised skin began to shrink and recolour itself. The blood and fluid collected in his head and sinuses began to abate. His nose twitched as it reset itself, his skin burned as it reformed.

“There.” Rhys lowered his hands, almost reluctantly. He smiled, more obviously satisfied. “Lookin’ a lot better now. Feel better too, I bet.”
Tim pinched the healed bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. The headache pulled back like the tides, leaving him floating in a sea of adrenaline and bad brain chemicals. He still hadn’t slept in almost 24 hours, and he hadn’t eaten much at dinner. His body’s complaints were numerous, and not easily brushed aside. God, he felt old.

“I feel okay. Could still use some sleep.” Something cold touched his face. He jerked away, but the metal hand caught him by the jaw and held him.

“Relax,” Rhys said, dragging the wet cloth across Tim’s face. Blood had dried, tacky and thick from his nose and where he’d gotten his skull broken open earlier.

“I can do this myself,” Tim said, pushing Rhys’ hand away.

“I told you to sit still.” Something flickered across Rhys’ expression, too quick for Tim to track. His breath caught in his throat. “Anyway, I don’t mind,” Rhys went on, his smile smooth and in place once more.

Tim frowned. Were the others watching this? What happened to Vaughn? Not that Tim particularly wanted to see Rhys’ chaperone, but he was surprised the others were just… letting this happen.

Moreover, he was surprised that Rhys was letting it happen. Rhys’ disgusted expression swam to the surfaced of his memories, as Tim assumed it would continue to do for the next few months.

“I’m surprised,” Tim said. Rhys’ mismatched eyes flicked up to meet Tim’s. “That you don’t mind,” he went on. “I thought… I mean, you and, uh. I heard that you and Jack were sort of…” He cleared his throat. “Involved?”

Rhys’ smile was strange. “Is that what they told you?” he said. “I guess that’s a word for it. He and I were definitely close.”

Tim still didn’t see Vaughn, but he lowered his voice anyway. “I heard things ended kind of… badly between the two of you.”

Rhys chuckled. “Yeah, that—that’s another word for it, sure. Anyway, don’t worry about that. I’m over it now. Yesterday’s news.” He tossed the red-stained cloth aside without looking. He didn’t release Tim’s face, as he expected. Instead he shifted closer, until they were pressed together side-to-side. He tilted Tim’s face at a new angle, staring down his nose.

“I can kind of see it,” he said quietly. The red light of the cabin made his features look strange. The boyish good looks Tim had grown accustomed to looked sharper in the too harsh light.

“Um,” Tim managed.

“The scar.” Rhys traced it lightly, following its curve over Tim’s nose. “Thought it’d be bigger.”

Tim took care to hold still. He took care to keep his breathing even.

“How do you know about the scar?” he asked.

“Me and Jack were close, remember?” Rhys replied.

“He showed you?”

Rhys’ smile thinned. “Not exactly. I saw… well, I was kind of in his head for a while. And vice versa. Long story. So,” he went on. “What happened to it? The scar, I mean. Did you heal yourself
Tim pulled away. “No offence, boss, but I don’t really want to tell that story again.”

Again, something passed over Rhys’ face. An ugly look that made Tim’s throat tighten with an old panic.

It passed. The plastic smile slid back into place.

“Of course,” Rhys said, like this was all perfectly normal. “I understand. Must’ve been traumatizing. Right? Leaving Jack, I mean. I know it wasn’t easy for me.”

Tim really didn’t want to talk about that, either. He looked away.

“Where are we going, anyway?” he asked. “Is Atlas—” He stopped, the image of the dome cracked and broken open, insides exposed to the elements. His guard tower a wreck of burnt out rubble on the ground.

“We’re not going back to Atlas,” Rhys said, watching Tim’s expression carefully. “It’s not safe. And anyway, we’ve got something more important to take care of.” He stood up and Tim felt the tension in his chest unwind. He breathed a little easier.

“And what’s that?” Tim asked.

“Pyrophoros.” Rhys flexed his mechanical arm with a flourish, his palm display activating. “Etna might be dead or an AI ghost or whatever, but that doesn’t mean all her good work has gone to waste. See, this?” The display filled with information, a code Tim couldn’t possibly follow.

“Remember what we talked about, months ago? When I told you Epimetheus was supposed to be a way to produce cheap digistructs? Well, that wasn’t entirely a lie, even though it wasn’t Epimetheus’ main function. This is the program she developed before she dissolved. It’s a method to produce long-range digistructs with only a fraction of the energy.”

“Why is that good?” Tim asked.

“It’s what let us project twenty buzzards when we only had two,” Vaughn said, startling Tim as he stepped into the cabin.

Rhys’ smile widened. “Big help with your rescue. Very flashy, very impressive.” The display changed and Tim saw the buzzards now, suspended in mid-air, animating without moving.

“Unfortunately, they were about the size of an actual buzzard and couldn’t actually shoot anything, buuuuut luckily no one could tell from a distance.”

Tim stared at him. “You mean—you were bluffing?”

Vaughn smiled weakly. “Yeah. Pretty good, huh?”

“I only wish I could’ve stuck around to see Lilith’s stupid face when she found out,” Rhys said, grinning.

“I’m actually not sorry we missed that,” Vaughn said with a nervous chuckle. “The pilot said we’re less than an hour away.”

“Beautiful,” Rhys said. He closed his hand and the display winked out.

“Sorry—hold on a minute.” Tim held up his hand. “What are we talking about here? I thought you
said Pyrphoros was a way to connect an AI to the centre of Pandora or something. What’s this about digistructs?”

“A lovely side-benefit of Etna’s work,” Rhys said. “All that Eridium interacted with the AI to create a digistruct. Etna manipulated this discovery to create multiple digistructs to act on her behalf. Most of Callum’s gang, for example, were her creations.”

“What?” Tim looked at Vaughn, wondering if this was news to him as well. “How—how do you even know all this?”

Rhys tapped his temple. “I got myself a closer look at her code yesterday. Very close. Had to jam it all in my head, as a matter of fact. But it’s all fine,” Rhys said, oblivious of the look Vaughn wore.

Tim wasn’t. Vaughn looked concerned, yes, but also a little angry. He caught Tim’s eye and gave a small shake of his head.

“The Atlas needle’s out of commission, unfortunately,” Rhys went on. “It was kind of fragile anyway, as you know, and the attacks yesterday knocked out its infrastructure. And to get up and running, Pyrphoros needs a an Eridium vein. But we can do it. We do have the technology. We’ve had it all along, actually. Hiding right under our noses. So to speak.” Rhys grinned at Tim, obviously baiting him.

Tim ignored it. “You’re still chasing after this project? Your company was just attacked, Rhys. Wouldn’t it make more sense to put your remaining resources into rebuilding?”

Rhys’ smile remained in place, but the rest of his expression edged away from it. “Are you questioning me, Tim?”

“We don’t have a lot of resources,” Vaughn said before Tim could reply. “Atlas sunk most of it into this project. There were others in the works, but Pyrphoros was the big one.” He sighed, rubbing his forehead. “If we can get it up and running, Atlas can start earning again. Enough to rebuild the dome and maybe restore the artificial habitat to its previous state…”

“Or we could just stay in Opportunity,” Rhys said. Vaughn winced.

Tim did not react immediately. He kept his face passive. “Opportunity. As in the city? Hyperion’s pet project?”

He’d seen it once, although only as a digital model. It’d been shortly after Tassiter’s death, and shortly before Tim ran. Jack had been excited about the project, dreaming of a safe, civilized, and above all expensive place for the who’s who of the galaxy to set down roots.

“But why Pandora?” Tim had asked. “Why not literally any other planet? We practically own Eden-5. Wouldn’t it make more sense to put it down there?”

“Because Pandora’s a wreck, Timtam. Because it’s a mess. We put this city on the borderlands, and we send a message to every major player in the game that we’re so powerful, we can tame the worst of the worst. Even the idiot bandits would have to sit up and take notice. Maybe they’d finally learn their place…” he muttered. Tim gave him a skeptical look. Jack shook his head, clicking his tongue. “Don’t worry your pretty head about it, okay? It’s a power move, pumpkin. Proves a point. I know what I’m doing.”

Tim had thought it sounded dangerous and stupid. He still did.

Because Jack had gone ahead and built the fucking thing. A citadel in the centre of Pandora, filled
with the finest technology Hyperion had to offer. The bleeding-edge stuff, the experimental stuff. Only the best for anyone willing to pay the premiums to get in. Bandits of Pandora hadn’t taken kindly to the place. After Jack died, security tightened around the place. A shield went up around the entire city, walling it off like Troy from the invading Greeks. Not that it stopped the bandits. They’d thrown themselves in droves against its security, getting chewed up like logs in a chipper. Tim hadn’t been among them. You couldn’t have paid him enough to go there.

“The place’s a gem just waiting to be taken,” Rhys said dreamily. “Trillions of dollars’ worth of untouched technology. No one’s been able to bypass the security measures since—since Handsome Jack died.”

Tim glanced at Vaughn, but the smaller man kept his gaze focused on Rhys. He didn’t look happy.

“Yeah,” Tim said slowly. “Because Jack is dead. The whole place was locked to his…”

They both looked at him. Rhys’ golden eye glittered.

Oh.

“To his voice,” Rhys said, bouncing gleefully on his heels. “To his eyes. Hell, probably to his fingerprints. But good news there!”

The buzzard shuddered. Tim gripped the edge of his seat, his heart thudding in his chest.

Opportunity. One of Jack’s pet projects, and the only one that didn’t end up a flaming wreckage. As good as it had been to walk through the remains of Helios, Tim didn’t think walking through those pristine streets would feel the same. As far as he knew, all those loaderbots Jack had sent down still patrolled the roads. Empty sentinels for a dead rule of law. Would they still have orders to subdue him? Or did those get wiped when Helios fell?

Tim quickly told Rhys. He tried not to feel like a man facing the chair, begging for the governor’s call.

“Why would Handsome Jack program the loaderbots to bring you back alive?” Vaughn asked.

Tim carefully didn’t look at either of their faces. He missed the look Rhys wore.

“Because Jack spent a lot of money on me,” Tim muttered, face heating.

“Relax,” Rhys said. “If there’s trouble on the other side, I’ll take care of it.” He tapped his temple and smiled. “Hacker, remember?”

Tim rubbed his damp palms onto the fabric of his pants. He didn’t know if that would be enough. He supposed he was about to find out.

“Is that…” He stopped, the words catching in his throat. He felt drained, in every sense of the word. Like someone had pulled a stopper inside of him.

He wanted to go home, but every time he thought about it, he remembered the bombing, the destruction. It felt like he was losing the place for the first time, over and over again. And now he had to return to the last bastion of Jack’s empire.

Is that why they’d come for him?

Rhys sat down beside him, nodding at Vaughn. Vaughn scowled but got up, muttering about
checking on the pilot. He left them alone.

“Tim.” Rhys set his hand on Tim’s, skin on skin. Tim startled, but Rhys’ grip tightened. “We didn’t just—I didn’t just come for you because of Opportunity. Although, I won’t lie: I did use that argument to get my partner to sign off on this extremely dangerous and daring rescue.” He grinned, looking a little smug and a little goofy. A lot like himself again. Tim relaxed.

“I came to get you because I knew that siren pain in the ass was going to kill you. And I didn’t want you to die.”

Tim looked down at their hands. Slowly, cautiously, he turned his over and twined his fingers between Rhys’. Rhys gave him a squeeze.

“I hope you can understand now,” Tim said quietly, “why I wanted to stop before. I wanted to talk about…” He made a noise in the back of his throat, turning away. “I didn’t want you to regret it in the morning. I didn’t want you to think I was trying to take advantage of you.”

“That’s very gallant of you,” Rhys said, sliding closer. “But I don’t think you wanted to stop at all. Did you?”

Tim felt the heat rising to his face. He heard Rhys’ quiet chuckle and remembered that his face was bare and exposed. This, he knew, only made him turn redder.

“Tim, look at me.” Rhys leaned against him, curling into his space. “Tim.”

Reluctantly, Tim turned. Rhys looked at him with unfinished business gleaming in his eyes. Tim’s mouth dried out at the sight of it. Rhys closed the space between them, bringing his metal hand to Tim’s face.

“Rhys,” he said, more hoarse than he would like. Rhys traced his fingers along Tim’s jawline, cool to the touch. Tim managed to restrain the urge to shiver, but only just. “Rhys. Are you sure? I’m—”

Rhys took Tim by the jaw and kissed him firmly, taking gleeful advantage of Tim’s open mouth. Tim groaned at the feel of Rhys’ tongue sliding against his own. Rhys made an eager sound in the back of his throat as he practically crawled into Tim’s lap.

They made out like teenagers in the back of the buzzard. Tim tried to feel embarrassed about it, but as Rhys wound his fingers through Tim’s hair, tugging his head back to expose his neck, he found he didn’t care.

They arrived before sunset, just as the sky began to turn vivid colours. Too bright pink and orange, and fading blue. Despite being such an ugly planet, Pandora had such a nice looking sky.

Rhys called him over to the window and, with great reluctance, Tim followed.

“It’s beautiful,” Rhys said. Tim gulped a breath and forced himself to look.

It really was. Opportunity sparkled like the gem Rhys had compared it to. Multi-faceted glass towers, yellow-gold and white structures. From high up above, the whole place looked almost lavender tinted, and Tim knew that it was due to the shielding that covered the whole city. The sight of it reminded him of Atlas again, and he felt the stab of loss. It’d gotten fainter now, at least. Less a blade slipped between his ribs and more a needle in his side.

Rhys caught his eye and grinned. His hair was a mess and his clothes were in disarray. He hadn’t
bothered to put himself back in order, even though Vaughn could come out at any moment. Maybe he didn’t care. Tim supposed he didn’t either, really. He couldn’t help but smile back, feeling light despite the task looming ahead.

Tim almost felt silly for all those weeks of hand-wringing and concern. Rhys liked him and they could actually do this. They could build something together. To think that only an hour ago he’d been facing down the barrel of a gun and now… For the first time in a long time, Tim’s future stretched out ahead of him, and it didn’t feel empty.

Two buzzards, just as Vaughn had said. They landed twenty feet apart, almost half a kilometer away from the tall, golden gates.

Athena and Fiona came out of the second one, Fiona trailing behind the gladiator with a faintly star-struck look. The expression faded when she caught him staring. Tim remembered she could see his face now. He turned away.

“Looking a little better,” she said as she breezed past.

“Thanks,” he said, although he knew she didn’t mean it as a compliment.

“Tim.” Athena came to a stop beside him, as Fiona, Vaughn, and Rhys trotted ahead. Tim hung back.

“Yeah?”

She gave him a hard look. Well, all of her looks were like that. It was as if she were compensating for her adorable features, putting twice the amount of concrete into her expressions than normal humans. Tim had gotten used to it.

Still, after a few moments, he began to fidget. A man could only take so much. He felt conscious of his bare face.

“Is there something wrong?” he asked at last. “Because we really should…” He nodded towards the others.

“Janey has asked me to invite you to dinner,” she said.

“Oh. Okay?”

“Should I tell her to expect two people?” she asked without a change of inflection. Tim could feel himself getting warm.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” He knew he was fighting back a smile.

Her gaze slid from him to the back of Rhys’ head. She pursed her lips, considering. “I suppose there is no accounting for taste.”

“Hey.”

“It might be good for you,” she went on as they strolled to catch up. “I… suppose, anyway.” She looked uncomfortable, and Tim knew this wasn’t exactly her area of expertise. She was a good friend (and maybe his only friend) but they rarely talked. The last time he’d seen her had been at that bar, before she’d gotten married.

“Janey sends her, um, well-wishes. She says thank you for the new gizmo. I suppose I should thank
“You’re welcome.”

“You’re welcome.”

“It’s a shame you couldn’t attend the wedding,” she said.

“Well, you know how it is,” Tim said awkwardly. He’d wanted to be there, but he couldn’t imagine actually attending an event like that. Surrounded by people, each conversation almost certainly bound to start with ‘What’s wrong with your face?’ Just the thought of it made Tim exhausted.

Athena nodded. They were nearly level with the others, standing before a set of gates that looked like something out of the fantasy books Tim used to inhale.

“Are you ready for this?” she asked.

Probably not.

“Sure,” he said, practised and casual.

Athena looked sceptical, but she fell silent as they joined the others. Everyone stared up at the looming structure and for a while, no one spoke.

“What happens now?” Vaughn asked. Rhys turned to Tim with a smile.

“It’s your show, Tim. Step right up.” He gestured expansively, taking in the whole of the gates and the walls and, Tim noticed now, the mounted guns stationed on high.

“Right.” There were a lot of them. Rhys had equipped him with his shield and his weapons, but they wouldn’t be enough to withstand a barrage. “What do I do?”

“Beats me,” Rhys said, unconcerned. “Just walk up and see what happens. There shouldn’t be any DNA scanners, if that’s what you’re worried about. Probably just a voice recognition security measure.”

“That’s a lot of ‘probably’s and ‘shouldn’t’s,” Tim said even as he began to walk forward.

“Just try to run between the bullets,” Athena said. For whatever reason, Fiona turned bright red at her words.

Tim’s steps slowed as he got closer. The guns stirred to life, swivelling to point their barrels at Tim’s chest. They moved slowly, like they were waking up from a long slumber. Tim fought the urge to raise his arms. It’s not as if it would do any good, if those machines were fixing to kill him.

A spotlight flared to life, bathing Tim in blue. Tim stopped, taking care to keep his arms at his sides.

A screen appeared, projected a few feet from Tim’s face.

He was Jack he was Jack he was Jack he was Jack…

Tim squared his stance, tilted his chin up and crossed his arms as a scan ran over him.

“Opportunity has been placed on lock-down,” a mechanical voice intoned. “Please state the password.”

Ah, fuck. Tim kept the sneer in place while he rifled through his memories. Had he ever seen Jack enter his password?
“Please state the password. Now.”

“Hold your horses,” Tim muttered. Fuck fuck fuck. What would Jack say? What would he do? He used to be so good at this.

“If you do not deliver the proper password, the automated turrets will open fire. You have thirty seconds to comply.” The turrets sprung to life, raising on their servos and lights blinking eagerly along their barrels. Thirty seconds wasn’t very long at all, Tim knew, and he doubted he had more than one shot at this—


“Angel!” Tim blurted. The machine went silent. The turrets didn’t power down. Tim held his breath, gun already in hand.

“Accepted,” the machine said. The ground shook as the massive gates finally opened. The turrets slumped, as if disappointed.

“You did it!” Rhys ran up to him, his face shining with joy. He slung his shoulder around Tim’s neck and planted a kiss on his temple. “C’mon, let’s get inside.”

Rhys pulled Tim by the hand and Tim allowed himself to be pulled. He couldn’t bring himself to look at the others’ expressions, so he kept his gaze pointed ahead.

The air before them shimmered a soft lavender and gold.

“Isn’t that the shield?” Fiona asked, casting Tim a side-long look.

“Yeah, but don’t worry.” Rhys said. “It hasn’t disengaged, but it won’t try to kill us either. We’re Handsome Jack’s special guests.” He grinned at Tim, who felt an uncomfortable squirming in his guts at the use of that name.

“Just ‘Tim’ is fine,” Tim said, his ears reddening.

“Not here it isn’t,” Rhys said. “In this city, you’re Handsome Jack.” He gave him a look over his shoulder, his grin sliding into a smirk. “Think you can handle it?”

Tim huffed. “Well, in that case…” He drew level with Rhys and lowered his voice. “I don’t think you oughta be leading me around like this, if I’m gonna be him.”

“You like it,” Rhys said, just as quiet.

The streets were just as quiet as Tim envisioned. They walked along a wide lane that stretched through the centre of the city like an empty vein. The growing twilight gave everything a soft look. The shadows appeared blue-grey, and the tall buildings caught the last of the draining sunlight, glittering gold against the black glass surface. Every surface appeared spotless.

“This is creepy,” Fiona said quietly. Tim silently agreed.

Worst of all were the statues. Tim had always thought Jack had a face for statues and he knew Jack had an ego the size of a planet, but that didn’t mean he expected to see the two combined in such an ugly way. Jack was everywhere. Posing thoughtfully, glaring balefully, squinting purposefully. There were posters too, billboards the size of a house stretched high above. Jack glared and sneered from nearly every surface.
Tim tried to walk like he owned the place. He tried not to let it get to him. Pandora was still littered with Jack’s propaganda posters, although he’d been dead for almost two years. But this was the first time Tim had seen so many gathered in one space. And not one of them had any bullet holes. Had the pack of hunters really chased Jack’s double all the way here? The place didn’t look as if it’d seen any human life in years. It felt like a tomb.

“Man, I’d forgotten what it felt like to walk through a place like this,” Vaughn said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Feels like I’ve been on Pandora forever.”

“Once we get rich, we can go someplace nice,” Rhys said. “One of the Edens. You too, Fiona.”

Fiona looked up at a statue of Jack with his fist placed over his heart and winced. “If the Edens are anything like this place, I’ll have to pass,” she said.

“You’re missing out,” Rhys said.

“Enough with the chit-chat. What are we looking for, anyway?” Athena said.

“Opportunity was built over a thick vein of Eridium. One of the many that lined this planet. If I know anything about Hyperion, and I obviously do, then I know there’s going to be something around here that was built to tap into that vein. This place’s gotta have a needle, just like the one we built. Epimetheus was meant to go into production here.” Rhys’ ECHOeye flared to life. “I just gotta find it.”

“Uh.” Vaughn eyed Rhys nervously. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? I mean, this place has got a very excitable security system.”

“Vaughn’s right,” Fiona said. “Maybe we shouldn’t go poking around the systems until we get some place a little less… exposed.”

Rhys waved them off. “Relax, I’m just scanning.”

They fell quiet, but no one looked convinced. Tim felt anxious, keyed up. He pulled his pistol out, spun it once, and holstered it again. He jiggled his knee. He tried to avoid Jack’s stone gaze. He could feel it on the back of his neck.

It wasn’t real and it wasn’t him, he knew. But he itched to put a few bullets in them anyway.

“Here.” Rhys veered off the road, taking off at a light jog towards a sleek-looking pillar. It stood a little taller than Rhys and at first sight, Tim took it to be an art installation or something, but when Rhys ran his mechanical hand across it, the thing split open, revealing three screens and a keypad interface.

“Whoa,” Vaughn said, adjusting his glasses. Rhys tapped out a few commands, faster than Tim could follow. He summoned a map of the city, which projected over and through them, in blue and yellow. Tim found himself standing hip deep in a smaller scale version of Opportunity.

“You see these?” The map zoomed out, and a thick, crooked line in glowing violet appeared deep under the city. Smaller lines branched out, creating a twisted path through the underground. “Those are the Eridium veins. The big one there is the one that’ll connect us to Pandora’s core. The same one the Eridians themselves were using when they played their little game of memory.”

“I’m still not sure I buy all this,” Athena grumbled. “Aliens storing their memories in rocks?”

“Magic rocks,” Tim said, trying not to think of the thumb drive he’d stashed away years ago.
“Whatever. It’s hard to believe, is all I’m saying,” Athena said.

“No stranger than anything else I’ve encountered in this shit-hole planet aaaaaand here we go.” Rhys drew his hands apart, the projection pulling up closer. Tim watched with fascination as buildings streamed past, clipping through him, until he was left staring at the cross-section of one of the buildings, and its massive underground network of laboratories. “We’ll find a way in through these labs.”

“I think that’s a few blocks from here,” Fiona said.

“I think that looks… extremely secure.” Vaughn pulled his glasses off and gave them a quick wipe. “Like, probably very secure.”

“It’ll be fine,” Rhys said. “Trust me.”

It was not fine.

They made it only a few steps before the first loaderbot appeared. It walked through the streets, careful to stay off the road, its heavy steps loud and obtrusive. These robots were designed to be heard and seen, to be tall and wide and menacing. Tim hated them. This one had been given blue stripes, a loud contrast against its yellow-white paint job.

Everyone slowed, although that was probably the opposite of what they should have been doing. Tim’s steps slowed too, like he was trying to avoid a predator’s attention.

“How many of those do you think there are?” Fiona asked.

“Probably a lot,” Vaughn said, ever the optimist.

Fiona flinched as the ‘bot’s gaze turned her way. She smiled nervously. “They won’t attack us, will they?” she asked through her teeth.

Tim looked to Rhys, whose cybernetic eye had gone star-bright, a golden rod flare.

“Rhys,” Tim said.

“What’s happening?” Fiona demanded. The ‘bot had stopped, its body leaning forward slightly.

“Rhys.” Tim fought to keep his voice even.

Rhys’ eye flickered. He grit his teeth. “Ah, fuck,” he muttered.

The loaderbot straightened. “COMPANY THREAT ALPHA DETECTED.”

“Alpha?” Tim repeated, a little touched.

“INITIATING THREATENING STANCE.”

The loaderbot’s arms whirred to life, only to get blown off at the joints. The corrosive rounds ate through the loaderbot’s armour and it fell into pieces. Tim didn’t relax, pistol poised and ready for the next attack.

“Do you think—?” Fiona began but the rest of her words were drowned out by the wail of sirens.

Rhys groaned. “Fuck. Run!”
The group rounded the corner, Athena’s shield flashing in an overhead arc. Tim didn’t look around when he heard the mechanical squeals of simulated pain, too focused on keeping an eye on Rhys, who had ploughed ahead, his palm display flickering with the movement. Strategically speaking, it wasn’t a smart move, but Rhys was the only one of them with a map.

“This way!” Rhys cried, skidding around another tight corner. “We got—"

Another pack of ‘bots lumbered towards them, dead ahead. They flowed up the street, moving in organized rank and file like a phalanx of yellow and white (and blue all over).

Tim grabbed Rhys by the arm and yanked him into an alley, down a set of stairs built into an underground walk-way. The other three ducked behind an empty garbage disposal on the opposite side of the street.

“THREAT DETECTED,” a loaderbot intoned before launching a grenade. It bounced past, but Tim pushed them further from the street. The walk-way wasn’t large. It would keep them out of direct fire for a while, but it wasn’t a permanent solution.

“What’s the plan, boss?” Tim asked, peeking around the corner and sliding a fresh round into his pistol.

“Still the same. We have to get to the lab. I can shut down the city’s security system from there,” he replied, his ECHOeye alight.

Tim disabled two ‘bots, their arms and legs flying apart. “Sounds good, but how are we supposed to get there? In case you haven’t noticed—"

An EXP-LOADER charged down the street, forcing its allies out of its path. Tim sucked in a breath and aimed for the legs as best he could. He got the knees, but Fiona got the joints properly. It fell to the ground, dragging itself pitifully by its arms, until Tim took care of those.

“We can follow this alley to a side street, and from there I can get us to the lab,” Rhys said.

“What about the others?” Tim asked, glancing across the street as Fiona chucked a grenade into the fray. Rhys gave him an odd look.

“They’re staying here,” he said. Tim stared at Rhys. “What, you think we’ll just slip away and the ‘bots won’t follow? Nuh-uh. Those things are programmed to neutralize you with painful prejudice. We need a distraction.”

“We can’t leave them,” Tim said. An explosion flung the remains of a ‘bot past the mouth of the alley, forcing Tim further within. “They’ll get slaughtered. Look,” he went on, reaching for his wrist. “If it’s a distraction we need, I can just—"

“No!” Rhys gripped his hand and yanked it away. Tim looked over, ready to argue, but the look on Rhys’ face made him pause. It vanished quickly. “No, you’re too tired,” he said, his voice softening.

Tim frowned. “I’m fine, stretch.”

“You didn’t have time to rest between the fight at Atlas and now. I know those things hurt your head and I know they make you weak if they’re out too long. Do you really think you can keep your head in the game to protect me, if you’re projecting your clones at the same time?”

Another round and another explosion, this one closer than Tim would’ve liked. He could see the light, feel the heat against his face. Rhys pulled him closer.
“The longer we argue, the less time they’ll have. Their only hope—our only hope—is to get to the lab and shut down security,” he said. Tim looked over his shoulder just in time to see Athena hold her shield up to protect Vaughn from a barrage. Rhys grabbed his chin and pulled his attention back. “I can’t do this alone. I need you.”

One of the ‘bots screamed as it flew apart. Tim tried to look back, but Rhys held his face. Tim sighed, relenting.

“Fine,” he said. “But we need to tell them.”

“Don’t worry,” Rhys said with a smile, his ECHOeye glittering. “I’ll take care of it.”

Rhys lead the way and Tim stayed close. They moved slowly and quietly, careful to keep out of any loaderbot’s sights, which meant stopping and hiding more often than Tim would’ve liked. But they had no choice; if even one loaderbot caught sight of Tim, it would bring the hoard on them.

“This wasn’t a good idea,” Tim muttered as they crouched behind one of the pillar terminals. “I should’ve stayed behind.”

“And gotten my head blown off?” Rhys scowled over his shoulder.

“You should’ve gone with someone else,” Tim insisted.

“Who? Unless you had someone hiding under your jacket, we were the only ones in that alley, Timmy,” he said.

Tim blinked, his hand tightening on the grip of his gun.

“Anyway, no use in complaining now,” Rhys went on, turning away. “Come on, I think it’s moved on.”

The lab was buried underneath one of the glass monoliths towards the centre of the city, where other monoliths clustered like porcupine quills. Rhys kept in contact with the others as they made their way inside. Tim could hear him muttering under his breath.

“…close now, just hang on,” he said.

“Are they alright?” Tim asked.

“Fine. Come on, we need to find an elevator.”

The lobby as impressive as the rest of the city. Shiny, decorated in golden and white, and very empty. Tim craned his neck and looked up at the stair case that curled on either side. The ceiling was a long way away. It gave him an odd sense of vertigo, like he’d found himself inside a hollow needle. He felt light headed and quickly looked away.

They found a bank of elevators at the far end. Rhys tapped a few commands into the security panel. He gestured Tim over.

“We need the big boss’ finger prints,” he said, grabbing Tim’s wrist.

“You don’t think this’ll attract some attention?” Tim asked, resisting as Rhys tried to pull him forward. Rhys scowled.

“It’s fine. Trust me, alright?”
Tim hesitated only a moment longer before he pressed his palm flat against the screen. He watched the scan. “It’s a big lab, right? You sure you’ll be able to find what we need?”

“Positive,” Rhys said. The scanner flashed green and the elevators doors opened with a chime. “It’s where all the goodies were kept. The needle’ll be kept in the lowest level, same as it was in Atlas. Best of all, we’ll have more than enough Eridium to tap into.”

“What about the security?” Tim asked as they stepped inside. “You’ll be able to shut everything down, right?”

Rhys called up his palm display. “Of course,” he said as he scrolled through commands.

Tim spent the rest of the ride in silence. The nausea he felt earlier wasn’t getting any better and his head still felt light. He blinked hard, trying to alleviate some of the sting in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Rhys asked.

“Nothing.” Tim swallowed. He could feel something unpleasant bubbling in his chest, and he couldn’t tell if it was his head or his stomach that made him feel sick. He glanced up at the display, watching the numbers sink. “Just don’t like being underground.”

Rhys watched him through the sides of his eyes. He closed his fist, dismissing the display, stepped into Tim’s space, took a handful of his hair and kissed him.

Tim took Rhys by his hips more out of surprise than any interest, holding him without pulling him closer. Rhys had used his mechanical hand to take Tim by the hair, and he could feel strands getting caught in the joints and divots of his fingers. Rhys kissed him like he had something to prove, pushy and demanding. He sunk his teeth into Tim’s lower lip, crowded Tim against the wall. His grip tightened, pulling Tim’s head back.

Tim’s stomach roiled, annoyance and anxiety blending together. He gripped Rhys’ biceps and gently pushed him away.

Rhys broke away, his yellow and brown eyes gleaming strangely in the light. His face was blank as he loosened his grip, smoothing down the strands, looking at him as if he didn’t recognize him.

And then he smiled. “Feel better?” he asked.

The elevator slid to a smooth stop. The doors chimed and opened, revealing a brightly lit and very clean hallway. Rhys walked out with a grin.

Tim lingered behind. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, feeling more annoyed than turned on. What the hell was that?

“Keep up, Timmy!”

Tim huffed, the unpleasant fluttering in his chest and stomach growing hot, almost painful. He wiped his hand across his face again and stepped into the hallway.

It was just this place, he told himself. And Rhys was under a lot of stress. He’d just lost his company, and he only had one shot to rebuild. Anyone would behave differently under those circumstances.

He told himself this, and more, as he caught up to Rhys. It didn’t make him feel any better.
turned right, and then right again, and then down, and on and on in an ever-tightening spiral down into the surface of Pandora. The elevator had taken them to one of the lowest stratas of the lab, down into the belly of the planet. Tim’s arms broke out in goosebumps, something chilled breathing across his skin. He felt as if he could taste the cold, clammy air found in caves, although he knew it was only his mind playing tricks. He could hear the hum of the ventilation system, a white noise that reminded Tim of the pulse of some great creature (although this, too, he knew to be a projection of his increasingly unsettled mind).

He should’ve stayed on the top floor. He pulled his arms close, fighting against the urge to shiver.

Rhys strode ahead, head high and seemingly unconcerned. He hadn’t spoken since the elevator.

“Are we close?” Tim asked when he couldn’t handle the hum of artificial ventilation anymore.

“Pretty close,” Rhys replied without looking up. “Why? Still feel nervous?”

“Worried about the people we left behind,” Tim said and that was true. He thought of Athena and her shield. He knew from experience how long that thing could last, and it was never as long as anyone would like.

“How many times do I have to tell you? Don’t worry. I’ve got this.”

Tim glared at the back of Rhys’ head. “How can you be so calm about this? Those are your friends up there. And those loaderbots—”

“Tim.” Rhys flashed him a quick look, his ECHOeye like almost a torch. He spoke clearly and carefully, his tone dripping with condescension. “Just let me handle this. Alright?” He turned without waiting for Tim’s response.

Tim ground his teeth and tried to get a handle on his nerves, his temper. He had the urge to grab Rhys, force him to talk or—something. He squashed it. Getting violent wouldn’t help. He didn’t really want to anyway, but it was where his mind always went. It was what he did best.

But he couldn’t hurt Rhys. His breathed out, forced his hands to unclench.

“We’re here.” Rhys stopped and reached for Tim, but Tim was ahead of him. He pressed his palm against the security panel and the door opened with a friendly chime.

For a moment, there was no light within and all Tim could see were the shadows of strange-looking equipment and the dim violet-blue glow of Eridium. A tank sat at the centre of the room, a crystal growth on display like a plant in a terrarium. There was something in the centre of the room, long and broad and difficult to discern in the dark, but Tim could see protrusions. Metal, he told himself. Nothing alive in there, he assured himself. But nevertheless, Tim felt struck by a strange sense of dread, stuck, frozen to the spot, almost breathless.

And then the lights flicker to life. Rhys stepped inside. Tim followed, a half-second behind.

The thing in the centre of the room looked like an operating table, set nearly vertical. The strange protrusions Tim had seen were indeed made from metal. There were straps on the table, he noted. Across the bottom, the middle, and closer to the top. Leather. Tim brushed one with the tip of his index finger, an image of a person stretched out and strapped down over their ankles, legs, arms, chest, neck and head appeared in his mind.

He swallowed. He tried to imagine a scenario where such a thing might be used for anything harmless, benign.
“What the hell is this, Rhys?” Tim asked.

“It’s a secure room,” Rhys said as he knelt down beside a bank of consoles and a desk. “I can get a direct link-up in here. Hey, do me a favour and check that wall? There’s a panel in here somewhere that’ll give us a temporary work-around through the security matrix.”

Tim went to where Rhys indicated, giving the table a wide berth. “Is that good?” he asked.

He could hear the smile in Rhys’ voice at his response. “It’s good. We need it to tunnel through their defenses. I just have to access the ‘bots’ programming core and I can start reworking their directives. It shouldn’t take long. It’ll probably be low to the ground somewhere.”

“I don’t see anything,” Tim said.

“Keep looking. It might be behind one of those machines.”

Tim got on his hands and knees. He peered as best he could behind one of the monstrosities pushed against the wall. He felt a surprised and a little unnerved to see the space was spotless. Not even a thin coating of dust. Not a speck of dirt, save for the ones Tim left behind from his fingers, kicked off his boots, or brushed off his clothes.

“Find it?” Rhys asked. Tim could hear him rustling around the desk.

“No.” Tim eased back onto his haunches, wincing at the pop in his knees. “Are you sure—”

At first, Tim thought Rhys had gotten him with an Anshin. That’s why he didn’t fight when he felt the needle in his neck, heard the hiss of a hypo releasing. But his vision swam and pulsed and his body pitched forward. He caught himself on his arms, but they shook as they tried to support him. He blinked hard and saw black stars dancing in his sights. His mouth watered, his head throbbed, and his own pulse pounded a rapid tempo in his ears.

He tried to turn his head, catch sight of Rhys, but all he could see was a tall form of black and gold, and a single yellow light, somewhere high up above.

And then he saw nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

See you next week.
Part VI: Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Is it handsome in here or is it just Rhys?

Chapter Notes

CW for abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THEN

It took hours for the sandstorm to die. Tim spent it in the corner of the abandoned room, well away from the broken windows. He found shelter just as it hit, in a place that had once been a refuelling and repair station, and then became a bandits’ den. Now it was neither. Tim barely managed to shove the bodies out the door before the storm descended.

Would it be strange to say he enjoyed this time? That it felt quiet and peaceful, although it was neither. The storm howled like a beast on a chain. It kicked in the doors and streamed in between the jagged edges of broken glass. But Tim enjoyed it all the same. He enjoyed the way it forced everyone to go to ground. Because it was natural, it was Pandora pounding at the door. It could kill him, but it would do so without motive. It would kill him as easily as it would kill anyone else. It could bury him alive, swallow him whole. It would probably be horrible. Sand drifted through the barricaded door.

Tim pulled his stolen jacket closer, drawing the hood tighter around his masked face. This was soon after he fled Jack and Hyperion and his old life, and his masks were rags worn over the lower half of his face, and goggles over his too-distinct eyes (fuck Jack’s stupid heterochromia). Sometimes it was a filthy skull mask, stolen from a corpse, just like everything else he owned. But Tim would wear a hundred thousand more like it sooner than he would return to Hyperion, to the mask Jack had made him wear.

The ECHOtablet he’d pulled off a wrecked caravan had also come from a body. Specifically, it’d come from the late driver. It was a beat up old thing, produced by DAHL back when they were still trying to edge into the technology game. It wasn’t pretty and it wasn’t very fast or clever, but it was tough as hell and had a battery life to put Hyperion’s finest to shame. But all that Tim cared about was its screen and its driver port.

…took a class in Greco-Roman history which discussed the naming conventions of the old Sol System and the new frontier and everything we’d carried with us all our old stories that we could never let go and why we need them and what it takes to be human as if humanity itself is connected to the stories we tell ourselves which to be honest is cool but also a little pretentious for a course that also teaches a novel about a man that turned into an ass and had a bunch of gross sex scenes in it…

Tim scrolled to the next page. He’d read it all before, every single ungrammatical, run-on, endless
sentence. But it didn’t matter. His history unspooled on the screen, unbroken and rambling, like Jack Keroac at his worst. Or Ginsberg. Tim couldn’t recall which of them had been the rambler. (Maybe both?)

The wind began to flag, the full-throated howl weakening to a hiss. Tim shook his head, dislodging a pile of yellow sand, and scrolled to a new page.

…cute and nice but kind of a jerk too but also sweet she had red hair but not like mine red hair like the colour of redheads in comic books saturated red and she wore it in braids a lot of braids and beads that clicked when she turned her head she had brown eyes and a gap tooth that I think she was sensitive about because she didn’t smile with her teeth showing much she was in my post-post-modern lit class and she sat a few rows down from me but I could always hear her voice because she was loud and unapologetic about it and I liked that and I miss her and I wonder what she ended up doing or if she’s dead…

Tim thought about the girl with red hair in micro braids and a gap-toothed smile. He thought of a face that might’ve been hers, or it might’ve been someone else’s, someone he’d seen once and superimposed over this woman in his post-post-modern lit class. Or maybe it was a complete invention. The Tim who’d written this hadn’t given her a name. Maybe he didn’t know it. Odd that he should write about her.

Tim in his trance wrote about a lot of things Tim couldn’t understand. Tangents about people he’d known (but not well, it seemed). He wrote about a Rudy Takagawa and a first kiss. He wrote about what rain sounded like outside his bedroom window (the same as it sounded everywhere else, but nicer). He wrote about his classes, and he wrote about his professors. He wrote about Eden-2, which Tim imagined as a neon-soaked smear of technology, a vision of the future dreamed up by someone on feel-good hallucinogens. Glittering, colourful, bright. Buildings like sharp teeth and streets like black tongues. The Tim who’d lived on Eden-2’s eastern megacity had been frightened and fascinated by the place, at turns disgusted and entranced by what he encountered.

Tim tried to imagine a place so large and open. A place with so many people, people Tim could see through his own eyes, inside his own skin. People he could touch, or speak to, or smile at, if he wanted. If he felt like it. Or he could just pass through, a minnow in a big sea. Without a weapon or a shield. That image stuck with Tim the most. He couldn’t imagine being so vulnerable among so many strangers.

…didn’t want to sing so they left me alone and I felt good about it but also kind of lonely I didn’t know how to connect with the others in the dorm and it felt just like it’d felt in high school so I sat down and started to write a short story and it wasn’t very good but I liked writing it because writing always made me feel like I could pull something out of nothing like I could make a place that was just for me and when I wrote I wasn’t who I was I was someone else someone who could write and create and I don’t know why I ever stopped writing but I’m writing now and I don’t want to forget this please jack don’t do this to me again I don’t want to lose these things I wasn’t happy but I had something and it was all mine please don’t take this please please…

Tim shut the screen off. The Tim who’d written those words tended to get like that towards the end of each entry. He supposed that was around the time the drugs began to wear off. He wondered if Jack ever read the entries and then he felt angry with himself for wondering. It didn’t matter.

The wind whispered outside. Sand stirred over fresh dunes, half-rising from the ground only to collapse once more. Moonlight began to shine down and if Tim could be bothered to look, he’d see patches of night sky between the broken clouds. He would see Helios, hovering above Elpis, its one eye fixed on nothing at all. The throat of the world opened up once more.
Rumour had it that Handsome Jack was back on Pandora. He’d been going through Hyperion settlements, factories, forges, anything and everything with the Hyperion stamp. Tim heard it from a bartender who’d overheard a few planet-side Hyperion employees getting drunk that Jack’d been having himself a lot of closed door meetings. The sort of meetings that ended with a call to a cleaning crew and an internal job posting. It seemed like Jack was upset about something. Restless. Eridium mining had increased almost 200%.

Stranger than that was what he did outside of Hyperion. Handsome Jack prowled across the planet with an army of loaderbots at his back, leaving broken bandit settlements in his wake. No one could figure out what brought on the sudden bout of violence. Very few people survived long enough to say what he’d been after. But rumour had it he was looking for something.

Tim shivered. The desert night time air brought a dry chill that could crawl under every layer Tim wore.

Handsome Jack had last been spotted in the highlands, closer to Tim than he’d been in weeks. Tim fled as soon as he heard, making like hell for leather on a stolen bike for the wastes up north. He’d driven nearly seven solid hours when the storm began to threaten. He still had another twenty or so hours to go before he could find a fast travel. He couldn’t spend the night here. He knew of a safe house on the other side of the ridged mountains. He could make it there just before sunrise and maybe catch a few hours of sleep, get some water. Maybe eat, although he didn’t feel hungry.

But Jack could be faster. He could be here in less than two hours, if he knew.

But he didn’t, Tim told himself. He straightened from his crouch and got to his feet, his knees and joints popping. He stretched with a wince, yellow sand falling off him in sheets. He walked over to his bike, yanking the sand-weighted tarp away to reveal its frame. Nothing could’ve protected it completely, but the tarp and the shelter kept the worst of the sand away.

Tim rolled it outside. The road he’d been following had vanished, lost under the ever-changing landscape of the Dusts.

Jack could be on his trail right now. Would a sandstorm really stop him? Would he let it?

It took a few tries to get the bike started, but soon the little engine rumbled to life, coughing and spitting. Tim could relate.

Jack could come for him. Tim knew it. He thought of it every time he looked up. Jack could still come for him and Tim didn’t know if he could fight his way free a second time.

But it didn’t matter. Tim kicked the bike into gear, the engine making a noise less like a roar and more like a shrill complaint. He pointed towards the north-east and set out.

If Jack came for him, Tim wouldn’t go. He’d sooner kill himself.

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**NOW**

“…friggin’ weak body… Although I suppose you’ve started drinking again, eh Timmy? You feel heavier… Gotten soft, I bet…”

Tim heard a voice before he could see, before he could understand. His body felt heavy and his mind felt sluggish. He felt, for a strange, disconnected moment, that he was observing something happening to someone else. His eyes were closed, but he could imagine a scenario, an image of a man with arms around him, hands touching him. A curious mixture of deja-vu, fear, and confusion
overcame him. It felt like a horror movie he’d watched once as a child, something that haunted him during his youth and was then forgotten.

He couldn’t move. He didn’t really try. Was this body his to move? Was this just a memory? He didn’t know.

He couldn’t hear the voice anymore, which he supposed meant that someone had stopped talking. For a while, Tim drifted.

He came back when he felt something clamp over his face, felt something digging into his skin, sharp points under his jaw, over the hinge of his mouth. It brought him back, reminded him of where he belonged.

Here and now, Tim.

“Come on.” Someone tapped him on the ridge of his cheek. “Wake up, princess. I know that tranq was strong but it wasn’t that strong.” The tapping grew more frequent, the voice more demanding. Tim groaned, and the sound came out muffled. “That’s it. Come on, pumpkin.”

Something supported Tim’s head, which was strange. He felt as if he was on his back, but all his weight rested against something over his chest, and his arms. He wasn’t standing, but he felt upright. He twitched his fingers, and felt gratified when they moved.

“Up up up, come on. Time’s a wastin’. You gotta wake up and face your brave new future.”

He tried to move his arm, and felt less gratified when he met with resistance. Life and awareness crawled through the fog of artificially induced unconsciousness and gave him some bad news. He was in pain, for one. For another, this was the second time in less than a day he would regain consciousness while tied down with a threat standing over him.

He managed to open his eyes, and the world revealed itself as smears of colours and bright lights. Tim could see white and violet, black and gold.

“Theeere you are. Good morning, sunshine,” a familiar voice cooed.

Tim closed his stinging eyes and groaned again. Or tried to. He found he couldn’t open his mouth. Something painful and hard clamped it closed. He could feel his breath, like a warm, damp blanket held over his mouth and nose.

“Yes, hope you don’t mind I took the liberty of muzzling you.” Something tapped against the thing on his face, producing a metallic sound. “Can’t have you voice commanding your way outta here. I think this thing was meant for skags. Or maybe it was meant for people. Who knows! The underlings could get up to some real weird shit when I wasn’t watching.”

Tim opened his eyes again and the world resolved itself. Rhys stared back at him, grinning like a shark. Tim tried to move his arm, only to find the more resistance. He tried to move his legs, but it was the same story. He tried to look down to see what sort of situation he was in, only to find he couldn’t move his head. Rhys’ smile widened.

“Kinda surprised you even followed me in here. Figured you’d take one look at the table and bolt. But I guess you must really like Rhys. Huh, Timtam?” He leaned forward, filling Tim’s tunnelling vision. “You know, I’d be more annoyed if I weren’t also just a little flattered. Out of all the people on this heap, you aim your goo-goo eyes at one of my left-overs. But trading me in for a younger, lesser model? Harsh.”
His breath felt like steam against his face. He tried to open his mouth, but the thing held firm and he could feel its claws digging into the soft skin under his jaw. His head swam. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t talk. He couldn’t even breathe.

“Hey now, none of that. I don’t want you passing out on me again.” Rhys put his hands on Tim’s face, clutching him with his thumbs touching the bags under Tim’s eyes. Tim tried to pull back, but he couldn’t go very far.

Rhys looked at him, smiling like he’d won a prize. Smiling like he’d found treasure. It didn’t look right. It wasn’t Rhys’ smile, although it used his face.

“Breathe, kitten.” He spoke and touched Tim with gentleness, the feel of his metal hand stark against Tim’s clammy skin. “Just breathe. I’m not gonna kill ya. I would’ve done it already if I wanted to.”

He sounded like Rhys. It was Rhys’ voice. But it wasn’t right. This wasn’t right.

It wasn’t possible.

Rhys laughed. “Aw, come on! Enough with the wounded look. You know who I am, babe. I know you’re a little dim but…” He shook his head. A few strands fell loose from Rhys’ coif.

No, Tim decided. Rhys had lost his mind. Nothing else made sense. It was the stress. It was… everything. He’d just cracked. It was unfortunate, but Tim could handle it. Just… as soon as he could move again.

Rhys stared at Tim, the joy in his expression clouding. “Okay. Still not gettin’ it.” He tipped his head back and considered the ceiling. “How ‘bout this, Timtam? Remember the first time I took you? You must. It was a dream come true for you, wasn’t it?”

Tim went cold. Rhys leaned forward, until they were touching, until he could press his lips against Tim’s ear.

“You were in love with me for years. You’d just come back from your first mission.” Rhys’ lips brushed against Tim’s lobe, his breath hot and sour. “You were covered in blood. I told you to have some fun, but you thought I meant with someone else. Like I was about to send you off to some random loser. Like I’d ever let someone else touch you. And then I put you on my desk and held you down. You were so sweet and open and desperate for me. You begged me to fuck you. Remember? Do you remember what you said to me, precious?” Tim could feel the other man’s smile. The voice lowered to a soft whisper and said, “Please, Jack.”

No.

No, no, no, no, no, no no no no nonononononononononononono—

Not possible. It couldn’t—he couldn’t—

Dead. Jack was dead. Dead and gone and buried and decayed and gone. Gone forever. He had to be.

A smile spread slowly across Rhys’ face. “Now you’re getting it.”

Tim’s breath whistled through the slats of the muzzle. He pulled back sharply, thumping his head against the table.

The man wearing Rhys pinched Tim’s cheek and leaned back on his heels. He crossed Rhys’ arms
over Rhys’ chest. He tilted Rhys’ head and examined Tim. He looked at Tim as if Tim were a painting he considered buying.

“Now,” he said. “Down to business.”

These robots, at least, were not funny. Not on purpose, at any rate. This brought Athena a small amount of relief. Janey always encouraged her to seek out silver linings, although this sort of thing might not have been what she had in mind.

A loaderbot crawled towards her, its one remaining limb flinching and twitching like a beached eel. Electricity arced across its frame and Athena crouched behind a pillar just as the robot finally gave out and joined the series of scorch marks that littered the streets.

They’d made progress through the city, although it took longer than Athena liked. Fiona (who was apparently her protégé, according to Janey) had gotten a lot handier with a weapon. Although she still favoured the spring-loaded ace up her sleeve, she didn’t rely on it exclusively, which Athena counted as progress. She had good aim and a steady hand and enough steel in her spine to see them through some hairy spots.

Fiona de-limbed another ‘bot while Athena reloaded. Their numbers were thinning at last, which was very good. Athena counted her ammo. Extremely good, in fact. She didn’t think they would’ve lasted much longer.

Vaughn had a gun too, but he wasn’t as good with it. At least he kept his whimpering to a minimum.

See, Janey? Silver linings. She’d practically become an optimist.

“I think that was the last of them,” Fiona said, making Athena wince. That was a rookie thing to say. But she’d done so well, Athena couldn’t bring herself to lecture.

Besides, misguided though she might be, she wasn’t entirely wrong. Things had gotten quiet. Their pursuers had gotten lazy. They’d destroyed a lot of them, it was true, but their numbers grew small as the three of them fought their way into the city’s interior.

Like they were being herded.

Fiona crouched beside Athena, and Vaughn beside her. He reloaded his gun with shaking hands. He looked focused, tired. Fiona looked angry, tired. She held her jaw tight. A muscle under her left lid twitched.

There was no sign of Rhys or Tim. Not anywhere.

“I can’t believe they left us,” Fiona said.

“They must’ve gone on ahead,” Vaughn said, and not for the first time. He snapped his shotgun shut.

But things were quiet now, and maybe it was time to talk.

Athena said, “Did you get a look at the building Rhys pointed us to?”

“I think so,” Fiona said.

“Do you think that’s where they would’ve gone?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Vaughn said. And then he opened his mouth, like he had more to say, but he didn’t
immediately speak. He looked to Fiona and shut his mouth. She looked back, her expression drawn.

Athena frowned, unnerved at the silent exchange. “What is it?”

“We need to talk about Rhys,” Vaughn said. “About the way he’s been acting.”

“You noticed it too,” Fiona said, surprisingly grim.

“What do you mean? He was acting like a jerk. Isn’t that normal?” Athena asked.

“No! Well. Maybe sometimes, yeah.” Vaughn winced. “But not like that. He’s not usually that…

focused.”

“Aggressive,” Fiona said. “Did you see the way he looked at Tim when we found him?”

“You should’ve seen him on the buzzard,” Vaughn said darkly.

“I don’t understand,” Athena said. “Is there something wrong with your friend? Is he sick?”

Another silent exchange, filled with portents and meaning Athena wasn’t privy to.

“He might be,” Fiona said.

“I think so,” Vaughn said, at the same time.

“If he’s trouble, then Tim can take care of him,” Athena said. Vaughn looked at the ground. Fiona looked at her weapon. Athena hated this sort of thing. Why couldn’t people just use their words? She forced her jaw to unclench.

“What is it?” she asked.

Fiona opened her mouth but the sound of whirring servos and metal feet on the ground made her fall silent. She peered out of her cover in time to see a loaderbot at the mouth of the street, walking past without turning its head. Another followed a few steps behind it.

“Where are they going?” she asked.

“Towards the centre of the city, looks like,” Athena said. “We need to get moving soon. I’m running low on ammunition and I think you are too, Fiona.”

“Where should we go?” she asked.

Athena leaned out from their cover, just enough to see the now-empty mouth of the street. She could see through the gaps between the buildings small strips of the sunset. Elpis loomed high in the sky. Night was minutes away. She flicked her gaze up to the tops of the buildings clustered around the city’s heart. If she were a megalomaniac building a tribute to her own greatness in the middle of a wasteland, where would she stash the top secret laboratory with all the fun toys?

Her gaze landed on the tallest building. Under the largest phallic symbol. Where else?

Fiona followed her gaze, a frown tightening the lines of her mouth. “I think that’s where all the loaders are going.”

Athena sighed. “Probably.”

“We can’t fight our way through.”
Athena looked down at her shield. She had enough energy for maybe two hours, assuming they didn’t get shot at. But if they were heading into a nest of loaders…

“There’s something I need to tell you both,” Vaughn said. He stared down at his gun, running the pad of his thumb against the cosmetic ridges. “It’s about what happened during the siege. I think Rhys might’ve done something stupid.”

“What a surprise,” Fiona muttered.

Another whirring of servos and clanking of feet, signalling another passing loader. It really did seem as if they were all headed in the same direction.

“Can we run and talk?” Athena asked.

This wasn’t real. This was a nightmare. This was every nightmare Tim’d had since he ran away. He just had to wake up.

“You’re surprisingly zen about all this,” the man wearing Rhys remarked. “Although closing your eyes like you can make me go away if you can’t see me… kinda childish, don’tcha think?”

It was Rhys’ voice, but the tone was all wrong.

Tim kept his eyes shut. He moved his arms, trying to pull on the straps, testing their strength. They were thick and tight, but Tim just needed an inch. Just enough to get his fingers onto his inner wrist.

He could hear Rhys’ body moving around. He could still see light even through his lids. He could hear tapping, fingers on a keypad. A voice humming quietly.

Jack would hum when he worked. He could never abide silence.

Tim jerked his left wrist, twisting desperately. Just an inch. That’s all.

Humming wasn’t enough. Jack needed something to chew on. Always did.

(This wasn’t Jack, it couldn’t be him, get a grip.)

“You must be wondering what I’m up to,” he said. Tim heard shuffling, a tapping of metal against metal, wheels against a tiled floor. A chair pushed back. More shuffling and the lights Tim could see grew dimmer.

“C’mon, Timmy.” He was standing in front of him again. Within arm’s reach, if Tim could move his arms. “You must be a little curious. What I’ve got in store for you.” Tim could hear the glee in his words. “You’re really gonna like it.”

Is that why you had to tie me down, you lunatic?

“Open those beautiful eyes, kitten.” Tim flinched at the feeling of cold metal against his cheek.

The other man was wrong. Tim didn’t keep his eyes closed because he wanted to pretend Jack wasn’t there. He kept them closed because he couldn’t bring himself to look into Rhys’ face. Into that smile again.

Tim knew Rhys’ smile. He could picture it clearly. Maybe he’d been thinking about it too much. But when Rhys smiled—and not the corporate smile, the toothy, bright thing that was all flash and no substance, but a real smile—he always looked just a little shy, and a little surprised. Like he’d half-
forgotten what a genuine smile felt like, forgotten how it moved his face. It made Tim ache to think about.

Tim knew Jack’s smile. He knew it inside and out. The real thing, all teeth and dimples and crinkles around the eyes. Jack’s happiness looked an awful lot like hunger to Tim. Always had.

The metal bit down, pressing hard at the skin under Tim’s eye. “I said open. Don’t make me do anything you’ll regret.”

Tim struggled to take a breath through the muzzle. He opened his eyes.

Rhys’ mouth moved in a smile. Tim’s heart nearly broke.

It was Jack. It was really him.

“There.” Jack patted him on the cheek. “There’s those lovely gems. Not so hard, is it? I gotta say, you didn’t do such a bad job minding the house while I was away. Sure, you put on a little weight but it’s nothing a change in diet can’t fix.” He squeezed the soft flesh of Tim’s stomach.

It was like suffering an injury, like falling asleep in the snow. Tim could feel himself slipping into numb shock. It might’ve been nice.

Jack straightened, taking full advantage of Rhys’ considerable height. Rhys’ lips twitched.

“Boy, you’ve gotten disobedient. Gotta say, I am surprised at how calm you’re being,” he said. “Figured you’d be a blubbering mess by now. You were always pretty quick to fall apart.” He leaned forward, pressed his hands against Tim’s chest, pushed his face close to Tim’s. Inches apart. “Maybe you’re just not scared of me anymore. Hm?”

Tim would’ve laughed if he could.

“Can’t believe you survived this long on Pandora all on your own. Figured you woulda caught a bullet to the brain after a year. You were tough, Timmy, but you were also a pampered poodle. Without that Hyperion teat to suck on, I’da figured you for a goner.” He slid Rhys’ hands down Tim’s chest, fingers catching on the leather straps. “But you are just full of surprises, aren’t you? Stop that.” He caught Tim’s wrist and gave it a hard squeeze, Rhys’ metal hand grinding the small bones together. “You’re not getting loose. I’ve got you, precious.”

He worked Rhys’ left hand through Tim’s hair, pushing the strands from Tim’s face. Jack frowned a little, pinching a lock between Rhys’ fingers. Tim had long ago gotten into the habit of keeping it short. Jack likely disapproved.

“I’ve got plans for you, Timmy,” Jack said, resuming his ministrations. “See, what Rhysie didn’t tell you about Pyrphoros is that this little AI telephone program can be used in very unusual ways. When Eridium interacts with programming, it creates some interesting and unexpected side-effects. One of them is the boosting of even a basic program’s intelligence to near-AI levels. But you already know that.” He gave Tim’s wrist another squeeze. “One you might not know of is the energy. One Eridium crystal the size of my pinky—your pinky, I guess—would be enough to power a 100 digistructs for ten years. If we tap into Pandora’s vein, we’ll have enough to power digistructs ‘til… hell. ‘Til the sun goes nova and the planet flies apart, probably. Imagine just how powerful you could be.”

Jack’s touches were gentle once again. Tim could feel the metal hand growing contact-warm against him.

“Now I can tell by the look on your face that you’re not following me. That’s okay,” he said. “I
didn’t bring you on board for your smarts. See, another thing I’m guessing Rhysie didn’t tell you is that about a year and a half ago, he plugged a very intelligent, very handsome AI into his little noggin. And then when said AI very graciously helped this leggy idiot to Hyperion’s golden throne, the ingrate decided to be a huge bitch about it and crashed the friggin’ satellite into the ground. All because of a lack of vision on his part.”

Rhys’ nostrils flared. Jack’s smile had vanished, replaced with an ugly look Tim knew all too well. Even on Rhys’ baby faced features.

“But luckily for us all, this particular AI is very tenacious and very good at surviving.”

An AI. Not Jack, but something programmed with his mind, his memories, and his personality. What kind of idiot would make something like that?

“Now, things were pretty rough going there for a while. I was basically living in the data storage of a severed cybernetic arm and eye. It was grim. But I just happen to be fortune’s favoured son, and a former Hyperion scientist just happened to come along and find said arm before the power could die.”

Etna. She must’ve found Rhys’ severed arm in the wreckage of Helios.

“They plugged me into an Atlas system. She wanted to salvage her stupid AI project, wanted to cannibalize my data for it. Well.” Another smile. “You can imagine how well that went for her. And then I found Epimetheus.

“I don’t think she wanted me to find it. I don’t think she knew what I was, really—only that she’d found some damaged code that might’ve been for an AI. But like I said: I’m tenacious. I scrapped myself back together, a little more Frankenstein than I might’ve liked, but it was alright. It was enough to get into Epimetheus’ programming. We worked together. She handled the day-to-day, and I handled the big picture. We took Crisis Ridge once the real Etna died. And then we made plan together.

“I knew Rhysie’d come running for Epimetheus eventually—he’s kind of predictable. But I wasn’t expecting he’d have such a nice little present for me.”

Jack pushed Rhys’ fingers through Tim’s hair, tightening their grip on his short strands. He bent Tim’s head back as best he could in that limited space, forcing him to expose his neck. He pressed a soft kiss against Tim’s rabbitting pulse.

“I took Rhys,” he said. “In that Atlas basement. I dismissed your little digistruct clone, and I put a fragment of my code into his head. Not as much as I would’ve liked to, but I didn’t have the juice to do a full wireless transfer. Not when I was that weak. Not when Epimetheus needed to play Pinocchio as Dr. Etna. But it was enough to keep him blind to Etna’s true nature, and enough to keep him moving towards my goal. Enough to keep him loyal.

“I had Etna sabotage the needle a few weeks back. I needed the distraction to get into Rhysie’s office, where he kept his old cybernetic eye, which just so happened to contain enough of my original code to put myself back together again.”

Rhys’ fingers pressed against Tim’s skull, a familiar gesture that made his stomach turn.

“And then I brought Rhysie back to me. When he thought his precious Pyrphoros was threatened, he did exactly as he was supposed to and plugged the whole thing into his stupid, empty head and I found my way back to his scrawny body.”
Rhys. Rhys was still in there. Still alive.

“But this isn’t my endgame. I don’t want to look like this for the rest of my life. Because it's like I said before.” Jack smiled, wide and genuine. “I’m fortune’s favoured son. And she brought you back to me, Tim.”

Tim closed his eyes. Ice settled in his stomach.

“Hey!” Jack snapped, yanking Tim’s hair. “What did I say? Eyes on me, princess. We’re just getting to the good part.”

Tim felt tempted to keep them shut, but there was no use in prolonging this.

“There.” He smoothed down a lock of hair. “That’s better. See, you might not be smart, but I think you can see where I’m going with this, right? We’ve got a program that can produce countless digistructs for an ungodly amount of time. We’ve got an AI that could benefit from being put into a physical body. And—” He closed the distance between them, slotting Rhys’ leg between Tim’s thighs, and pressing a chaste kiss on the skin under Tim’s eye. “—we’ve got you. The little digistruct engine that could. With what you’ve got in you already, you can make two clones. Once I’m finished with you, once I’ve pumped enough Eridium in you to power the planet, and I’ve plugged myself into that mutated digistruct device of yours and overwritten the existing code, you’ll be a veritable Handsome Jack factory. We’ll be able to produce enough Jacks to take over a planet. Hell—why think so small? We could take the galaxy, precious. Can you imagine? Well, maybe not.”

He paused, his smile widening, and Tim knew that look all too well. It was the look he’d worn the last time he’d met with Tassiter, just before he’d vaulted over the desk and put his hands around his neck.

“You won’t be able to enjoy it much,” Jack said. “You won’t enjoy much of anything except for bright colours and shiny things. Cause I’m gonna drill a hole into your temporal lobe here.” He tapped Tim’s skull. “And I’m gonna just wiggle a metal stick in there until the parts of your brain that control thought and movement and memory and whatever else turn to goo. And you get to spend the rest of your long, long, long life as a drooling vegetable.

“Oh, and don’t worry,” Jack said, his voice echoing in Tim’s ear. “Because I’m gonna take good care of you. I’ll make sure nothing happens to my precious Timmy.”

Distantly, he became aware that he was struggling. To breathe, to move, to be free. To get an inch. Anything.

He heard Rhys’ voice ring out with Jack’s mocking laugh, the noise muffled, like it came through three feet of snow. Jack kissed Tim’s forehead, and then the muzzle, and then he pulled away.

“But enough foreplay.” Jack strode over to the bank of monitors. He picked up a sleek, surgical tool from a row of similar items and held it up to the light. He pressed the trigger and the device emitted a shrill whine. He smiled. “Let’s get to the main event.”

What could Tim say, if he could speak right now? What would he say to Jack? What would he have to say about facing death again, for the second time in less than a day?

He’d spent so much time thinking about this. About what he would say to Jack, if they met again. In those long, lonely hours, he would map out arguments like a man planning a trip through a mine field. He rekindled his way with words, drank heavily, and planned out every thing he wanted to say. He spent so long in Jack’s company, in his head, that he felt certain that he would know just
how to take him apart. How to pull down his defenses, slice into his skin with the deftness of a surgeon, work his way into Jack the way Jack had so easily gotten under Tim’s skin.

You’re the reason Angel is dead.

You never learned how to care about anyone but yourself. I don’t care how shitty your childhood was. It doesn’t make up for what you did to the people who loved you.

The reason we leave and betray you, Jack, is because you drive us to do it. Because you pay our loyalty back with cruelty.

And you are cruel. You are vicious. You are self-involved, a narcissist, a sociopath. You’re a monster, Jack. No wonder Angel would’ve rather died. I would’ve made the same choice.

You thought you were making me strong, but pain doesn’t make anyone stronger. It didn’t make you stronger. It just made you pathetic.

I loved you and all you did was try to destroy me.

I loved you. I would’ve done anything for you. You ruined that.

You never loved anyone as much as you loved yourself. You were too afraid to. You were always afraid to let anyone get close. A rotten childhood doesn’t excuse that. Pathetic.

I may have been a loser, but I was better before I met you.

I wish I could go back and tell you to fuck off.

I wish I could go back and shoot you on that range.

I wish I could've saved Angel from you.

I would change everything, all of it, if I could.

What the hell was wrong with me?

Why did you pick me?

Facing his death a second time, Tim couldn’t conjure his list, couldn’t think of what he wanted to say. The bright, hot anger he’d nurtured for five long years went dark inside him. He felt as if he were sinking. He felt an incredible sadness. The words that came to him weren’t for Jack at all.

I’m sorry, Rhys.

I don’t blame you for this.

I wish we had talked sooner.

I wish I could’ve been better for you.

I’m so happy I met you.

Jack touched Tim’s face, brushing the hair back from his temples.

“You got a little grey,” he murmured, barely audible over the whine of the drill.
There was no cause to keep it on like that, Tim thought dimly. He focused on it, watching the silver blur.

Jack wouldn’t even do him the favour of killing him. Not really. He should’ve known. Hadn’t Jack himself said as much? He’d never let Tim go.

“Ah, there we are.” Jack’s smile looked ghoulish on Rhys’ face. He leaned forward and licked the tears from Tim’s cheek. Tim flinched on instinct, his arms jerking in their fastenings.

His left arm—

He could move it. He had an inch. He had a lot more than an inch.

Tim kept his face blank. He stared at Jack, into Rhys’ soft face, and curled the fingers on his left hand.

“I knew I could get you going again,” Jack mused.

He was easily distracted. Throw a toy in his path and he was like a cat. Show him your soft belly and the claws would come out. Tim let his face crumple while he worked his hand through the strap.

“Maybe you’re feeling a little sorry now, hm? Shouldn’t have been so quick to throw all our years together away like you did, maybe? Running away like a little coward bitch? Taking everything I did for you for granted for so long?” Jack pressed another kiss to Tim’s temple. He smoothed back his hair. “Too late now, precious.”

He brought the tip of the drill against his skin, just in the spot where he’d kissed Tim, and pressed down. Tim began to bleed.

Tim pressed his fingers against his wrist.

Split in half and then split in half again, but it was worse than usual this time. Tim’s head gave a massive throb and for a dizzying moment, Tim thought maybe Jack got into the bone already. But a shriek and a whine of metal and then Jack was gone. Tim wanted nothing more than to sag in his bonds and maybe black out for a bit, but self-preservation kept him awake. It was instinct that made him yank his hand free, that made him scramble for the ones tied around his chest and neck and head and Christ how many straps could there be what was this place originally designed for?

A pair of hands grabbed him and it was instincts that made Tim lash out without looking, without thinking. They caught his fist, grabbed him by the chest. Tim looked up and into the face—

—the face

—of Thing One.

It was like missing a stair in the dark, seeing that face. It was one thing looking like your abusive ex. It was another looking into his face again. Tim couldn’t bear it. He looked at the ground.

Thing One put a hand to Tim’s chest, supporting him while he worked on the other straps. Tim was half-out of his bindings when he heard Rhys’ voice shout in pain. He froze, something older and more primal than his instincts taking him over.

Thing Two was brutal, vicious and not prone to mercy. His digistrates only knew violence, and Thing Two knew it best of all.
Tim abandoned his attempts at freedom to pull at the muzzle. He needed to call him off before—

“Enough, enough!” Jack twisted Rhys’ voice to sound sharp. He bled from his nose, and from his mouth. One eye had become haloed in red, soon to turn purple and swollen.

Thing Two didn’t fall back, exactly, but he did relax his weight onto his heels. He kept his shotgun in hand, wielding it like a club, and he kept his knees slightly bent. Thing One kept his hand on Tim’s chest, the other half-raised to Tim’s face.

Jack sniffed. He wiped Rhys’ face, smearing blood. “What the hell’s the matter with you two? You’re backing the wrong horse, here.”

Neither moved. They watched him warily and didn’t speak. That, in and of itself, was strange enough to make Tim feel uneasy.

“Don’t you recognize me?” Jack swept a hand in front of Rhys’ body, encompassing it in one gesture. He then looked down at Rhys’ chest and frowned. “Alright, fair enough. This outfit is sort of outside my usual wardrobe. But come on, kiddos. I made you. I poured blood, sweat and tears into you. You were made in my image, for fuck’s sake.” He advanced on them. Thing Two didn’t raise his weapon.

Tim yanked on the muzzle, but the thing had its tines in painfully deep.

Jack, likely sensing his upper hand, began to smile.

“You’re gettin’ it now, right? Did you overhear what I was sayin’ to Timtam earlier?” He took another step forward, spreading Rhys’ hands. “We’ve got a rare opportunity here. We got a whole galaxy at our mercy, if we play our cards right. I’ve got a real vision for us all.” He stopped, lips twitching. “Sorry. Just… kinda funny, standing in this room. With the four of us in it. Five, I guess, if you want to count Rhys…”

Tim took a breath, dug his nails around the edge of the muzzle, and pulled with all his strength. He felt the tines digging into his skin, dragging like blunt claws.

“Anyway, forget that. Just think about what I’m proposing here. We’re talking immortality. We’re talking real heroics. Glory. The good stuff. The stuff worth livin’ for. I don’t know what you’ve been up to while Timmy held you hostage, but I’m gonna go out on a limb and assume it was nothing special.”

The muzzle bit into Tim’s jaw, in the line of flesh just under his cheeks. He grit his teeth and pulled.

“But that can all be over now. You’ve got a brighter future ahead. Stick with me.” Jack had an honest man’s smile, and Tim never asked where he’d gotten it. When Jack turned on the charm, he could sell water to a drowning man. He could talk Eve into taking a whole bushel. It was hard to believe he didn’t get his start in sales at Hyperion, because he would have murdered it.

Tim was never weak to those smiles, although he wasn’t strong against them either. When Jack wanted to sell Tim his vision of the future, he went with ‘honest yet vulnerable’. He’d look at Tim like Tim was the only person in the whole universe who could understand him. Like he was special. A true con man, Jack knew his mark’s weaknesses. Tim never really stood a chance.

But the digistructs… Tim didn’t know what their weakness might be. They were built in Jack’s image, so it could be they’d be swayed by Jack’s empty promises of greatness. And hell—it wasn’t as if they owed Tim anything. It wasn’t as if Tim had ever given them reason to be loyal.
Tim’s breath huffed, damp and hot in the confines of the metal device. He could feel blood oozing from fresh tears along his face, his jaw, dripping down his neck. He could feel the muzzle begin to close, resisting being removed. And yet he still pulled.

Thing One finally moved, turning his head just enough to get Tim into his sights. Tim met his eye. He swallowed.

*Please.*

Thing One’s eyebrow twitched. He turned away.

Thing Two cocked his head. He glanced to Tim, to his brother. He pursed his lips.

“You know I’m right,” Jack said, with the confidence of a salesman with a done deal.

Thing Two raised his gun.

“Nah,” he said, and fired.

Chapter End Notes

I can’t believe we’ve got about two weeks to go. I’ll save the long speech for the last chapter, but it meant and continues to mean a whole lot to me that so many people are reading and enjoying this work. You guys are great, thank you so much.

Next chapter: Things get worse.
Tim tries to play chess with a master. Then he tries to smash the board.

Violence and abuse in this chapter. So, the usual.

What would Rhys say, if he could talk right now? If he had control over his mouth and vocal chords, if he wasn’t sitting shotgun inside his own body?

Jack’s presence was a bright, hot light. Blinding. It was a hand on the top of his head while he flailed in the deep water. It was the cold, dark water, too. It was cellophane held taut over his face. It was the breath Rhys couldn’t take.

What would he say to Handsome Jack, if Jack were interested in hearing him talk?

He would not beg. He would not apologise. (Not again.) He would not say a single, solitary word. He’d said his piece already, in the wreckage of a crashed satellite. And though, like Tim, Rhys’d had many conversations with Jack in his head since then, he couldn’t think of one thing to say to him now.

Jack would never listen, anyway. There’s no changing a leopard’s spots, no matter how devastating your arguments might be.

But he would like to talk to Tim. There were some things he wanted to say to Tim.

(I’m sorry, it wasn’t me, I don’t want this to happen to you, I’m so sorry I turned away, I’m so sorry I let you go, I should’ve destroyed the arm and the eye, I should’ve kept you by my side, this is my fault, I’ll make it right, I promise, I won’t let him do this, I promise I’ll make this right for you, Tim, I promise I promise I promise.)

Tim’s head rang. The world around him spun gently on an axis Tim couldn’t follow. Someone helped him up and he didn’t think to fight. A pair of hands gripped the muzzle, forcing Tim’s head up, into a near-blinding light. Tim blinked hard. He couldn’t find meaning in what he was seeing. He thought maybe he’d been shot.

The muzzle fell away.

“Don’t!” Tim gasped. “Don’t kill him, don’t kill—” He broke off coughing, wheezing.

“Aw, you’re kidding me—!” Another flash, another explosion. Thing Two broke off into a string of curses. Tim tried to focus, but the cocktail of shock and the remaining effects of the tranquilizer had
his head in its grip and everything was too loud, too bright, too much. And Rhys—

He couldn’t hear Rhys’ voice. He could barely hear anything over the ringing in his ears, but he knew he was still talking.

“Don’t kill him, don’t you dare—”

His arms came free and he half-fell forward, grasping to his digistruct for support. Thing One pulled him loose, grabbed his arm and slung it around his shoulders.

“There you are, boss,” Thing One said. He supported his weight, and Tim finally managed to find his feet under him.

“Don’t, don’t hurt him…”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time.” Thing Two grabbed his other arm, supporting the weight on his other side. “He ran off and I’m still here, so you don’t have to keep saying it.”

“We need an Anshin,” Thing One said.

“We need 40 hours of uninterrupted sleep,” Thing Two shot back.

“Well, Anshin first.”

They did find one, possibly in the same drawer Jack found his tranq. Tim regained enough control by then to push them away.

“No,” he said.

“Boss—” Thing One began but Tim turned to his brother.

“Did you shoot him?” he demanded. Thing Two opened his mouth, but Tim went on. “Point-blank, with the shotgun?”

“He had a shield,” Thing Two said.

“He hurt him?”

“He might have to pick out some buckshot from his chest, yeah,” Thing Two admitted.

Tim shut his eyes. He took a long breath, and passed a hand over his bleeding face. He couldn’t be angry, he knew. He’d been completely at their mercy and, for whatever reason, they chose to save his life.

“Boss, you need an Anshin,” Thing One said. Tim shook his head.

“I just need a minute,” he said. He sat down and put his head between his knees. He knew this wasn’t the best use of his time—not when Jack was still out there, still wearing Rhys’ body like a suit—but he couldn’t bring himself to move.

“Give me the hypo,” he said. Thing One looked mutinous, but he slapped the Anshin into Tim’s palm. “Thank you.”

“Boss—”

“For— for everything,” Tim said, meeting his clone’s eye. “Thank you both.”
Neither appeared moved. “We knew what Jack had in store for us,” Thing One said, crouching beside Tim. “We knew he intended to overwrite our programming.”

“Fuck him,” Thing Two said.

“Still,” Tim said. “I know I haven’t exactly been— That we haven’t exactly been—” He pinched the bridge of his nose and took another long, shaking breath. “Fuck, I used to be good with words.”

“There’s a time and a place, kiddo.” Thing One slapped Tim’s knee. “Now, get up. We’ve got things to—”

The building shook. A rain of dust fell from the ceiling, and up above Tim could hear muffled gunfire. He tapped his earwidget on instinct before remembering it was long gone.

“You think that’s the others?” Thing Two asked. Tim bit back a curse and scrambled to his feet.

Tim found the others several floors up. He followed the sound of gunfire and the smell of smoke and burning plastic. They were in a lab, pinned down by loaderbots and wall turrets, both firing a near-endless stream of bullets, and both likely activated when one of someone blew the lab’s doors open.

This looked bad, but Tim knew Jack hadn’t kept him muzzled for the aesthetic.

“Shut down the security system immediately!” he snapped. The turrets died with a whine, slumping against the wall. The ‘bots turned their attention to him, and Tim knew their programming wouldn’t be so easily overridden. But Tim was a raw nerve, and recent events had pushed his mind out beyond rationality. Instinct kept him alive. It always did.

His clones helped, too.

Fiona came out first, with an SMG in her hands, and her near-depleted shield flickering back to life. She glared at Tim and Tim could see in her face that she’d been worked over, that she was just as tired and just as worn out as he was. They eyed each other warily. Thing One adjusted the grip on his rifle.

“Did you see him?” Tim asked at last.

“We saw him,” she said. “We saw him coming out of the stairwell, covered in blood.”

Tim’s stomach dropped and maybe he’d spent too long with the mask, because he didn’t think to keep his emotions off his face. Something changed in Fiona’s expression and when she spoke again, her voice had shed some of its flint.

“He shot at us. He sic’d those robots on us.” She kicked one of the fallen loaderbots, knocking its head loose from the wires still holding it. “It wasn’t really him. Was it?”

Tim glanced at his clones. “Look, this might sound hard to believe, but—”

“Not as hard as you might think.” Vaughn staggered out, one bloody hand held against the meat of his upper thigh. His pant let was soaked through, heavy and black with blood. Tim stepped forward, fumbling for the Anshin in his pocket, but Vaughn held up a hand. “I already got it. Just… give it a minute.”

Indeed, just under the smell of blood, Tim could detect the faint, medicinal and burnt meat scent of an Anshin at work. Vaughn huffed out a short breath and straightened. The tension on his face
smoothed out.

“Tell us,” he said as Athena picked her way out from the lab.

“It’s Jack,” Tim said and waited for the outburst. But, save for a look exchanged between Fiona and Vaughn and a raised brow from Athena, his audience didn’t react.

“Go on,” Fiona said.

“I don’t know the whole story, but some asshole must’ve designed a Jack AI and it’d been piggy backing on the Pyrphoros this whole time and now it’s in Rhys’ head and he— he’s—” Tim stopped, breathing hard. “He’s got some plan but he needs me. Needs us,” he amended, glancing at one of his clones.

Vaughn sighed heavily. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

“This has been… just an awful day,” he said.

“Yeah,” Tim said, a little surprised. Fiona looked unhappy and Vaughn looked exhausted, but neither of them looked shocked by the news that their friend had been headjacked. “Gotta say, you guys are being awfully cavalier about all this.”

“It’s not the first time something like this has happened,” Fiona said.

“How did you fix it the last time?” Tim asked but Vaughn shook his head before he could finish.

“We didn’t,” Fiona said, somewhat regretfully. “It just… sort of took care of itself.”

“That’s promising,” Thing One muttered. Fiona shot him an ugly look, which he ignored.

“And last time Jack didn’t have complete control like this,” Vaughn said. He’d gotten to his feet once more and some of the colour had returned to his face. “I think we can handle this.” He looked up at Tim with a frown. “But I’m going to need a few things. Do you have any idea where Jack might’ve gone?”

“I don’t,” Tim admitted. “But I don’t think he’ll leave the city.”

“Agreed,” Fiona said. “He was the one who brought us here. Whatever he’s after, he’s going to find it all in here.”

“We shouldn’t leave him alone for too long,” Athena said. She nudged one of the dormant turrets with the butt of her rifle. “He could hack back into the security system. Or worse.”

“You said you can handle this,” Tim said, turning to Vaughn. “Does that mean you can save him?”

He’d forgotten again that his face was unmasked, that if he didn’t keep himself in check, people could see what he was thinking or feeling. Vaughn must’ve seen something he didn’t like, because he looked away.

“Like I said, I’ll need some things first,” he said.

“Whatever you need, I’ll give it to you,” Tim said.

Vaughn puffed out a quiet breath and pushed a few loose strands of hair back from his forehead. “Right. Let’s start with a secure uplink.”
At any other time, Tim might’ve found this situation amusing. Watching as Yvette and Sasha slowly reacted to Vaughn’s story, the way the COO’s head sank lower and lower until she had her face in both hands. The way Sasha slunk down in her seat, as if she were melting. Both their faces drawn with unhappiness, Sasha looking worried and Yvette looking exasperated (and maybe a little worried).

“That’s why we need you to send us our Plan F,” Vaughn finished.

Yvette rubbed circles into her temple, her eyes closed. “You know why we call it ‘Plan F’, don’t you?” she asked.

“I do,” Vaughn said regretfully.

“I don’t think he ever finished it. And half the simulations we ran—”

Vaughn crossed his arms. “I know. I saw the results. I know what the success rate looks like.” He hunched down in his chair. “But it’s all we’ve got.”

Sasha looked up. “What are we talking about here?”

“A program,” Yvette said without turning around. “Something Rhys had been developing in his spare time in the event… in the event that something like this should happen to him.”

“Again,” Fiona said bitterly.

“It’s like a virus,” Vaughn said. “He programmed it to cleanse his system of anything that remotely resembles AI code. We can plug it in his head and flush Jack out.”

“Great,” Tim said, pushing up from he’d been slouching against the console. “Give it to me and I’ll—”

“Wait, what makes you think you’re the guy for this?” Fiona demanded.

“Because Jack won’t kill me on sight,” Tim said. “He needs me.”

“It’s not that easy,” Vaughn said, cutting Fiona off. “This program could work, yeah, but sometimes it has difficulty telling the difference between the AI code it should target and code that just resembles AI code.”

Both Fiona and Tim stared at him.

“And that’s… bad?” Fiona asked.

“In previous simulations,” Yvette said, “it’s been known to attack the higher functions of the cybernetics. When Rhys got his temple port and eye, the surgeons had to remove a large part of his brain to make room.”

Tim paled. “They cut into his brain?”

“It was perfectly safe. And completely normal,” Yvette said.

“They had to do it. It’s what lets people interface with their cybernetics properly,” Vaughn said. He pushed his fingers under his glasses to rub at his eyes. “But that’s the problem with Plan F. It could attack parts of Rhys’ own code. The stuff he needs to keep… well, to keep functioning.”

“It could turn him into a vegetable,” Yvette said. “It was one of the results he got in the simulations
he ran. It came up a few times.”

“How many times?” Athena asked.

Yvette sighed and pulled her head upright. “According to the last round of data collection? Around 77.97% of times,” she said.

It was almost funny. It really was. The irony would’ve made Tim laugh if he thought he could open his mouth without screaming.

Jack could always find some new way to make himself a nuisance. To ruin someone’s life. He was a maestro of emotional and mental destruction. For the first time, Tim wished Jack hadn’t died in that volcano, just so he could finally jam the barrel of a gun in his ribs and pull the trigger. For the first time, Tim wished he’d been there with the other vault hunters. He placed a hand over his mouth and sighed through his fingers.

“We have to do it,” Athena said. She sounded firm, determined and when Tim spared her a glance, he could see the straight way she held herself. Ready for battle.

“You mean Tim has to do it,” Fiona said, pacing to the centre of the room. “Right, tough guy? You said it yourself.”

But more than anything, Tim wished Fiona wasn’t right. He scrubbed his face with both hands and sighed.

“Jack will shoot any of you on sight,” he said.

“But not you,” Fiona said. Tim nodded. “Why not?” And maybe she saw something in his face, or maybe she finally realised what a raging bitch she was being, but something in her voice had gotten a little softer.

And maybe that was why Tim only sounded tired when he said, “Why do you think?”

She stared at him for a long moment, and Tim felt reminded of Lilith’s gaze. He felt as if he was being judged, his heart weighted against a feather. He met her eyes and held them as best he could.

“It’s the only shot we’ve got,” Vaughn said, breaking the silence to Tim’s relief.

They found a portable data drive in a desk drawer, one large enough to house what Tim assumed was called ‘Plan F’, although the download screen showed a program called ‘ALCH3MY.EXE’ being transferred over. There wasn’t much to do but watch the progress bar tick up, and so the others began to rummage through the area, searching for ammo and supplies. Tim’s voice came in handy there, as a simple command for a location gave them what they needed.

Another command for signs of security intrusions and echo locations of living bodies gave them Jack’s position. He hadn’t even left the building. Instead, he’d gone up, ascending to the luxury guest residences.

“Looks like he was trying to dodge something,” Athena said, tapping her finger against the screen. “He must’ve tripped an alarm or something. He—whoa.”

A screen popped up under her hand, displaying grainy security footage of the hall. They watched as
Jack, huddled against a decorative statue, pulled up a display on Rhys’ cybernetic arm. A few seconds later, one of the loaderbots stumbled into frame, its optic flashing in distress, before it collapsed onto the ground. Another second later, three others joined it. Jack glanced up at the camera and the footage went black.

“He’s surprisingly good at that,” Athena said.

“It’s his city,” Tim said. “His stupid robots. I wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t have a hand in programming at least some of the security here.”

“His city and his robots.” Athena crossed her arms, tipped her chin low. She frowned down at the screen, her full, lower lip jutting out. Tim’s heart gave a painful squeeze at the sight. “Are you sure you can do this, Tim? He’s got something of an advantage over you.”

Tim ran a hand through his hair and closed his eyes on the digital display. They couldn’t find Jack’s signal in real-time—no doubt he’d figured out they were looking for him and found a way to hide his signature—but the system showed them the last place Jack had last been registered. A Presidential Suite on the 83rd floor.

“I’ll be fine,” Tim said. Athena pierced him with a quick look. He flushed. “It’s not like we have a choice, is it? I’ll get to him. I’ll…I can do this.”

“You look awful,” Athena said, diplomatic as ever. “Like you’re going to fall over. And you have personal feelings that might cloud your judgement. Strategically speaking, you’re the last person I would send in to fight Jack.”

“Thanks.”

“You know I’m right. This is a bad call,” she said.

It was, and trust Athena to put it out there. Tim was only glad they were alone, that the others had gone off to other rooms to dig for Anshins and food.

“Maybe,” he said. “But I’ve told you already, it’s the only call we can make. Anyway, what’s the point in picking at this? Nothing’s going to change.”

Athena pursed her lips and gave Tim a longer, more considering look. “I just want to know you’re ready,” she said. “I want you to think hard about what’s coming next. About what you’ll have to face.”

“Ready?” Tim huffed a weak laugh. “Sure. Why not? What’s the worst Jack could throw at me now? What do you think he could do to me that he hasn’t already done? I’m ready for him. I can handle him.”

Athena’s expression didn’t change, which told Tim everything he needed to know about what she thought of his speech.

“And Rhys?” she asked.

Tim looked at the progress bar on the big screen. “What about him?” he asked.

“You heard what they said. Seventy-seven point whatever percent change that this plan will fry his brain. You could kill him, Tim. Do you think you can handle that?”

Tim didn’t respond. The progress bar ticked up another percent.
“I know what you’re thinking,” Athena went on. “If you let Jack take you over—and don’t deny it, I can see your gears turning—if you let him take you over like he wants, he’ll leave Rhys’ head. Sparing Rhys’ life. And you’re just self-loathing enough to think it might be worth it.”

The progress screen displayed ‘Transfer at 85%...’.

It was disturbing to think how well she knew him. More disturbing yet to think that she was his oldest, and closest friend. And for that reason, he supposed he owed her a little honesty.

“It isn’t,” Tim said. He swallowed, continued. “What Jack’s got in mind... it’ll be more than just my life at risk if he succeeds.” And he would too, the bastard. Things tended to work out for Handsome Jack, much to the detriment of everyone else.

Athena’s stare didn’t waver. “So, you wouldn’t do it?”

“I’d like to think I’ve learned my lesson about saying ‘yes’ to Jack.”

“Even if it would save Rhys’ life?”

Transfer at 96%...

“Yeah.” Tim’s voice sounded weak, even to his own ears. He tried again, “Yeah. Even if it would save him. I’m not letting Jack in.”

Athena subjected him to another few seconds of silence. She took a breath and turned away.

“Alright,” she said. “I believe you.”

At least one of them did.

A little four-note fanfare sounded from the big screen and the words ‘TRANSFER COMPLETE’ displayed in bold type.

As Tim predicted, Jack wasn’t on the 83rd floor. The doors to the Presidential Suite hung off their hinges (actual hinges! And the doors were made from real, hand-carved wood. The whole thing was breath-takingly impractical, which Tim assumed meant it was all very expensive) and the interior was a wreck. The four loaderbots Tim had seen collapse over security footage were still there, although they looked as if they’d been partially stripped.

Fiona picked her way through the mess of spilled stuffing and white feathers. It looked as if someone had taken a knife to the bed, the duvet, the pillows, and every cushion on the couch. Torn canvas hung from broken frames on the wall, and pieces of porcelain and coloured glass littered the floor. A chandelier that likely cost more than Tim earned in the last year teetered from freyed wires on the ceiling, crystals clinking gently.

“What the hell was he doing in here?” Fiona asked, nudging a piece of painted porcelain with the toe of her boot.

“Maybe he was looking for something,” Vaughn said.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Fiona frowned at a scorch mark on a solid bronze statue. “It kind of looks like he was just having a tantrum.”

Tim’s eyes fell on the ripped couch. A lump rose in his throat.
“Yeah,” he said.

Ignore it, he told himself. Jack’s just trying to get under your skin. If only he wasn’t so fucking good at it.

“The other rooms don’t look like this,” Athena said, stepping through the door frame with one of Tim’s clones behind her.

Thing Two caught Tim’s eye and gave a small shake of his head. They’d been ordered into silence, with some reluctance. Tim still felt grateful for their interference before, self-motivated as it might’ve been, but while the others seemed tentatively alright with Tim’s presence, Tim didn’t want to test their patience by trying to extend it to his clones. So he kept them quiet.

“If he was having a tantrum, that doesn’t explain the loaderbots.” Fiona crouched beside one of the fallen loaders, prodding at it tentatively with the barrel of her gun. “They look as if they were taken apart for a reason.”

“You think he was trying to build something?” Vaughn said.

“Almost definitely,” Tim said. “Probably a bomb. Or worse.”

Thing Two came up beside him, staring at the couch with the same blasé expression he generally wore when there was nothing to shoot at. Tim couldn’t help the way he tensed.

“We shouldn’t be here,” Tim said. Thing Two huffed.

The lights flickered as they stepped into the hall. Tim looked up just as a loose ceiling panel fell to the ground and a turret descended.

Tim had just enough time to register the extrusion of yellow and white bolted onto its barrel before it commenced opening fire. Thing Two caught him around the waist and flung them both into the destroyed Presidential Suite, his shield flickering with absorbed impact. Bullets chewed up the floor, sending splinters and chips of expensive, impractical wood flying.

Fiona cursed and scrambled to her feet as another turret clanked to life, knocking another series of panels loose from the ceiling at the mouth of the hall. The turret outside their door swivelled on its axis, the long barrel pointing straight inside.

“Disable turrets on floor 83!” Tim snapped as he vaulted over the ripped mattress to take shelter on the other side of the massive bed. The turret chassis spat out sparks, but otherwise showed no sign it even registered his command. He cursed.

“He must’ve built something using the loaderbot parts to override your voice commands,” Fiona said.

“Great,” Tim muttered. “Onto plan b, then.”

Plan B took longer than Tim would’ve liked; nearly five minutes to disable the turret outside their door, and another three to destroy the two at the end of the hall (Athena’s shield having already taken care of the third). Athena and Vaughn peered cautiously out from their hiding spot in the room across the hall.

Vaughn got as far as, “Do you think—” before more turrets descended.

The group ran before they could get penned in again, making for the emergency stairs. They got as
far as around one corner before a spray of bullets cut straight through the centre of the hall and
Athena was fast, fast enough to throw her shield in time to absorb a round of four bullets that would
have hit Fiona in her face, neck and chest. She was fast enough to push Vaughn against the wall
with her other hand.

She wasn’t fast enough to dodge the next turret, which descended in a shower of sparks on her right
and fired a spray that depleted her shield and ripped her open.

Tim was slow. He was slow enough to watch it happen, slow enough that he couldn’t react in time.
Thing Two was faster. He threw himself forward, shield flickering under the spray, and pulled
Athena up by the scruff of her neck, and held her like a rag doll. He yanked Vaughn up at the same
time and pulled them both backwards into a room, the door splintering under their combined weight.
Athena screamed when they hit the ground and Vaughn yelled, “It’s fine, I’ve got a—”

And then the world went white.

An explosion is sound and fury. It’s hotter than the devil’s breath, louder than a blaspheme in
heaven. Tim hit the opposite wall with enough force to push him through. He fell in a heap in
another unused luxury room. Pieces of the wall, of the door, and parts of the ceiling rained down
with him. He lay still for a while—hard to say exactly how long—hears ringing, the world in a
blur, his head swimming. It would be easy, in that state, to confuse the spike of pain behind his eyes
as a concussion or a head injury, but even like that, Tim knew what it meant. He was down a clone.
He could only hope Thing Two managed to save—

Tim gasped and choked on a lungful of smoke and dust. He tried to push himself back onto his feet
and felt the debris shift, heard the sound of dust hissing, pebbles rolling as he forced his way up. He
kicked off the last of the wreck that pinned him, his chest spasming for a clean breath of air. He
heard someone groan on the opposite side of the room, and saw a pile of wood and ruin move
slightly.

Tim scrambled over, his mind blissfully empty. He took hold of one plank and pulled it off. He took
another and did the same. He pushed some of the ceiling away and grabbed the hand that emerged.

Fiona came free in seconds. She coughed and sputtered, spat and wheezed. Tim held her hand all the
while, supporting her as she struggled upright. Even in the dim, flickering light, Tim could tell she
looked awful. Nearly grey, even under the dust and dirt and streaked soot. He supposed he didn’t
look any better. She blinked her streaming eyes at him and wiped her mouth and face with her free
hand.

“What…?” she tried. Tim could only stare in response. Distantly, he became aware that he’d slipped
into shock. It’d been a long day.

She shook her head at whatever she saw in his (bare, exposed) face. She reached into her jacket, her
face contorting into a wince. She cursed and when she pulled her hand out, Tim saw it was covered
with luminescent red liquid.

“Goddammit,” she muttered. “Anshin must’ve broken in the fall. Tim, do you have…?”

Given a task, Tim moved quickly again. He searched himself and turned up his one remaining
Anshin, miraculously unbroken. She started forward, but hesitated.

“What do you have another?” she asked.

“No,” Tim said.
“Then keep it. I’ll find something.” She flicked her damp hair back from her face. “We need to find the others. They might need…” She trailed off, and Tim could feel a massive space opening up in the conversation, filling in with the long, long list of things the others might need. Better friends, for starters.

Tim and Fiona picked their way carefully into what remained of the hall. A weak fire snapped in the room opposite, slowly working its way through what had once been a very nice four-piece bedroom set. Tim could see it clearly because the wall and most of the floor in the room had vanished completely. A hole sat in the centre of the floor, like a god had punched their finger through the building.

Neither of them spoke as they approached. The floor creaked as they got closer to the lip of the hole. Tim peered inside, but his watering eyes couldn’t make out much. He thought he could see a pale figure, but it didn’t seem right. It seemed too small, too far away.

Fiona got down on her knees, and, taking great care, she leaned over the edge.

“Vaughn?” she rasped. She cleared her throat, attempting to dislodge the mess they’d inhaled. “Vaughn? Athena?”

A distant groan reached their ears, almost too faint to be heard over the crack of burning wood.

“Athena?” Tim nearly jumped at the sound of his own voice. He hadn’t meant to speak. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest. “Athena, are you alright?”

Coughing and more groaning, as if from far away. Tim knelt down carefully, bringing himself closer to the edge.


“I know,” Tim said, maybe too soft to be heard.

“How’s Athena? Is she—?” Fiona stopped, her chest heaving with heavy breath.

“Alive,” Vaughn said. They could hear the sound of things moving around, and someone groaning. “She’s hurt but she’s alive.”

Tim could picture her as he’d last seen her, suspended with one arm extended to catch her shield, the turret warming up to fire. He felt as if he could reach out, pull her back to safety. Without thinking, he took out his Anshin.

“Hey, Vaughn, we’ve got a hypo for you,” Fiona said. “We’ll just—”

“Don’t!” Vaughn’s voice echoed against the walls of the building. “Don’t do it. We’re too far. It’ll break.”

“How far did you fall?” Fiona demanded as Tim reluctantly withdrew his hand.

“I don’t know. I felt the floor give way at least twice. I can’t—” He broke off, coughing. “I can’t see much.”

Tim could hear a quiet voice, too soft to make out the words, but he recognized Athena’s voice when he heard it.
“I’m going to try to get a sense of things,” Vaughn said.

“Be careful,” Fiona said.

Tim sat in interminable silence while he listened to the sounds coming from below. He strained to hear anything beyond the fire slowly dying in their room, and the sounds of Vaughn moving around from wall to wall. He thought, at one point, he could hear Athena’s laboured breathing but he couldn’t be sure.

“I think I found a door,” Vaughn called up. Tim waited, holding his breath, while he listened to the sounds of Vaughn straining. “Damn. It’s locked.”

“Do you have a gun?” Fiona asked.

Tim blinked and pinched the bridge of his nose. The shock he’d worn like a blanket had begun to slide away, and while that lead to more coherent, present thoughts, he sort of missed it.

“I do but I can’t see anything. Besides, I don’t think—” He broke off with a grunt, and another curse. “Yeah. It’s solid. The whole room feels solid. I’m not sure there was anything in here when we came in.”

Tim bit his lip, a dark suspicion beginning to form. “Uh. Computer, what’s located three storeys directly below us?” he asked.

Something whirred in the ceiling above and, moments later, a display of the familiar cross-section of the building appeared in the air, their location indicated by a flashing yellow beacon. Tim followed the beacon down two stories, ignoring the red-text warning of damage recorded in the area.

“Oh, shit,” Fiona breathed.


“You’re in a vault,” Tim said. No immediate response came, and so Tim continued, “A high security vault. Probably part of the hotel. Meant for whatever valuables the guests had with them.”

Silence. And then, “Oh.”

“Jack knew. He must’ve set explosions to rip the ceiling open. Son of a bitch.” Fiona brought her fist high, as if she were about to hit the ground, but she quickly thought better of it. Instead, she cursed again.

“Is there any way you can get us out?” Vaughn asked hopefully.

Tim had a feeling they couldn’t, but he tried anyway. “Computer, open the vault door on floor 79.”

True to his instinct, nothing happened, save for the appearance of a new warning message, informing him of that he required a security override password. ‘Angel’ probably wouldn’t cover it this time, although he tried anyway and got his expected results.

“Try something else,” Fiona suggested.

“I don’t know anything else that might work,” Tim said. Fiona gave him a strange look. “What?”

“Are you kidding? You were the guy for years. You don’t know anything else he might use as a password?”
“I know he was a paranoid, suspicious bastard,” Tim shot back. “We didn’t exactly have sharing time. At least, he never shared with me,” he added bitterly.

“Forget it. We need to figure out a way down there. We—” Fiona stopped as the display flickered and went dead. “Um.”

The building shook and the lights died. Tim sucked in a sharp breath as he was plunged into sudden darkness. He reached out blindly and found Fiona’s hand.

“It’s Jack,” he said, needlessly.

“What is he doing?” Fiona asked, her fingers curling around his.

“I don’t know.”

No no no, pumpkin, none of that. You know. Think it through. What would Jack do.

Fuck. Tim did know. Jack had set a trap for them—for Tim. But it didn’t go off quite right and he caught two people he didn’t actually care about. So, first gambit failed. What’s the next one?

Escalation. Flush ‘em out into the open.

Tim grabbed Fiona by the shoulder, dragged her to her feet, just as the lights came back on at full force. They both flinched, blinded, and stumbled back. Tim heard the sound of something whirring in the ceiling, heard the sound of Vaughn shouting something—a warning—and heard the click-click-click of a turret warming up.

They just managed to get into the hall when the turret opened fire. They ran through the hall, towards the elevator, which ascended to their hall just as they skidded into sight. Tim had enough breath to curse as the doors slid open, revealing four loaderbots. Fiona yanked him down another hall, turrets knocking their way through the ceiling behind them, and they both ran towards the stairwell.

This door was not wood. This was a metal fire door and it slammed behind them just as bullets chipped off the concrete stairs. Tim shot the handle off, fusing the lock with a fire round. And then there was nothing to do but catch their breath.

Neither spoke immediately. Not that they could be heard over the sound of bullets denting security-grade metal.

“We can’t stick around,” Fiona said. Tim nodded and started down the stairs. Fiona followed with her gun drawn. Behind them, they could hear as the firing wound down, and one by one the turrets went silent.

“You don’t think there’s any turrets in the stairs, do you?” Fiona asked.

“I hope not,” Tim said.

“I don’t suppose you could just ask,” Fiona said.

Tim opened his mouth to do just that but stopped in time. “No,” he said. “I can’t just ask. Think about it,” he said as Fiona gave him an annoyed look. “If Jack’s in the system, and I’d bet he is, he can track any attempts I make to get in and make changes. I think that’s how he knew to open fire on us in the hotel room. He knew it was me up there.”

Fiona scowled but didn’t argue, which he hoped meant she believed him.
“Fine. But we need to get to Vaughn and Athena. They’re fish in a barrel down there,” she said.

What would Jack do?

Tim felt shepherded. The guns had been just a few seconds behind, just a little bit too slow. Jack wasn’t looking to kill, after all. He just wanted to get Tim where he needed him. Someplace he could trap him. Tim looked up at the windowless stairwell winding above them.

And Jack knew he had something Tim would want. Something he’d head towards: his oldest and only friend. An open, bleeding target.

So. Jack intended to draw Tim out by dangling his dying friend as bait. But what then? He’d want to incapacitate Tim somehow, or force him into surrendering. Or maybe he wanted Tim to stay put, right where he was, trying in vain to understand Jack’s next move. Jack was obnoxious and bombastic, but he was a hell of a strategist. Tim’s own abilities didn’t extend far beyond the ones that kept him alive moment-by-moment. The kind that made him look good on the battlefield, like he had a plan beyond ‘improvise and wing it’. He couldn’t plot out a game of chess the way Jack could.

So why bother?

“Alright,” Tim said at last as they stopped in front of the next landing. “You go on ahead. Find an Anshin or seven and bring it to Athena. I bet you’ll be able to get to them more easily if you’re just one floor above them.”

“Right,” Fiona said, a little suspiciously. “But what about you? Where will you be?”

“What do you think?” Tim gave her an exhausted smile. “It’s me he’s after. I’ll draw his ire and give you the time and space you need to help the others.”

If there was anyone who might get dewy eyed over Tim’s noble self-sacrifice, it wasn’t Fiona. She gave him another one of those measuring looks, and Tim couldn’t guess how he weighed up.

“Look,” she said. “If there was any other way, I’d go with you. In a heartbeat. And not because I want to offer my axe to your doomed cause, but because I’m still not sure I trust you.”

“If there’s anything you can trust me on, it’s this,” Tim said. “I will never go back to Jack. I’d die first.”

She pushed out a long breath. “Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, I think I’m getting that. But don’t be in a rush to die. Not before you save Rhys. Alright?”

“Yeah,” Tim said. And then, to both their surprise, he touched the tips of his fingers to the back of her hand. “I’ll save him.”

Tim was not a strategist. But he was a survivor.

The doors bounced off the wall as he strode into the 70th floor. His clothes were ripped and bloody, and he reeked of soot and fire. His hair was streaked with ash and pearlescent machine oil, with more smeared across his face, mingled with blood. Most of it his.

“Computer, give me the location of anyone still breathing in this heap.”

The screen projected steps ahead of him, the now all-too-familiar cross section of the building. Five dots flashed yellow against the blue wireframe. Two staying put in a hole (and Tim breathed a small
sigh of relief at the sight of it—Athena was at least still kicking), one moving slowly across the floor just above. He spotted himself, circling through floor 70. And the last, far below, in the lab. He’d doubled-back. Typical.

Turrets whirred to life, slumping down from the ceiling. These were not weighted with loderbot mods, but their only response to Tim’s snapped “Stand down!” was a twitch and a shower of sparks. That, too, was just fucking typical. Tim had a shotgun at the ready, because he knew how his luck ran.

Tim was a survivor. He was a cockroach. Rats in the sewer after the whole city got knocked down. Really, did Jack think this would cow him? Anger rose like the tide, and Tim surrendered himself gratefully to it, let it wash up over his head, until he was entirely submerged. Anger was better. Anger was useful. It didn’t make him stronger, but it made him hurt less.

He made his way through the building. He hadn’t picked the 70th floor at random. He found an office with a supply cache of weapons and stripped it. Sparks and broken machinery hailed down in his wake, fire and acid rounds doing their work through the turrets. Tim didn’t really know what Jack’s goal was here—herding him again? Make him waste ammo?—but he didn’t care. He made his way towards the elevator and didn’t run when the doors parted. Where Jack found himself these loaderbots, Tim couldn’t begin to guess. Didn’t really care. But maybe he smiled when he saw two of them waiting for him. (And only two. Child’s play.)

He collected whatever ammo they’d dropped (not much). They stained his hands with the same oil as their fallen siblings, a slick, blue-black substance that gleamed with a rainbow shine under the fluorescents. Tim kicked the loaders’ remains out of the car and hit the button for the basement. He pressed his palm against the security panel and to his surprise, it gave a cheerful beep and turned green. Authorized. He dropped his hand, leaving behind a smear of black and red. The doors slid closed and the elevator began its smooth descent.

He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. Tried to ignore that old, familiar fear. He squeezed his hand, digging his blunt nails into the calluses on his palm. Oil dripped between his fingers. And below, Jack waited for him.

Are you ready for this? Tim asked himself.

He felt a prickle on the back of his neck, and he knew, without opening his eyes, that he was being watched. Jack’s paranoia went beyond bolting a turret onto every flat surface; he’d also stuck micro cameras in every corner. Tim wished for the hundredth time that he still had his mask. Without the adrenaline of a fight, his fears began to creep out of their hiding places. He kept his face blank, peaceful. He’d gotten so good at keeping his true feelings off his face, but it’d gotten harder. He’d been free for so long.

The elevator lurched to a stop. The lights flickered and died. Naturally. Without opening his eyes, Tim shifted his shotgun back into both hands, slipping two fingers over the trigger.

“How’s it goin’, pumpkin? Feelin’ cosy in there?”

Tim opened his eyes. The emergency lights had come on, and for a moment he felt a wave of deja-vu so strong it nearly knocked him down. He almost reached for his ECHO, before remembering his was long gone and Angel was long dead. Tim took a long breath and let it out slow. He kept his face placid.

“Hello, Jack,” he said. “You actually want to hear me talk now?”
“Kinda don’t have a choice. Anyway, no danger in it. I’ve locked you out of the system. I’m pretty good at this.”

“I’m really impressed,” Tim said. A staticy chuckle sounded over the PA.

“See, I missed that. Missed your sense of humour. How’ve you been, kitten? You look awful.”

“I’ve had better days,” Tim admitted.

“Not since you left me, I bet.”

Tim forced a laugh. “Every day since I left you has been like an ice cream social. A parade that never ends. A fucking Bacchanalia of good times.”

“Language.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

A turret descended from the ceiling. This time, Tim’s laugh was natural.

“And he threatens me! What a surprise. What are you gonna do, Jack? Gonna shoot me? You won’t kill me.”

“Don’t assume what I will and won’t do. You’re not as indispensable as you think, sunshine.”

“Oh yeah?” Tim leaned back against the wall, cradling the shotgun in his hands. He tilted his head to the side and smirked. “Take the shot, then. I won’t stop you. No, I’m serious.” He snapped the gun open and let the ammo cartridge fall to the ground. The shotgun followed shortly.

“Take it, go on.” He held his arms wide, stuck his chest out. “Cause I’ll take death. Hell, I’d prefer it, if my alternative is going back to you.”

The turret didn’t move. The barrel of its gun remained squarely aimed at Tim’s chest.

“You... are really, really pissing me off.”

“Well, I thought I’d play to my strengths.”

Jack said nothing. The turret remained still.

“Do you know, I think about that day a lot,” Tim said. “The day I left you. It’d be generous to call those Hyperion thugs you set to watch me ‘innocent’ but they weren’t trying to skin me, either. They were friendly to me in the carrier, even if I wasn’t. And I killed them. And I feel guilty about that. I do. But I don’t regret it. Because I’m not a good man. I’m not sure I ever was. And because it got me away from you. I’d do it again.” Tim smiled, a flash of bright teeth and dimples. Jack’s propaganda smile, sharp as a razor. “I would do it all again!”

Silence, save for the soft hiss of an open connection. And then, Tim heard Jack’s laugh, although it came out strained.

“I don’t know why I’m surprised. I guess I should’ve expected this from you. Fucking ingrate that you are. After everything I did for you—”

“You—!” Tim sputtered, his composure slipping. “You brainwashed me, you fucking psycho! You took a red-hot brand and stabbed me in the face with it!”
“Aw Christ, here we go…” He heard Jack’s sigh. “I did that FOR you, you idiot. I was trying to help you! All I ever did! Was try to help you! And this is the thanks you give me?”

Tim laughed again, more than just a little hysterical. He pushed his hands through his hair, swallowing thickly. What did he expect?

“Fuck, I hate you so much.”

“Yeah? You should watch your mouth, Timmy. In case you’ve forgotten, you’re not the only one I’ve got pinned to my corkboard.” Tim’s head snapped up. “Or maybe you don’t care about that gladiator bitch and her short buddy anymore. But that’s okay—because Rhys cares.”

Tim’s breath caught.

“Poor little Rhysie cares so much. He doesn’t want to, bless his worthless heart, but he always did. It’s his big weakness. Just like yours. And he’s awake. I can make him watch while I activate every security system in this pile and turn all his best friends into a red mist. Whaddya say, Tim?”

The turret pulled itself from its slump. Tim swallowed. “Cause I don’t mind. I can pilot this body for the rest of its life for all I care.”

Tim stared down the barrel of another threat. Bravado clawed in his throat, the sort of things he might say if he were on camera, if this were just another mission, a piece of propaganda. The act he’d put on so well, because he knew it would infuriate Jack.

“Don’t,” he said instead.

“Sorry, didn’t catch that. Wanna try that again, kitten?”

Tim swallowed. It hurt how smug Jack sounded, how much it made him sound like Rhys.

“Don’t,” he said. Athena was right, god damn her, and Tim was wrong. He wasn’t ready for this.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t hurt them. Don’t do that to Rhys.”

“Ooooh, not so tough now, are we? What happened to all that confidence earlier, huh? All that give ‘em hell attitude? I was almost impressed. Thought maybe you finally grew a pair. But of course not. Because this is what you are, Timmy. What you’ll always be. Pathetic and small and weak and always a few steps behind me.”

Tim could swear the walls were moving, in and out in slow motion, like something breathing. His battered heart picked up its pace and all his anger drained away, the heat of it replaced by cold fear seeping through him like dark water from the depths. Choking.

Laughter crackled over the system, bringing a sharp shriek of feedback. “Aw, Timmy. You’re not lookin’ so good. Still uncomfortable in a small space, hm? Maybe I should keep you there for a while. Let you think over what you’ve done. How long does it take to die of dehydration? I’d say a day, but honestly, when was the last time you had any water? I doubt you’d last even that long. And all the while, I’ll let you sit and think about what I’m doing. Maybe I’ll just go ahead and kill the others anyway. They’ve got nothing to offer me.”

“Jack,” Tim said.

“What is it, pumpkin? You ready to play nice?” Tim said nothing. “Go on, then. Beg me.”
Tim’s jaw worked for a moment. “Please, Jack,” he said.

“Pfft. I know for a fact that you can do better than that.” Tim ground his teeth and glared at the ground. “C’mon, princess. Cut the pouting and start with the pretty please or I start takin’ shots at my fish in a barrel. I bet shorty dances real good.”

Tim closed his eyes, his hands bunching into fists. To hell with dignity. What did that ever get him? He sank down to his knees.

“Please, Jack,” he ground out. “Please don’t do it. Please don’t do that to Rhys. I’m begging you.”

Jack made a soft noise over the line, something between a scoff and a sigh. “Not your best work, Timmy, if I’m being honest here. But, I’ll tell ya, the sight of you on your knees never gets old. How ‘bout this? How about you just stay put, sit nice and pretty for me, while I finish getting some things ready, and then I’ll send some ‘bots over to collect you when I’m done. Sound good?”

“And you’ll leave the others alone?” Tim asked.

Jack chuckled. “I don’t remember saying anything about that.”

“Jack—”

“Sit tight, kiddo. I’ll be ‘round in an hour. Oh and if you try to escape, I’ll shoot ya dead.”

“Jack!” Tim surged to his feet.

“Toodles!”

The ceiling was too high to easily climb. The doors were sealed tight and, according to the last count he’d seen, he was stuck between floor 45 and 44. The floor looked solid and, when Tim got down for a better look, he saw that there was nothing to pry open.

Breathing hard, Tim sat back against the wall and pushed both hands through his hair. The walls tightened around him like a noose. He closed his eyes.

What could he do but wait?

Chapter End Notes

Three more chapters! Six months of my dang life and we're down to the wire here.

Thanks as always to everyone who reads, and comments, and leaves kudos, and general good will. Reading these comments is the highlight of my week.

Next chapter: Knock down, drag out.
Part VI: Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Look at the person I've turned into.
Tell me how you like him now.

As it turned out, Tim would not have to wait long.
Jack pushed away from the console, rolling back on the stolen office chair, feeling entirely too pleased with himself. Whoever taught Tim that kind of attitude would have to be dealt with. Fortunately, Tim knew his place. He'd been too well-trained not to come to heel.

He turned his chair to face the long, mechanical spike at the centre of the room. Even behind a solid foot of treated glass, Jack could feel the hum of it powering up. He could feel it in his teeth when he clenched his jaw. Eridium’s violet glow filled the room, tendrils of its power curling through the glass and metal needle.

Epimetheus. Who would have thought that crazy little gremlin could pull it off? Jack had been willing to throw money at it, willing to let his engineers build the needle inside his precious city, but even he had his doubts.

The needle still needed calibrating, but that would only take a few hours. Enough time to let Jack continue what he'd started with Tim.

He returned to the medical room they’d so recently vacated and checked the straps on the table, and made a small, satisfied noise at what he’d found. There were no signs of breakage or weakness.

Which was good but also… odd. How had Tim gotten loose the first time?
Nevermind. It wouldn’t happen a second time. Jack could learn from his mistakes. As funny as it would be to keep Tim awake during the procedure, Jack knew he couldn’t risk it.

See? He said to his passenger. I’m practically merciful. I can make sacrifices when the cause calls for it.

His passenger didn’t reply. Rhys hadn’t had much to say since Jack’d come back on board, and honestly, it wasn’t a huge disappointment. There wasn’t anything the kid had to say that might’ve held Jack’s interest, anyway.

Except maybe to hear him beg. The memory of what Rhys’d seen before he pulled out his optic still burned in Jack’s mind. He’d make Rhys pay for that. There were other rooms like this one in the building, other tables with straps, other trays with silver instruments. He'd get Rhys squealing in no time.

But no use getting ahead of himself.

He returned to the desk and sat down. Watching the needle power up was an interesting experience, but the humming was giving him a headache. He pulled up his work screens, one displaying the read-out of his own coding, one displaying brain anatomy, and the final showing the newly minted
Pyrphoros. It really was a brilliant piece of business—made even better with Jack’s incredible coding. He had to admit, the idea of accessing millions of years of Eridian knowledge was appealing. Once he finished with Tim and got into his proper body, he’d take a real crack at being the translator.

He glanced back at the screen to watch Tim scratch at the floor like a mouse in a cage. Hilarious. But not what they agreed on.

“Oh, Timmy.” He sighed. “What am I gonna do with you?”

He dismissed a screen displaying brain function and anatomy and called up his security monitor. The hat girl had found her way to the others. She lay flat on her stomach on the ledge one storey above, one arm outstretched with what looked like an Anshin in her hand. Short and muscular was doing his best to grab it from her, but of course he had a natural disadvantage. Jack brought up his security functions.

He considered calling Tim, patching him in so he could hear the sound of his buddies dying, but he decided it wasn’t worth it. There’d be plenty of time to rub it in before he scrambled his brain. And anyway, Jack thought as he entered the turret commands, this was more about proving a point to Rhys.

Hope you’re watching, kitten. It’s the last you’ll ever see—

Jack didn’t know what happened next. He jerked forward, hard enough to slam his chin against the desk. It wasn’t until he felt the pain blossoming at the back of his skull, felt blood drip down his neck, that he realised someone had actually hit him.

This realisation took less than a second. He moved in time to dodge the next blow and ducked under the desk. He caught sight of a stocky pair of legs and beat up boots before he kicked the chair out into his attacker. It wouldn’t stop him, he knew, but it did distract him enough to let Jack pull out his pistol and come out guns blazing. He caught an eyeful of the handsome face of his attacker.

The clone. One of them, anyway. Not bad, Timmy.

His attacker’s shield flickered when the first shot glanced off his shoulder. He was already running, putting distance between them, and raising his own weapon. He fired off a shot before Jack’s top-notch reflexes could save him completely.

But it wasn’t a clean shot, aimed while running, and it hit Jack off his shoulder. The electricity buzzed through the shield. Jack dodged the next shotgun blast, ducking behind the table in time. He ran for the door.

If he had time, he probably could’ve hacked the stupid thing out of existence, just as he’d done in the factory basement. And if he had his old body, he might’ve had enough muscle to take it head on. Even at a disadvantage, he still had his brains and he suspected the thing wouldn’t follow him and he knew it definitely wouldn’t kill him. Tim had seen to that, bless him.

Jack escaped. To his surprise, the clone didn’t follow.

Left alone in the office, Thing One straightened and dusted himself off. He spotted his boss on the security feed, seated in the corner with his head between his knees.

Interfacing with the computer was child’s play. An ECHO device appeared in a flurry of blue light, and he plugged himself in with ease. He locked turret access and activated the PA.
“Grab your gun, boss,” he said. Tim’s head snapped up.

“Thank god. Anything incoming?”

Thing One checked the security logs and frowned. “He’s on the run but he’s trying to send loaderbots to ya.”

“Forget that. Where’s Jack now?”

“He’s…” The computer fed him a layout of the building. “Heading down.”

“He won’t go far. Everything he needs is in here. What about Athena and the others? Are they—?”

Thing One flipped over to the security feed. “Fine.”

He didn’t hear Tim’s sigh of relief, but he could imagine it. “Alright, then. Get this elevator moving and tell me where he is.”

Thing One hesitated. “You’re not going after him alone, are you?”

Tim snapped the shotgun back into one whole. “I’d like to say no, but…”

“It’s not smart, boss. He could still kill you. Kill us both.”

“Nothing I’ve done over the last fifteen years has been smart. Start the elevator. Tell me where he is.”

Thing One grit his teeth. He wanted to keep his mouth shut, take care of this himself. But he had orders. Tim lurched as the elevator finally resumed its descent.

“He’s down to the third basement. But he’s moving. I think he’s heading for the needle room. He was down there before, setting things up. He had the place on lock-down. I couldn’t get to him.”

“Can you unlock it now?”

“I’m in the system, boss. Whatever you want.”

“Good. Do it. And seal the exits. I don’t want him getting out of the building.”

“Yeah, I’ll just lock us all in here with a maniac.”

Thing One slipped deeper into the systems. Jack had done a real number to everything, but he put himself at a disadvantage in that meatsuit of his, cybernetics or no. Real people were limited. Thing One wasn’t.

But it was hard, all the same, to make changes with Jack actively working against him. He put the order through and sealed the exits, and unlocked the core, but he couldn’t hold up forever. He told Tim, who nodded.

“I’ll distract him soon enough. You just stay put and make sure he doesn’t try to escape or kill anyone else.”

“I should be out there with you, Tim.”

Tim looked up at the camera with shock written all over his stupid face. “Huh,” he said.
“What?”

“What? That’s the first time either one of you called me by my name.”

Thing One’s scowl deepened. “That can’t be true.”

“Anyway, you can’t come with me. I need you there.”

“I can—”

“What will happen if you disconnect now? If you leave that room and join me? Would you be able to keep Jack at bay?”

Thing One cursed. “No,” he said through his teeth.

“Right. I need you right where you are.”

“You idiot. You’ll die.”

“I won’t. Okay?”

Thing One didn’t respond.

“Where is he now?”

“In the observation room of the core. He’ll try for a manual override.”

“Got it.” The elevator slid to a smooth stop. Tim lifted his head. He rolled his shoulders and gripped his shotgun, braced against his shoulder.

“I’m ready,” Tim said.

Even with his clone’s confirmation, even with the reassurance, Tim didn’t know if he really believed he would find Jack in the core. He didn’t know why the notion seemed unlikely. Maybe he just didn’t expect anything to work out how he wanted. The universe hated him, and seemed to love Jack (volcanic death aside), although he never understood why. He expected things to go awry and Jack to vanish once more. And take Rhys with him.

The elevator chimed and the doors parted. Tim stepped out into the core and he was instantly brought back to the near melt-down weeks ago, to Atlas’ needle room. Tim recalled how large and deep that room had seemed. He vividly recalled looking down into a wide and empty pit.

But Hyperion’s core room was bigger, somehow. Each step he took echoed off the cathedral ceiling. The lights had gone out here as well, leaving Tim with nothing but emergency blue and the glow of eridium from behind the glass to see by. He could see the needle itself, a faint outline, decipherable from the shadows only by the gleam of its metal and glass chassis. The sight of it—the buzzing, humming sound of it—made Tim feel uneasy.

Tim crept carefully into the open, listening out for anything unusual. The whisper of fabric, the wheeze of a breath, the click of someone accessing a computer terminal. Movement would be more difficult to detect, but he kept his eyes open regardless.

All his doubts evaporated. Jack was here. He could feel it. He just needed—

Tim spun around and caught the cybernetic arm before it could turn his skull to paste. He twisted it
around, wrapping one arm around Rhys’ chest and held him in a lock.

Jack grinned at him. “You’ve gotten better.”

He stomped hard on Tim’s foot. His military-grade boots took the worst of it, but it distracted him enough to give Jack space to slip from his grasp. He slammed Rhys’ metal arm against Tim as Tim reached out to stop him, bring him back, and then he was gone, swallowed by the shadows.

Tim followed on his heels, a few scant but frustrating steps behind. Rhys’ black suit had gotten dirty, the shine of the expensive material turned matte by dust and ash, making it all the more difficult to find him. Jack lead him towards the centre wall, towards the glass and chrome consoles, and Tim began to panic. Maybe Jack intended to fire up a program, summon more of his goddamn loaderbots, and lose Tim in the fray.

Tim didn’t know exactly what happened next. One foot landed and something shot up his body, cutting through his shield, seizing every muscle and burning like a lit fuse up his spine. He only saved himself from worse through instinct, blessed instinct, twisting his body before he could fall into the remaining jaws of the electric trap Jack had set for him. He stumbled onto his knees, inches away from what he could now see as little divots in the ground, little silver nubs no more conspicuous than bolts.

He had less than a second to register this before a shadow fell over him and he ducked his head into the crook of his arm to avoid the worst of the blow. Rhys’ cybernetic arm hit like a sledgehammer, and Tim could barely keep from crying out when he felt it break his arm. He launched forward, curling his damaged arm against his chest and tackled Jack to the ground.

They both landed hard, with Tim only just managing to save himself from landing on his bad arm. Jack recovered, rolled away and scrambled to his feet. He closed the distance between them and swung the metal arm at Tim’s face. Tim jerked back, stumbling, still addled from the shock he’d taken seconds before and the pain of a break. Jack may not have had his strength, but he still had his speed and he was able to get into Tim’s space, able to bring his knee up right for Tim’s crotch. Tim managed to dodge that one as well, twisting so that his thigh took the hit.

He spotted the little silver coins from Jack’s earlier trap on the ground, an idea already formed. But the split-second break of concentration cost him and Jack brought the arm down against Tim’s temple. Tim fell to his knees, stunned and bleeding. Jack grabbed a handful of his hair and slammed Rhys’ knee into Tim’s face. He would’ve done it a second time, if Tim hadn’t grabbed Jack by the foot and pushed him upward, unbalancing him and knocking him onto the floor, inches from the silver nubs, not close enough to activate the trap.

“You’re pathetic, you know that?” Jack wheezed as he crawled to his hands and knees.

“Yeah… yeah, you mentioned,” Tim said. Blood oozed from his torn lip.

He launched himself at Jack, not an easy task with only one arm. Jack managed to get half-way to his feet when Tim caught him ‘round his waist and pulled them both back to the floor. Rhys’ head hit the ground just beside the silver coins, and Tim just had to move him an inch, just one inch—

Jack clawed at Tim’s face, fingers curling into his eye socket. Tim jerked back, tried to pull himself out of arm’s reach without losing his hold on Jack, but it was a losing proposition. Jack raked Rhys’ nails across Tim’s cheek, smearing blood and oil. Tim pulled further back, half-blind and desperate to get out of range, and Jack slipped from his hold.

“You’re not gonna win this one, pumpkin,” Jack said, his voice raw and blood-rough. “It’s fuckin’
stupid to try. You’re not gonna beat me.” Jack’s laugh sounded like something scraped from his lungs. “You can’t beat Handsome Jack.”

Tim spat and flexed his jaw with a wince as the fresh injuries pulled with the action. He eased back to his corner, the two of them on opposite sides, eyeing each other warily like wounded dogs in the same cage.

Regardless of the pain, Tim smiled. “You’re not Handsome Jack,” he said.

A better man probably wouldn’t have enjoyed what that statement did to Jack’s expression. Tim found just a twinge of satisfaction, deep in his chest.

“Have you gotten delusional in your old age, Timtam?” Jack asked.

Jack may have known all of Tim’s soft spots, all the old scars he could reopen, but Tim knew a thing or two himself. Jack’s monstrous ego was a target too big to miss. Tim felt his smile grow, and it was worth the pain.

“Handsome Jack died in a volcano years ago. Like a super villain from a comic book. His body’s carbon.”

Rhys’ round, soft jaw twitched. “You want to watch your mouth, Timmy.”

Tim eased his weight onto the balls of his feet. “You, on the other hand, are just programming. Code. Ones and zeroes.”

“I’m Handsome Jack’s AI,” Jack said.

“Exactly. You’re a copy.” Tim relished this next bit, the muscles in his legs tensing. “Like me.”

He struck, closing the distance between them before Jack could respond. It was a messy fight and Tim fought dirtier than he had in a long time. He wrestled Jack back to the ground, and clambered on top, pinning Jack with his knees.

He slammed his fist into Rhys’ jaw. It made him feel rotten, watching Rhys’ head bounce off the shiny marble, watching that face contort with pain. Even knowing Jack was in there didn’t help.

And maybe that’s why his next punch didn’t hit as hard as it needed to. Why Jack was able to squirm enough out his Tim’s pin to get that golden arm up. Tim dodged the hit, brought his knee down hard on the joint where flesh met metal and leaned all his weight onto that space. Jack howled and the sound hit Tim like a knife to the heart.

“Tim, Tim, please! It hurts,” Rhys sobbed, tears leaking from his one eye. “Tim, please!”

It’s a trick, Tim told himself. It’s not really him. He pinned Rhys’ flesh arm with his knee, and groped blindly for the latches that kept his cybernetic arm attached. He found one, but it didn’t snap out easy. He pulled and Rhys screamed.

“Tim, please—please stop, please it hurts so much— Please I’m sorry whatever it was— I’m sorry —”

Tim’s fingers trembled, the wire latches slipping from his blood- and oil-slicked hands. Panic pounded in his chest, his heart throbbing like an open wound. Rhys choked on his tears, whimpered and sobbed, crying like a kid in pain, all dignity forgotten.
—pinned against the desk, hands squeezing his throat, please Jack please don’t do this I’m sorry please I’m sorry—

Rhys’ left arm squirmed free. Tim barely noticed, not until he felt Rhys’ soft hand grip his bicep.

“Tim, please,” he said. “Don’t do this.”

“Rhys.” Tim didn’t want to believe it. His wretched heart squeezed at the sound of Rhys’ voice, weak and trembling. He fumbled with the latch, but they wouldn’t give and Rhys moaned pitifully when he tried. He couldn’t do this. Fuck, fuck he couldn’t do this.

The portable drive was still there, still an option. He could feel the weight of it in his chest pocket.

“Tim,” Rhys whined, his free hand gripping Tim’s sleeve.

He’s tricking you this isn’t Rhys goddammit Tim you’re smarter than this—

Tim touched Rhys’ chin with the very tips of his fingers. Rhys sniffed and stared up at him. Tim could feel the fine tremors in his jaw.

He jerked his arm free. Tim’s instincts had fled in the face of everything this had dredged up. They couldn’t save him, not when Jack brought the arm down like a hammer on his face. Tim jerked back, nose spurting blood, and Jack pushed himself out of Tim’s hold, got one leg free and kicked Tim in the chest. It wasn’t a good kick, hobbled by the limited space they had between them and Jack’s own manoeuvrability, but it knocked the air from his lungs. Tim doubled over and Jack pushed him down with ease, reversing their positions. He wrapped that golden hand around Tim's throat and squeezed with all the strength Rhys’ body had to offer.

Tim struggled, but Jack shifted until he could push some of his weight against Tim’s broken arm. Tim screamed—or he would’ve, if he could get the air. All that emerged from his mouth was a pained sound, a choked wheeze. Jack’s eyes were fever bright and Tim knew the look he wore on Rhys’ face, that familiar excitement mingled with triumph and disdain.

“Told ya,” Jack said. Blood leaked out of Rhys’ mouth, stained the spaces between his teeth. “Weak, Timmy. That’s all you’ve ever been.”

Tim tried to get his fingers under Rhys' hand, but he wasn't strong enough and Jack had all the leverage he needed.

“But hey, how about a parting gift? From me to you. Cause I’ve been knockin’ around in Rhys’ head for a while and now you know what I saw?” He leaned close, his breath tickling Tim’s face. “You wanna know why Rhys kept you around, pumpkin? Why he was so aggressive and pushy trying to get you to stay? Hm?” Jack smiled.

Tim pawed weakly at the cybernetic. He gasped, struggling to stay conscious.

“It was Vermont. The Raider. She offered him a reward. Half a mil for your fine ass. That’s why he was so sweet on you. He knew, just as I’ve always known, what a pathetic, little loser you are. That all he had to do was smile and you’d fall over yourself to stick around. Get it? He didn’t care about you. He wanted you close because he wanted to sell you.” He leaned all Rhys' weight into Tim’s throat, the metal crushing his windpipe. “So you see? It’s not just me who’s the bad guy here.”

Tim heard the too-familiar sound of himself choking, the soft little noises from his damaged throat, just audible over the pounding of his own pulse.
“I wish I could say I’d miss you,” Jack went on, because he could never abide silence for long. “Maybe part of me will. One day. Maybe next time I see some brainless skag, some bloodthirsty attack dog, or somethin’… maybe I’ll think of you. Maybe I’ll even smile. Who knows?”

Tim’s vision tunneled and he knew what came next. Darkness would wrap itself around the world and his chest and throat would spasm and all the blood would pool hot in his face, trapped in his head. Always before, Jack would’ve stopped, but Tim knew he wouldn’t this time. He’d see this through. Tim’s eyes rolled back, his lids fluttering weakly.

Sadness washed over Tim, which surprised him. He expected anger or fear or hopelessness. He didn’t expect this melancholy, this lament of everything he’d leave behind. Sadness for Athena. For Rhys, regardless of what Jack said.

For himself, which was most surprising of all.

All you need is an inch.

Tim barely noticed, but the golden fingers moved. The pressure lessened. It was nothing, almost nothing. But it was enough.

Tim could breathe. He drew a shuddering breath, and then another. He opened his eyes.

Rhys’ head was thrown back. Veins stood out in stark relief on his neck. His chest shuddered and he held himself so absolute and still that he shivered like a taut bowstring.

“Tim,” he gasped. Tim froze. This wasn’t the theatrics Jack had pulled on him earlier; this voice sounded strained, distant.

Tim brought his left hand under Rhys’ arm and pushed gingerly. He was met with resistance, enough that he couldn’t move, but Jack didn’t start choking him again, either. Slowly, Rhys unbent, bringing his head down, his face closer to Tim’s.

“I need— Can you—” He breathed in short gasps, his pulse rabbit-quick and obvious in the crook of his neck. He shook his head. “Fuck. Fuck, I’m sorry. It’s not— I can’t keep him—”

“Rhys?” Tim’s voice came shredded and weak from his wrung-out throat. He touched Rhys’ elbow carefully, cautiously.

Rhys shook his head again, like he was trying to clear it. “You’ve got it, right? ALCH3MY? Tell me. Tell me Vaughn could— Jack saw you open a line to Atlas.”

Tim tightened his grip, just enough to be a comfort. He knew he shouldn’t fall for this. He knew damn well this could be another trick. Jack toying with him again, bringing him to the brink, force him to have hope, only to break it, break everything, again and again.

But Jack was right about Tim. He was weak. A fool.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, we got it.”

Rhys sucked in a shaking breath. “Good.”

Rhys fell back like something flung him, like something hooked into his spine and jerked him back. A puppet on a string. He hit the ground, right on top of the little silver bolts and screamed.

Electricity danced over him. His limbs locked up, his mouth open wide and body straining. He
looked like a man possessed. Tim recovered quickly, but not quick enough.

He grabbed Rhys by the heel of his boot and yanked him away. It was only a few inches, but it was enough to get him clear of the current.

“Rhys, what the hell...” He pushed the hair from Rhys’ face, brushed his thumb across the tear tracks left from the earlier show. Rhys groaned, eyelids fluttering. His lips moved but Tim could barely hear his voice.

Cautiously, aware that he might be in for another trick, Tim leaned close, close enough that he could hear Rhys’ weak, eggshell thin voice.

“Do it.”

Rhys’ yellow eye had rolled back in its socket, the light gone dead. His arm lay limp at his side. Rhys cracked open his remaining eye and fixed Tim with a dark, liquid gaze.

“Please,” he rasped. “It won’t— last. I can’t— not forever— He’ll come back. I need—“ He broke off with a cry of pain, back arching off the ground. Tim fumbled in his jacket, his hand wrapping around the hypo.


Rhys jerked his head away at the sight of the glowing Anshin.

“Don’t! Don’t you dare,” he said. “ALCH3MY — I need ALCH3MY.”

“That could kill you,” Tim said. Rhys let out a strangled laugh.

“Fuck. So what? What he’s got in store for me— for you—“ He swallowed and seemed to regain control over his breathing. “This is kinder. Trust me.”

Tim licked his lips. He glanced at the hypo. Rhys let out a soft whine and pawed at Tim’s jacket.

“Tim, please.” He spoke so evenly, so calm and soft, despite his obvious pain and discomfort. “This is better. It’s better.”

Slowly, cautiously, Tim reached into his jacket, shifting the hypo in his hand to grip the slim portable drive. Rhys’ lips twitched. He slid his hand up to Tim’s wrist and held it, slipping his thumb against Tim’s pulse point.

“Do it,” he said.

Tim stared at the drive. He ran his thumb across its surface. He thought about a 22.01% success rate, about what the odds told him, about the quality of his past luck.

He wanted to think that this time the universe would give him a break. This time, he’d really get what he wanted. He’d get to kill Jack, save Rhys. He thought about a possible midnight vigil at the side of a medical bed. Being the first thing Rhys saw when he woke up. Watching his smile grow slowly across his face. Not the wide, plastic corporate smile, but the soft one, the genuine one. The one that made Tim’s chest ache.

Tim lowered his head. Tears stung the scratch marks left on his face.

It wouldn’t happen. The future didn’t work out like that. Kids like Rhys got eaten alive by men like Jack. By men like Tim. The only future Tim had in store was the wide expanse of an open sky,
blood in the sand and gunsmoke in his lungs.

“Tim. We don’t have a lot of— of time,” Rhys said, voice hitching. His eye flickered, a soft golden light gaining strength.

Tim set the hypo down. He gripped the drive tight, and took in a breath that sounded like a sob.

“Rhys.” Tim leaned forward and brushed his lips over his temple. “I’m sorry.”

Rhys did smile, then. “Me too.”

The drive went in easy. Rhys twitched, mouth falling open but no sound escaping. And then he went still.
It was Tim’s clone who found them first. He found them not long after Rhys had gone silent, and so terribly still. The needle had gone quiet as well, and Tim would later learn that it’d been his clone’s work that shut it down.

Rhys breathed steadily, but he didn’t wake, not even when Tim used his hypo at last. The wounds Tim had inflicted healed, skin clearing under spattered blood, but Rhys himself didn’t react. He didn’t twitch, didn’t sigh, didn’t do a single thing.

Tim pulled Rhys into his lap. He ran his hand through his hair, ran his thumb across his brow. He did these things without really understanding why. It wasn’t as if it would wake Rhys. But if it did, wouldn’t that be a nice way to wake up?

The clone didn’t comment on the state he found Tim in. He didn’t even comment on the fight, and everything he’d seen, and Tim had no doubt he’d been watching the whole time. Bathed in the blue-violet light, he stalked through the room. He checked on the status of the needle, and disabled the traps—plural, because Jack had set a few. He did this carefully and in silence.

His clone knelt down beside Tim. Tim turned away before he could catch sight of that face.

“Boss,” he said. “Your arm’s busted. You need an Anshin.”

Tim stared at the darkened wall. Exhaustion made him see things moving in the shadows, little tricks his eyes played on him.

His clone sighed. Tim felt himself go tense, his body ready for a fight he didn’t want to have. Another lecture, another reprimand. Christ, he was tired.

“You need to dismiss me,” his clone said instead.

Tim blinked but it didn’t chase the strange movement in the shadows away. He heard his clone make a quiet sound—not quite a sigh, too soft to be. Maybe just a long exhale. Tim turned his head slightly, caught his clone’s face in the corner of his eye, where it looked too blurry to make out.

“Thanks,” he said. “For everything.” And then he dismissed him.

Fiona found them less than an hour later. She came with Athena and Vaughn at her back, both injured by otherwise in one piece.

Tim would later learn all about Fiona’s rescue, how her resourcefulness and cleverness managed to save them from the safe. How she managed to find an Anshin at last, and how close it’d come to being too late. Even with one Anshin, Athena’s wounds were too grave, and she’d been left with
them too long. She’d live, but she would be laid up for a while. That was why she staggered behind Fiona, why Vaughn had to support her through the halls. Why he supported her in the lobby, when they came upon Tim, an empty hypo rolling away from the tip of his boot.

By that time, Tim had gone somewhere else, although he’d left his body behind. He heard Fiona cursing, although it came from a long way away.

When she asked him, “What happened?” he didn’t reply. When her steps faltered, and her hands fell to her sides, open and empty, and she said to him, “Is he— Oh god, is Rhys—“ he closed his eyes.

He thought about his future, and couldn’t see anything.

They thought about going back to Atlas, but the place was still in ruin, its medical bay overrun. Fiona argued they would be better off, but Vaughn argued they were in the middle of the most advanced city in the quadrant, that every medical supply they could want was right there—

(Tim pictured a table with leather straps and a cart with shiny, silver tools)

—and it would be stupid to give up this chance.

“Besides, we’ve got access,” he said, casting a glance towards Tim. Tim didn’t respond. They’d given him an Anshin, but he’d sat too long with his wounds and, like Athena, he was paying for it now. The break in his arm had healed, but the bone-deep ache remained, and the bruising and swelling up to his elbow had lessened but not vanished. His nose pulled itself back together— cartilage a little easier to heal—but it’d turned red and purple under the blood he hadn’t bothered to clean away.

And he still wasn’t talking.

In the end, Vaughn won out and instead of sending Rhys back to Atlas, he had them call Helios for whatever medical personnel they could spare.

They spared two people and a modified loaderbot, the sight of which made Tim’s trigger finger twitch. But it barely paid him mind, instead following the commands it was given.

Tim did the same, speaking commands to the city like an untrained actor being fed lines. They got Rhys situated in the major hospital, which took up an entire 50 storey building. The sight of it, a stark white, silver and blue building almost made Tim laugh. What was Jack expecting to happen in his perfect utopic city? How many injuries and illnesses did he anticipate?

They set Rhys up in the nicest room (another presidential suite, naturally). The medical professionals (only one was an actual, certified doctor, Tim learned. The other was the field-trained Pandoran sawbones, the one Tim’d met before and after the original Pyrphoros nearly melted down.) monitored his brain functions, examined screens with waves and numbers displayed in soft blue and violet light. They made grim faces (well, the trained Hyperion doc did—the sawbones’ face remained in a permanent scowl, like she’d pulled the face as a kid and it stuck that way) and took notes.

They gave their reports to Vaughn and then to Yvette, who came on the third day. He wasn’t getting any better, they said. But he wasn’t getting any worse, either. Nothing to do but wait and see.

Tim came to Rhys’ bedside a few times, when he was certain he would be alone.
This was tricky, as Rhys’ friends were the tenacious, loyal types, even if they seemed exasperated and exhausted with him. Sasha in particular.

Tim made the mistake of visiting without checking security feeds first, and came upon Sasha taking up the bedside vigil. It’d been at the small hours of the morning, just past the cusp of ‘late at night’. The sunrise had been hours away and Tim couldn’t sleep. He stood outside Rhys’ sealed door, and listened to the sound of Sasha’s voice for a while. He couldn’t hear what she was saying, and for a moment he’d been tempted to press his ear against the wood. But then he heard her sigh and lower her voice and he knew this wasn’t meant for him. He left, ashamed.

It wasn’t as if he was trying to avoid the others, but he wasn’t making an effort to see them either. He’d overridden the vocal lock on the computer commands early after they’d gotten situated, handing over control to Vaughn and then to Yvette. He noticed that Vaughn had trouble meeting his eyes. He noticed Yvette would talk to him while staring at her ECHOTab.

Fiona wouldn’t speak to him at all. Her eyes passed over him the rare times they met in the halls. Whatever camaraderie they’d shared during the fight had cooled in the aftermath. Fair enough.

He missed his mask. A few enquiries to the Atlas employees came up with no results. No one knew what happened to his earwidget. As far as they could tell, it’d gone with him up to Sanctuary. Possibly the Crimson Raiders still had it. Long gone, then.

Athena left two days after the medical staff arrived. She, at least, didn’t mind looking at Tim when she spoke to him.

“Janey’s expecting me,” she said abruptly. She met him outside his room, with a bag slung over her shoulder.

“Hello, Athena,” Tim said.

“I can’t stay any longer. I told her I wouldn’t get in trouble.” She held herself stiffly, kept her expression carefully neutral, but Tim had known her long enough to read between the lines. She felt guilty.

“Tell her it was my fault,” Tim said.

“Are you going to stay here?” she asked. Tim glanced down the hall, towards the stairwell entrance. Rhys’ room was three floors below.

“For a little while,” he said.

“You shouldn’t. This place, these people…” Athena fingered the strap of her bag. “It can’t be good for you. I’ve seen the way they look at your back.”

Tactful as ever. “I can’t go yet,” he said.

The nice thing about Athena was how quick she was to drop these sorts of conversations. Some people might’ve viewed it as callousness, but Tim preferred to think of it as respectful of people’s rights to make their own mistakes.

She shrugged. “Alright, then. Janey has asked me to repeat her invite—our invite for dinner. It still stands. If you’re interested.”

“I’d like that,” Tim said, meaning it.
Athena nodded. “I’ll tell her. Let us know before you drop in,” she said. She reached out as though she were going to shake Tim’s hand, but quickly changed her mind. She patted him awkwardly on the shoulder instead.

“Take care, Athena,” he said.

“You too.”

Tim did manage to find a few quiet hours to spend with Rhys. He didn’t talk, although he kept thinking of things to say. If he had his modulator, he might’ve spoken them aloud. Instead, he placed his hand over Rhys’. He didn’t entwine their fingers, and he didn’t press down. He simply let his hand rest, as though it might offer some comfort. He told himself that was all he could do.

There were few deities left to pray to, and Tim had never been interested in any of them, so he didn’t pray, exactly. But he did give voice to the desperation inside of him. He did make promises to an unseen force. It was a kind of prayer, as close as Tim had ever gotten.

He promised to quit drinking. He promised to quit killing. He promised sacrifice after sacrifice and as the sleepless hours drew on, his promises became more esoteric, less focused. He promised to give up ever feeling satisfied, he promised to find no solace in the open road, he promised himself to cold nights, to abstinence to everything he’d ever wanted, to a lifetime of speechlessness.

In the very dark hours, he promised to give himself up. Nothing seemed valuable enough, but it was all he had left.

The doctors eventually had better news. Rhys had woken up, they said. The Hyperion doctor pointed to the screen, showing a series of spikes where there were usually calm waves. You see that? She said. Brain activity. He was awake, although only for a few seconds.

“He’ll make it,” she said and wiped down her glasses in celebration.

Somehow relief felt heavier than dread. It wasn’t a lifting of weight, but a press, a warmth, like being wrapped up in a blanket. Like sinking into a hot tub after a long day.

Alone in the room he was staying in, Tim let himself feel it. He trembled with it. After a few celebratory drinks, he began to wonder what promise he’d made to the ether had done the trick. As though he could significantly impact someone’s life in such a way.

Rhys would be okay. Whatever Tim had to give up in return, it would be worth it.

Of course, Tim did have to give something up. Although not in the way he expected.

Rhys woke up a week after ALCH3MY.EXE chewed through his brain. Properly woke up. Not just a few seconds of consciousness, but a few minutes of awareness, which was different. He was able to open his eyes and even answer a few questions.

Tim received an alert as soon as it happened. He stood outside the room, watching through a one-way observation window (creepy as ever, Hyperion) as the two doctors quizzed Rhys.

Yvette was there as well and although she didn’t entirely look pleased to see Tim, she didn’t make him leave, either.
“What’s your name?” the Hyperion doctor asked.

“Rhys.”

He didn’t look good, if Tim were being honest. He had no colour in his face and a week spent in bed had robbed some of the softness from his features. But he was upright and his eyes were open and that was all Tim needed.

“When were you born?”

“February 17.”

“Do you know what day it is?”

Rhys frowned. “No.”

“What was the last date you remember?”

Rhys chewed on his lip. He touched the joint of his right shoulder, where his hospital sleeve had been pinned.

“Where’s my arm?” he asked.

“Rhys. What’s the last date you can remember?”

He scowled. “I don’t know. January something. I was out in the Dusts looking for…” He stopped, glaring at the doctors. “Who are you? You’re not one of mine, are you? Where’s my arm? What happened to my eye? Where even am I? Is this Atlas?” His eyes widened a little when the doctors exchanged professional glances and they tapped out notes in their devices. One of the machines beeped a quick warning. “What’s going on? Why are you asking me about the date?”

“You’re arm is with your maintenance team, along with your eye,” the sawbones said while the Hyperion doctor fiddled with one of the machines. “You’re in Opportunity. And it’s March 1st.”

“What?” The machine beeped again and the doctor shot the sawbones a warning look she ignored. “What are you talking about? Where’s Yvette? How did I lose so much—” He stopped, blinking hard. “How did…” He touched his face, the tips of his fingers brushing against the bandage around his right eye. He began to sway.

“Oh,” he said and fell back. A moment later, he began to snore.

The doctors met at the foot of Rhys’ bed, exchanging a hissed argument that Tim could barely hear over the sound of blood thumping in his ears.

Nearly two months. Yvette whispered something into her ECHO.

The attack on Malady’s factory, the Splatterdome, the chase back to Atlas, the time spent at Atlas, his birthday, the attack, everything. Gone. All gone.

Tim leaned his weight against the glass, wiped his hand across his face and laughed. He laughed until his eyes stung and his voice broke.

Yvette shot Tim a nervous look he pretended not to see. Still giggling, he wiped the tears from his eyes and retreated to his room to drink himself to sleep.
Rhys would be okay, they said. ALCH3MY did its job, but it’d been a little too zealous.

The last thing Rhys could recall clearly was waking up in a vault hunter safe house almost 20km away from a factory explosion.

“I was with someone. Guy with no face. A vault hunter. Vaughn, I think you hired him.” Rhys scratched at the edge of his bandage. “Tom or something. What happened to him?”

The doctors took their notes. Yvette exchanged a quick look with Vaughn and told him not to worry about that right now.

The infection began in the basement lab where they’d dug up Etna and Pyrphoros, according to what Jack had told Tim. ALCH3MY’s job was to eradicate any traces of the AI from Rhys’ system and it did that better than they had anticipated.

He might get his memories back, the official report said. The human brain isn’t exactly like a computer, even though Rhys’ kind of was.

You can’t just erase memories like data from a hard drive, they said.

The memories were likely still there; they were just damaged, repressed. In time, he might remember.

The doctors seemed pleased with their report. Even the sawbones seemed optimistic.

But what the hell did they know?

Tim flinched when he heard the door’s ‘access requested’ chime.

It was late, nearly midnight, long past anyone would come to visit Tim on official business. He fought down a spike of panic and adrenaline. Rhys was fine. He would’ve received a notification if anything had changed in his prognosis.

Still, he quickly checked again to be sure. Rhys was fine. He was asleep.

The chime rang again. Tim licked his lips and carefully set his ECHO device down. To his tremendous surprise, it was Fiona on the other side of his door.

“Hey.” She slouched against his door frame, arms loosely folded over her chest, seemingly at ease. He could see that she was armed.

“Hey.” Tim knew his stance didn’t suggest any sort of relaxation. He couldn’t help the way his shoulders tensed, the way his weight shifted onto the balls of his feet, as though he were preparing to spring forward, push her down and start running.

Fiona smiled, raising her gaze briefly to his face and then away.

“Can I come inside?” she asked.

Tim couldn’t think of any good reason why not, although he tried. With some reluctance, he stepped aside and motioned her to come in.

“Thanks,” she said, just a little too dry to be sincere. She cast a quick look around his room—really, just a private hospital room designed for long-term patients.

He stood in front of his desk, blocking the ECHO device from view. It was one of the larger ones,
the ones designed to make proper notes on. He tried not to look too defensive, even as he crossed his arms and flexed his jaw.

“Like what you’ve done with the place,” she said.

“You come by for a reason?” Tim asked.

“No one’s seen you around for a while, and I just wanted…” She trailed off, her gaze caught on something under his bed.

Tim bit back a curse. He’d been so preoccupied with his work, he forgot to kick the bag out of sight before he opened the door.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“A bag,” Tim said.

“I can see that. You taking a trip somewhere?” she asked.

Tim considered lying, but what was the use? It wasn’t as if he was doing anything wrong.

“I’m leaving,” he said. “I don’t have a destination in mind yet, but…” He trailed off, shrugging.

“When?”

Again, he considered lying.

“Tonight,” he said. “I intend to get on the road before dawn.”

Fiona’s scarred brow climbed half-way up her forehead, but otherwise her expression remained impassive.

“Okayyyy,” she said. “Were you planning on telling anyone?”

Tim resisted rolling his eyes. Why else would he leave in the middle of the night?

“Honestly? No.”

“Why?”

“There’s no reason to stick around. The Raiders are off my back, Opportunity’s controls have been handed over to Atlas, and I’ve finished the job.” He shrugged again, letting the tension ease out of his body. He could be a good actor, when he wanted to be.

Fiona didn’t look fooled. “This is about Rhys, isn’t it?” she said.

Tim leaned against the ledge of his desk. “Rhys is the reason I stayed this long. I wanted to make sure he’d be alright. And he will be,” he said lightly.

"Are you going to say anything to him before you leave?” she asked. Tim didn't reply. He looked out the window. "You haven't seen him since he woke up."

"What am I gonna say to him that he's gonna want to hear?” Tim asked. "Sounding like I do. Looking I do. You really think that's a good idea?” He looked at her at last, but there wasn't much to see. She looked back, without sympathy.
“You could stay,” Fiona said. She didn’t look hopeful, and her voice wasn’t kind. She spoke plainly, as if she were presenting an option he hadn’t noticed.

For that, Tim found himself growing a little fonder of her.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said.

For a moment, he was afraid she might try to argue with him. But she did him proud when she shrugged her shoulders and took a seat on the edge of his bed, entirely uninvited.

“What’ll you do now?” she asked.

A breeze blew in from outside, carrying with it the distant sound of loaderbots on patrol. They were too good a find to completely disable, much to Tim’s displeasure. The clever digital engineers from Atlas had made adjustments to their programming, ensuring they no longer went shithouse when they saw Tim. It didn’t mean Tim enjoyed their presence, but at least he didn’t feel the need to run at the sound of them on the street.

Tim considered telling her the truth, because he knew she would react as if he were telling her about the weather, or what they had for dinner that night. He had no real plan, never did. That he took everything as it came, lived moment-by-moment, and never let himself to consider what his future might look like. That he would live to see another sunrise was enough for him.

“Travel,” he said.

“Any destination in mind?”

“Not particularly, no.” He hesitated, picking at his shirt sleeve. “I was thinking I might head to the south-east. Someplace green.”

“That’s a nice area.” She drew her finger across the bed spread, stirring up wrinkles. “There’s a settlement out there called Karamay. You heard of it?” she asked. Tim shook his head. “Nice place. Close to the river. But they’ve got a hell of a stalker problem. Maybe you could pay them a visit.”

“Maybe,” Tim said, a little perplexed. Her comment seemed innocuous enough, but a lifetime of gullibility had taught him to be at least a little canny now and then. Although he still wasn’t great at it. He couldn’t figure her angle.

“Right. Well.” She stood, smoothing down the fabric of her coat and adjusting her hat. “For what it’s worth, I’m not sorry you stuck around. Things would’ve taken a shitty turn if you weren’t here. So.” She made a show of examining her gloves. Tim didn’t know how to respond to that.

“Thank you?” he said.

She nodded. And then she left.

In a hero’s journey, this would be the part where the hero returns back to their idyllic home, to the place of complacency and safety. The place the adventure took them from. Tim had wondered for a long time, if he were to ever complete his journey—if he were even conceited enough to think of his story as a hero’s anything—where he might end up.

Menoetius? Every image Tim has of his home planet felt like a painting, or a photo. Flat memories, and it didn’t bring out much in him except a faint sense of longing, the way he might feel if he looked at a vacation resort in a magazine. A place he wanted to be, without feeling any motivation to
actually go.

Eden-2, then? Except the sound of the crowds, the closed-in streets with tall buildings crowding out the horizon, blocking off every view, only made him feel a little nauseated. He needed the horizon. He needed the sky.


Tim travelled for a few weeks, making his way slowly up to the south-eastern plains. He took the long way, and ignored the fast travels. There was no one on his tail, and no mission hanging over his head. He had money in his account and wide open spaces on every side.

He slept outside for the first few nights. He made a point to visit a settlement to stock up on supplies, and drop them off at the closest vault hunter safe house. He picked up extra meat chews for Mordecai’s bird. It wasn’t enough, but he hoped Mordecai would appreciate the gesture.

Rhys stayed with him during those long, daylight hours. He stayed with Tim in that safe house. He dogged his steps whenever trouble reared its head on the road. Tim saw Rhys in things he had no right seeing him in, in the way the shadows stretched across the cracked pavement, in the sparking shields of his brief enemies, in the golden glow of the sunset. Tim thought about Rhys like he was helpless against it and every time it was like watching the dome break over Atlas. It was like staring down a dry and empty well when all Tim wanted was a drink.

He didn’t deserve to miss Rhys. Rhys would be fine. Better, now that Tim was out of his life for good. It hurt every day but it got a little easier to put Rhys behind him.

Jack followed him too. He whispered in Tim’s ears at night, in those long, middle hours when sunlight was a long way off on either end. He brought their shared memories with him, unpacked them one at a time, over and over again, night after night. Lurid snapshots like vacation slides in red and red and red, until Tim woke up shaking.

_This was you, Jack said. This was what you were. What you still are. Pathetic, Timmy. You could’ve killed me at any time, but you didn’t._

Tim tried to remember what it was like, those first few weeks after Umber Bluffs, after the Hyperion slaughter, and rejecting the mask, the scar. He tried to remember what he felt like. It’d been bad, he knew, but had it been like this? He’d been afraid, but there’d been purpose to his fear. He had defiance, too, which had made him feel brave. He’d escaped and it’d given him a sense of momentum.

This time, he felt like an exile.

Tim realised, in those long nights when Jack wouldn’t leave him alone, that he’d wanted to kill him for a long time. Of course the universe would give him his chance the way it did. Of course Jack would ruin that for him too.

He’d killed Jack at last, but there was no victory in it. No sense of accomplishment, no defiance. Just a hollow feeling in his chest, in the place where something else had tried to grow over the last two months. Tim thought of it like that, semi-deliriously after too many hours spent awake and too many drinks. He thought of an empty lot where a tree once stood. And in that absence, all sorts of things could find root.

On those nights when he couldn’t sleep, on the nights when Jack seemed hellbent on dragging him back in time to his office, his padded prison cell, Tim would pull out his ECHO and write. It felt like
pulling weeds.

He’d write until he fell asleep. Some nights he’d sleep the whole night through, undisturbed. Jack’s voice grew weak.

He wrote down what kept him awake. He wrote down what happened in Jack’s office, or in the apartment Jack kept him in, but he wrote his version. It felt like a stamp on reality, an assertion against what Jack kept trying to tell him. He hadn’t been pathetic. He’d been frightened and alone. Sad and angry. He wrote what he remembered. No detail too small.

And then, when he was done, he pressed ‘erase’.

Each word was a fistful of dirt into a grave. He’d bury Jack one day.

Eventually, he made his way towards the new settlement. Wary, but not seeing any reason not to, he dropped off his catch-a-ride and entered Karamay. For a terrestrial settlement, it wasn’t as small as he was expecting. There was the usual collection of sturdy, corporate-built structures (Hyperion, although the logo had been scorched off). Other, flimsier structures had been built around and over these buildings, standing on either side of the street.

And there were other buildings, in a rambling field behind the town, facing off an incline that lead down into the plains and the grazing grounds of their livestock.

Tim lingered a while outside, taking in those little buildings. They reminded him of a more modest version of what Etna had.

There was a small stand that sold little figurines carved from the soft stone they dug out of the quarries. Little grey things, streaked with lavender so pale it almost looked white. He picked up a figure of a fluffy, four-legged creature he didn’t recognize. The hopeful shopkeep informed him it was something called a sheep.

“Never encountered one of them before,” Tim admitted. The shopkeep’s eyes flicked to the rifle strapped to his back.

“They’re non-carnivorous,” he said drily.

Feeling as if he’d been caught out on something, Tim bought the sheep and walked away before he remembered he had no place to put it. Maybe he could give it away.

They did have a stalker problem, as it turned out. The town sheriff, bartender, and moritician (the same woman, named Batu) told him all about it.

“A nest of them, ‘bout 10 clicks to the north-west. Used to be they were 15 clicks away, but they’ve been gettin’ closer and closer every week, the devils. They come at night, for the livestock,” Batu said as she wiped grime and split beer from the bar. “We nailed a few, but there’s always more.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Tim said.

Batu looked him over speculatively, the wrinkles around her mouth drawing tight as her gaze lingered on his mask. “We can pay you, but not much.”

A few months ago, Tim might’ve fought for more. He might’ve tried to negotiate, or extort.

He felt so tired.
“I’ll take what you can spare,” he said.

He took a vehicle out and packed a sandwich and some protein bars and a shotgun, two pistols, and a sniper rifle and made an afternoon of it. Stalkers really were devils, and there were always more than you expected.

By the time Tim returned to Karamay, the sun had begun to set and the town’s people had begun to file into Batu’s bar. Batu gave him another long look when he walked in, but she set a beer in front of him and told him it would be a while before she could collect the funds.

“I didn’t think you’d get it done so soon,” she admitted. She wasn’t shy about it, but she did seem a touch regretful.

Tim took a pull of his lager and considered his long-gone tree house, considered having a place to put his things, a place to sit down with his ECHO and… maybe finally do something with his hands that didn’t result in casualties. He ran his thumb across the sheep carving in his pocket.

“That little homes near the fields,” he said, before he could think better of it. “Any of ‘em empty?”

Tim didn’t know what he was doing.

They gave him one of the small buildings on the outskirts, the one furthest away from the settlement, a few feet from the edge of a 20-foot incline that eventually lead into the grazing lands.

It was a three room home, nothing special or luxurious, which Batu explained in a matter-of-fact way that endeared her to him. He had a small kitchen, with an electric oven and a few shelves for storage. He had a front room with a massive window, a beat-up couch someone had left behind, and a table. He had a cot, originally, but after waking up every single morning with a crick in his neck and spine, he bought himself a proper bed.

That had been a real novelty. Sleeping on it every night still felt strange. The mattress was too firm and the pillows were too soft. It was nothing like the lush, padded mattress with the 9000 thread count sheets he’d had on Eos and Helios, but he didn’t care. He slept better in that small room with his head sinking through his pillow and his left arm going numb because he’d slept on it, than he ever had in anything Jack had given him.

Not that he could sleep every night.

He earned his keep. Once the stalkers were routed from their nest, a pack of skags moved in, gleeful to find their new hunting grounds free of competition. After the skags were taken care of, there were the threshers. And then rakks came in from the mountain range, happily swooping down over the livestock pens.

The livestock, Tim learned, were the sheep the stone carver had told him of. They were fluffy. Some had horns. The fluff was their major crop. Before synthetic materials were developed, people used to make clothes and blankets from them.

The people of Karamay stole the sheep from the previous Hyperion settlement. No one quite knew what the sheep had been left behind for, but so far there had been no trouble with them.

Except for the predators they attracted. Skags and stalkers, rakks and threshers, even those varkid fuckers. For the first few weeks, Tim was busy almost every day.

At night, he would sometimes visit Batu’s bar. People had started to recognize him, or at least
recognize the top half of his face, and sometimes they would invite him to join them. Sometimes, Tim actually would.

He wouldn’t say much. Any question they asked him—about his family, his home planet, his education—he could only give brief answers to, and people began to take his sparse responses as signs of a taciturn personality. They still bought him the occasional drink, but they were content to let him sit in silence. Tim didn’t know if he was content or not himself, but he didn’t feel too bad. Even if he did kind of wish he could tell people about himself.

But his silence made him a good listener, and people loved to talk about themselves. He learned about the villagers, their families, their homes. He found he liked to listen to regular people, who had regular problems. Maybe he always had. Maybe it was one of those things he’d forgotten about himself.

“On your own again?” Batu asked one night, popping a beer open and setting it in front of Tim.

“Generally,” Tim replied.

It wasn’t a busy night. There was a small knot of people sitting at one table, playing a card game Tim didn’t know and didn’t particularly care to learn at that moment.

“It’s the mask, you know,” Batu said, setting another beer down for herself. Tim glanced over. “The whole bandit mystique. It puts a barrier between you and everyone else.”

Tim considered that while he sipped his beer.

“Not that there’s anythin’ wrong with that, mind.” Batu’s cheeks were red and her voice came out in a full-on drawl, hinting that she’d had more than a few. “But it makes it tricky to get yourself a girl. Or a boy.”

“You hittin’ on me, Batu?” Tim grinned under his bandanna. “I’m flattered but it would never work. You’re too young for me.”

“Don’t get cute with me, kid.”

“I can’t help it,” he said.

“And don’t change the subject.” She leaned her elbows on the bar. Tim looked back to the other people, taking a longer pull from his beer. “Why do you wear that mask?” she asked.

“It’s better than wearing my face,” Tim said.

“You got a fucked up face?”

“Yeah,” he replied honestly.

“Scars?”

“Some.”

A ruckus rose from the foursome on the other side of the bar. One man raised his hands, cheering. The other three flung their cards down, some groaning in disgust, some finishing their drinks. Tim ran his nail under the beer’s label, pushing it away from the sweating glass.

He thought about his home, and the carved sheep on his mantle. He knew Batu. He knew her name, knew that she’d been married four times. He knew the name of everyone seated at that card game
(Troy, Ginger, Ulan, and Ark). And they knew his name.

“You want to see?” he said.

Batu quirked a grey brow.

“Afterhours tonight. I’ll come back. You can see for yourself,” he said.

“Oh, a little show and tell? Lucky me.”

He came back when Batu had finally pulled up her shingle. He pulled off his mask like he would at home, before Batu could say a word, running a hand through his hair to put it back in order. Batu stared at him, at his face, for an excruciatingly long time. Tim tried to hold still, keep his hands open and visible. He couldn’t read what her face was doing.

He couldn’t take it anymore. He tried a smile—one of his own, small and weak.

“Pretty fucked up, right?”

To his surprise, Batu didn’t kick him out, or open fire. Instead, she pulled out two shot glasses and a bottle of bourbon.

“Sit,” she said as she poured them two fingers a piece. Tim thought that maybe that was a little too much for her, but he knew better than to say anything.

He sat and drank when she did the same.

“Okay,” she said, pouring another round. “Explain.”

He gave her the short version, the one closer to the truth than his story about money, but not quite as raw and brutal as the story he told Lilith.

“You’re right,” she said when he finished. “That’s pretty fucked up.”

Tim nodded, his head buzzing. He’d had three drinks in less than an hour, and hadn’t eaten much before. It started to hit him just how bad of an idea this probably was.

But he didn’t feel bad. Maybe it was the alcohol. He didn’t feel the profound sense of release he’d been hoping for, but he didn’t feel awful. He fiddled with his empty glass and tried not to think about the hangover he had in store.

“Do you want me to tell the others?” she asked. “Just about the face,” she said when he shot her an alarmed look. “Not about the ugly stuff behind the story. I wouldn’t put up a bulletin about it or nothin’. I’d just… start the word.”

“Why?” Tim asked.

“So you can lose the mask, you moron. What? You didn’t really want to keep wearing it ‘til you died, did you?” she asked as he stared in disbelief.

“I—“ He stopped, the truth of it sticking in his throat.

“Go home. Think it over. I can start the word tomorrow, if you’d like.” She rubbed her temple with a wince. “Not early, mind you.”
Tim went home. He poured himself a glass of water, drank it down in four gulps, and poured himself another. He felt exhausted, but he knew better than to sleep just yet. He thought about what Batu had said.

Walking out in the open with his face bare? The last time he’d done that had been in Opportunity.

He drank half the glass and poured himself another. The memory of Opportunity, of everything that had lead up to it, made his insides writhe unpleasantly.

It’d been almost two months. There’d been no word on Rhys’ recovery. No one had contacted him since he’d left. Tim received word of a few Atlas caravans travelling from the city, crawling across the landscape in all directions. Word had it that production had started in no less than three new factories. Only one was for munitions.

If something had happened to Rhys, Tim would’ve heard by now. He might not have left Vaughn and Yvette on the best terms, but he didn’t think they would keep something like that from him. He hoped.

He set his water down on his desk and took a seat. There was no use thinking about Rhys, or Atlas, or that field under the setting sun where they shared noodles, or the way Rhys didn’t push, let him stay in the guard house, fixed it up so he would be more comfortable just because he wanted Tim to be comfortable. Because he wanted him to stay.

Because he wanted money. You were only ever a bounty to him, pumpkin.

No. Tim had spent a lot of time thinking about it. To hell with what Jack said. Rhys was mercenary, but he wasn’t heartless. In the end, he’d been willing to die to protect his friends—to protect Tim.

Tim’s heart gave a squeeze, a pump of pure misery and loneliness through his system. He closed his eyes and rode it out.

This was why he didn’t think about Rhys. There was no use to it. Rhys had forgotten him—moved on. That was exactly what Rhys deserved. A clean break, a fresh start. He deserved Atlas and Opportunity, he deserved a bright future, his ridiculous vision of a better Pandora. Tim couldn’t give him any of that. All Tim had to offer was himself, and Rhys deserved better.

God. Drinking made him so maudlin. Made him feel weak.

There would be others like Rhys, he told himself. He’d taken a step today, showing someone his face. Batu wasn’t wrong: no one would ever make an effort with him if he didn’t start trusting people. If he didn’t take off his mask once and a while.

And maybe he’d find something like he had with Rhys. Or maybe he wouldn’t. That would be okay, too.

Tim took a long and heavy breath, let the oxygen fill his lungs, felt the way his chest swelled. He let it out slow and made himself relax. He let his head rest against the back of his chair and stared up at the dark ceiling until his eyes began to play tricks.

After a while, he straightened, flicked on his table lamp, and picked up his ECHOtab.
This would be a nice place to end this story, even if it might be a bit of a downer. Maybe if I were a more capital-L Literary writer, I'd leave things here.

But I'm genre trash.

Next chapter: Hello, Rhys.

Good news, bad news, gang. Good news: we've got one chapter left! Bad news: it will be late because I'm hopping on a plane in a few hours and won't return until Wednesday night. Expect next week's update either Wednesday night or Thursday morning. Sorry.

I'll save the big note for the next chapter, but for now know that I am always thankful for everyone's comments, and for the fact that people actually read this dang thing. In a lot of ways, the response I've gotten to this madness has far exceeded my expectations. You're all just the fucking best.
Hi Janey,

Yes, the rumours are true: that handsome look-alike that’s been spotted wandering the plains is indeed me. And sometimes my clones. I’ve put down roots

Tim highlighted the last phrase and hit delete.

I’ve gotten a home in a settlement called Karamay. Sort of. Technically, my home’s outside the settlement limits, but I’ve become part of the community. They let me stay in return for my valuable contribution of murdering any threats. It’s not bad work. I get by

Tim paused and stared at the screen. He deleted the last three words.

It’s definitely not outside my wheelhouse.

And yes, I’ve stopped wearing the mask in public. Not all the time, but a lot more than I used to. Everyone kind of knows the story, or at least the cleaned up version. The people around here have gotten used to seeing it, but I think it can still come across as a nasty shock. Yesterday a drunkard on the street reached for his pistol when he saw me in the dark

Highlight, delete.

People are getting accustomed. Familiarity breeds comfort, or something.

As for how I’m doing... I think I’m okay. It’s not as easy as I want it to be. Sometimes I can’t sleep. I still drink too much and I don’t always remember to eat. Sometimes I keep my front door propped open all day. I took the mirror out of the bathroom. Shaving is a bitch but that’s my life. My whole life is a series of things I have to do to keep myself from falling apart. Simple things, things people can just do, are like a fucking mine field for me and I would probably be angry if I weren’t so tired. I let the clones out from time to time because I feel like I owe them but it’s hard. I can’t always make myself look at them. I don’t like hearing them talk. And it’s not fair.

It’s not fair that I’m still afraid of him when he’s dead twice over. It’s not fair that I still have nightmares. It’s not fair that I’m the one who has to carry this baggage, who can’t look in the fucking mirror, who can’t go a single goddamn day without a reminder of how bad it was, how much it hurt. He’s dead but he’s still controlling me. I don’t deserve this. I don’t think I deserve this. I’m writing again, but that doesn’t mean anything to you. I used to want to write professionally, but I gave it up because I was depressed. I think that’s why Jack picked me. I was already a victim when he found me, and he made me into something much worse. And I have to live with that. Forever, I guess.

I guess I forgot how bad it was those first few months after I escaped. It feels like it did back then. It got better, eventually. But I don’t think I was ever free.

I don’t know if I should stick around. I can’t tell if this place is good for me or not. Or if I’m good for it. I think I am, but somewhere along the way I stopped trusting myself. I’m working to rebuild that. I’m trying to get better. Some days I think I am, but maybe I’m just better at being sick.
But some days are good.

Tim stared at the screen until it dimmed. Highlight, delete.

As for how I’m doing… I’m doing better. Thank you for asking.

That’s wonderful news about your new deal. I hear good things about Ellie. I’m sure you’ll both make a lot of money.

If you’re ever in the region, feel free to come by. I’m learning how to cook. I can make a pretty decent stew and the Mayor/restaurant owner has promised to teach me how to make a ragout.

Send Athena my regards.

Tim pinched the bridge of his nose, an action that brought him no relief from the tension building behind his eyes like a summer storm. He’d been getting headaches like this almost every day now, and he knew it was because of the ECHO screen. He’d tried installing a few apps to help reduce the screen glare, and remind him to look away now and then, but these were only stopgaps. Sooner or later, he knew, he’d have to bite the bullet and get himself a pair of glasses.

The afternoon rain made its presence felt, misting in from the open windows and drumming on Tim’s metal roof. The rainy season was brief in this part of Pandora, but it was fierce. It’d rained every day for the last two weeks, a punctual and steady downpour lasting for most of the morning and afternoon. It made Tim’s job slower, churned the grass plains to soft mud. Even the sheep stayed indoors, although Virtanen the Shepherd said they weren’t happy about it.

The housebound sheep meant the local critters had nothing to hunt. Which meant the skags, rakks, stalkers, and other assorted monsters weren’t coming ‘round as often. It seemed like the rain drove everyone to ground. Tim enjoyed it, even though it meant less work for him.

Tim hadn’t spent enough time in any one place on the planet to appreciate the turn of the seasons. He’d been at Karamay for nearly three months. Tim didn’t know if he was any happier than he’d been at Atlas, but he felt less stressed. He noticed that people were still more comfortable around him when he wore a mask, but only a little. These people were far from the blast crater Hyperion and Handsome Jack left in the planet, scorched logos or no. Hyperion’s grip hadn’t been as strongly felt out here—the Eridium that lined the planet too thin and deep for Jack to bother with. So he’d sent biologists and their sheep. And when Hyperion fell, the locals moved in. Kicked out the biologists, but kept the sheep.

Tim wrote every day now, as regular as the rain. On a good day, he could write 20, 30 pages. At the start, all he wrote were bits and pieces of larger narratives. Snapshots, flash scenes, bits of dialogue. It felt like flotsam from another universe, albeit one contained entirely inside his head. He still wasn’t as imaginative as he’d been before… well, before. But he was better than he used to be. Sometimes that was enough.

But he’d started something new, on a whim. Except it wasn’t new, exactly. And it wasn’t really writing so much as it was… revision. Or a revisiting.

It started out as an exercise, a way to force himself to recall as much as he could about the text file Angel had given him. He wrote down what he could remember of his past—except they weren’t his memories, not really. They were memories of what he’d written, the facsimiles he created in his own head when he read those words that first time, and every time after. In that way, really, he wasn’t writing about himself but about ‘Tim’, the boy who lived in his own head. The terrified young man
going away to university in a big city, far from home. As Tim wrote, he found himself growing fond of the kid, even as he made terrible choices. He wrote things differently, took a few liberties with the facts. His Tim wasn’t alone. He wasn’t a miserable, jealous man. And he wasn’t passive.

It was self-indulgent and Tim would never admit to anyone what he was doing. He knew how it would sound. But he wouldn’t stop.

His eyes stung and the headache he’d been fighting off began to beat against his skull with renewed energy. With a sigh, Tim set down the ECHOtab and rubbed ineffectively at his temples. Lunch would help, maybe. Although a quick glance at the clock told him that he was a little too late for lunch. That might’ve explained the sudden headache.

Tim sat at his desk, thinking over the contents of his pantry, when he heard a knock on his door.

He didn’t think much of it. In a settlement this small, few people bothered with ECHO frequencies. A sheep might’ve gotten loose and Virtanen might need his help with the search. Or Batu might’ve gotten wind of a new bandit camp. Or Huang might’ve needed a fourth for a game of Tichu. It could’ve been anyone.

It was Rhys.

It was Rhys on Tim’s sagging step, hunching under the little awning that should’ve provided cover from the rain, but didn’t, really.

It was Rhys, dressed in a dove grey suit that matched the sky, with white-yellow accents.

Rhys, with his yellow ECHOeye and golden arm.

Tim could only stare.

Rhys shifted his weight, the step creaking. “Can I come in?” he asked.

Tim took longer than necessary with the tea. He stared at the steam rising from the kettle’s spout and tried to figure out just how he’d gotten here. It felt like a dream. Or maybe not a dream, exactly, because his dreams tended to be stranger and more unpleasant. (And if this were a dream, blood would’ve spilled from Rhys’ mouth by now.) It felt like a slice from someone else’s life, like a leak from an alternate reality. Tim half expected to find his office/sitting room empty when he returned.

But Rhys was still there, seated on the lumpy couch Tim had inherited from the previous owner. He looked tailored and coiffed as ever. Tim figured between his cybernetics, his suit, and the briefcase he’d brought with him, Rhys had more than quadrupled the value of Tim’s home by virtue of being inside of it.

He looked up when Tim entered, and Tim froze. He felt caught, pinned by his gaze. He just barely remembered to keep his expression blank. Rhys looked away. Time resumed and Tim set the tray down on the coffee table. Just a pot of tea, two mugs, and a plate of dry biscuits.

“Thanks,” Rhys said.

“Sure.”

Tim dithered for a split second, half-way between taking the seat on the other side of the couch, before he reached for his office chair. He took a seat opposite Rhys and prepared himself for what was likely going to be the most uncomfortable few minutes of his life.
Neither immediately spoke, perhaps both waiting for the other to start.

“You look good,” Tim said at last, just as Rhys said, “I like your place.”

Silence. Tim cleared his throat. Rhys looked down at his knees, flushing.

“Thanks,” he said.

“New cybernetics?” Tim asked, the words just a little barbed.

Rhys winced. “Um. No. But they’re clean. Trust me,” he added when Tim shifted uncomfortably. “We made damn sure before we plugged them back in.”

“Right. So. You remember what happened?” Tim asked. ‘Do you remember what I did to you?’ went unsaid.

“Yeah. Not every single detail. Not yet. But I’m getting there. And I know—” He hesitated. “It’s frustrating because I can remember these pieces—little moments that feel almost unreal—but that’s all I could remember for a long time. It was like trying to put together a puzzle without looking at the box. It didn’t help that half of what I remembered seemed completely…” He trailed off, shaking his head. “I mean, I had to double-check with Vaughn for a lot of it. I just kept seeing this guy with no face. It felt like a nightmare.”

Tim tried not to take that personally. He didn’t succeed.

Something must’ve showed in his expression, or maybe Rhys’ mind caught up with what he’d said, because Rhys went on quickly. “I didn’t mean—not that the time we were together was—well, okay, the stuff with Malady and all the guns and violence was pretty awful but that wasn’t—” He stopped and pushed out a hard sigh. He looked down at where his hands gripped his knees and frowned. “Can I start over?”

Tim shrugged.

“It took me a long time to remember you fully. I kept asking Vaughn and Yvette and Fiona and they told me it would come back to me in time. The doctors kept telling me to be patient, but…” He scowled and Tim had forgotten just how full and lush his lips were. The lower one stuck out. “I kept feeling like I was missing something. I didn’t feel right for a long time. It was such a strange thing.” He brought his hand up to his chest, and pressed his fingers there. The gesture was so gentle that Tim wondered if he even knew he was doing it. “It was like… like those first weeks after the accident. Before I got the cybernetics. I’d feel an itch on a hand I didn’t have anymore.”

Rhys caught Tim’s eye. He flushed and dropped his hand. “You came back to me in pieces. It took me weeks to get everything in the right order. But as soon as I remembered you, I—” His voice hitched, his fingers dug into his knees. “I knew I had to find you again.”

Tim said nothing. He made himself sit perfectly still, let his face remain empty. He could feel something stirring in his chest, through the churn of everything else. A butterfly in a storm. He knew it by now, what this was. He didn’t want to name it, as though that might make it less real.

Rhys’ face crumpled. He looked up at the ceiling and then down at his mug. He bit his lip and slid his hands up, kneading his fingers into his thigh.

“Maybe I should’ve sent you a letter,” he said. He raised his head and looked Tim in the eye without flinching. “I’m sorry. It’s not enough, I know, but it’s—it’s why I wanted to see you again. One of the reasons. And maybe I don’t deserve to apologise and you definitely don’t have to forgive me, but
I just wanted you to know that I am. I’m so sorry, Tim.”

Tim sat, stunned. Rhys glanced at his face, his brown eye wet under his thick lashes.

“Um.” His voice sounded rough. He rubbed at his thighs. “Maybe I’ll, um, leave you to your… life. I can just.” He swallowed, the movement absurd on his long, thin neck, and got to his feet. “I’ll just go. Thank you for—”

“Rhys.” Tim didn’t stand. He didn’t really trust himself to stand opposite Rhys, with nothing between them. He felt certain he’d do something foolish.

Rhys stared at him, wide eyed and tense. Tim sighed.

“Just… stay, alright? You came all this way—“

“—I don’t want to make you uncomfortable—“

“—The rain’s not gonna let up for a while—“

“—have a car so it’s not a big deal, really—“


Rhys sat down on the edge of the cushion, his knees brushing against the coffee table.

“Have some tea,” Tim said.

Rhys picked up his mug. They each drank their tea, letting the silence mellow into something a little more comfortable, giving breathing room between their previous conversation and whatever happened next.

When Rhys risked a glance at Tim, Tim caught his eye. He lifted the corner of his lips. Rhys returned his smile with something small and shy.

Tim took another sip, savouring the floral, sweet flavour.

“I’m glad you’re willing to hear me out,” Rhys said quietly.

“I’m not angry with you, Rhys,” Tim said. “I don’t blame you for what happened.”

“You’d be alone in that,” Rhys said bitterly. “It was my fault.”

“It wasn’t,” Tim said.

“It was. I could’ve stopped it. I could’ve—been smarter, for once. Not been such a sap. If I’d destroyed that stupid eye in the first place, if I’d been smarter with Etna, or faster in the basement when Callum infected me, if I’d gotten my systems checked out, or done anything…” He shoved a hand through his hair, pulling the styled locks into a mess. “I should’ve been smarter. End of story.”

Rhys slumped over his mug, wilting like an overripe sunflower. He braced his elbows on his skinny legs, and stared down at the floor. Tim ran his thumb along the rim of his cup, watching the fading steam rise.

Finally, he said, “When I worked for Jack, he’d call me back to his office after every mission to give me a personal debriefing. He’d spend an hour, sometimes several, just going over the last mission with a fine tooth comb and pointing out every mistake I’d made. Every instance where I should’ve
been smarter, or faster, or stronger. Every mistake was a personal failing. It was my fault I got hurt in
the field. Just as it was my fault when he hurt me in that office.” Tim stopped. He stared down at his
tea and breathed slowly, until he could talk again.

“Bad things happened to me because I was bad, because I was stupid and slow. I really believed that.
It took me a long time to unlearn that,” Tim said. “And it’s still hard.”

Rhys stared at him, his hands gripping his mug. He looked gut punched, pale and wide eyed.

“I wanted to blame everything that happened to you—to us on myself,” Tim said. “I felt like I’d done
it to you. That if it hadn’t been for me, you wouldn’t’ve…” He shook his head. “Part of me still
wants to apologise.”


“I’m sorry about what happened to you, but I couldn’t have prevented it. It wasn’t my fault. And I
don’t think it was your fault either,” he went on as Rhys opened his mouth. “It was Jack’s. And he’s
dead. End of story.”

Rhys’ jaw tensed and flexed. His one human eye wet. He gave a small sniff and buried his nose in
the rising steam and took a long drink of his tea. Tim took his cue and did the same.

“Right, okay.” Rhys stopped, his voice rough and shaking. He cleared his throat and tried again.
“Okay. So that’s one reason I came by. I had something else…” He set his mug down and retrieved
the sleek briefcase he’d set down at his feet. “I don’t know if you remember—we talked about it a
while ago, but—but we made a sort of promise…” He popped it open. Tim craned his neck, but
Rhys had positioned the case away from him. “An exchange. You would tell me about your face…”

The bottle of scotch sloshed as Rhys set it on Tim’s coffee table. Like everything Rhys had brought
with him, it significantly raised the value of Tim’s home.

“Whoa,” Tim said as he examined the label.

“That’s why I’m here. I know—” Rhys hesitated, his gaze skating across Tim’s features. “I know the
story now. I wanted to hold up my end of the bargain. I want to tell you the truth.”

Tim looked up, eyebrows high. Rhys drained the last of his tea, wincing when it likely scalded his
mouth. He held his hand out for the bottle.

“About Helios, and Handsome Jack, and the vault we opened.” He cracked the seal, and pulled the
cork free. “Everything.”

Tim finished his tea and held his empty mug out. “I am all ears, stretch.”

It was a long story, and Rhys didn’t rush. The weak light outside faded. He spoke in an even tone,
pausing now and then as though he were rehearsing what he intended to say next. Maybe trying to
find the best to phrase it. Rhys seemed to recognize that the story he told didn’t exactly place him in
the best light. He looked pained when he talked about the vault key, about his quest to climb to the
top of Hyperion through bloody means (as if Tim were in any position to judge him for that). But
worse was his confession to keeping Jack a secret from his friends—right up until the very end,
when it was too late.

“I don’t know why. I don’t know why I trusted him. Fiona was furious. The first time I told this
story, told her the truth…” He shook his head, took another drink. Too fast. He winced a little at the
burn. “Fiona made it sound like I’d trusted him over my friends, which in a way, I suppose I did. But it wasn’t as if Fi and I were close at that point. I mean, I’d just met her and she’d tried to kill me. Alright, she also saved my life once or twice, but—”

“Rhys.” Tim stayed silent for most of the story, but occasionally Rhys would get wound up and off-track, circling the same point without actually delivering a conclusion.

Rhys stilled. “Anyway,” he went on. “I trusted Jack. He said… he said we needed each other. He always made it sound like everyone else was waiting to stab me in the back. I’d been at Hyperion for so long that it was easy to believe. It wasn’t a good idea. Everyone thought I was an idiot for doing it. Even Vaughn. They were right to. Jack probably meant to kill me from the start.” He drained the last of his second drink, swaying a little as he tossed it back.

“I don’t know… It was stupid, right?” he asked. Tim could see his one eye looked bloodshot. The circles under his eyes, so difficult to see in the grey afternoon light, now looked prominent under the soft yellow glow of Tim’s lamp.

“Sure,” Tim said with a shrug.

“They all wanted to know why. They all wanted answers from me. But I didn’t know what to tell them. How do you explain something like that? Being caught up with Jack was like—like—“

“Like being caught in a fissure at the bottom of the ocean, or seeing your home planet from orbit for the first time. Like being too close to a dying star. Like watching it go nova before your eyes. You knew that you’d start dividing your life between before and after.” Tim swallowed a mouthful of scotch. He remembered all too well what it was like.

“Yeah,” Rhys said, watching Tim.

That was Jack’s greatest con. The way he made you feel as if your life were improved by him being in it, that if you left him, you’d miss out on something incredible. Crossing him was risking losing something valuable, something only he could give you.

“I always wondered why he picked me,” Tim admitted. “At the time, I’d felt so special, but also like a fraud. I felt like I was tricking him, that he’d figure me out and ditch me if I didn’t play his game, keep his interest. But I think I get it now. He always knew I was empty. Small. I didn’t have anything to offer him except myself. But that was exactly what he wanted. I was only ever an easy target to him.”

Rhys said nothing. Tim couldn’t bear to look at him. The hole in his sock suddenly seemed very interesting.

Rhys cleared his throat and reached over for the bottle. Tim held his mug out gratefully.

The story reached its inevitable conclusion. Rhys always hated this part. Even as he told it, he found himself wishing he could change the ending part-way. That his choices had taken him somewhere else. On the nights he couldn’t sleep, he’d stare at the ceiling and play out the chain of events, try to figure out where the path could’ve branched. The quantum wondering, the torture over the endless ‘what if’s.

But nothing he came up with could change what happened. The story would always take him to Jack’s office. He would always say yes. And he would always tear it down, all of it. And the graveyard that resulted from his poor decisions would carry on in the orbit around Pandora.
Rhys dreamed about that. Cold bodies, drifting past the planet in silence. Sometimes it was Yvette and Vaughn. Sometimes it was himself. Trapped in stasis, unable to move or breathe or scream. A prisoner in his own body.

He was a hard man in some ways, no matter what people said—but some nights, he’d wake up screaming.

He suppressed a shiver and took another gulp of scotch, tried to find shelter in the burn. It was good stuff—too good to drink the way he was drinking it, like he was in a race. He’d blasted past buzzed and hurtled straight into the early stages of proper drunk. The room wasn’t spinning, but it didn’t feel stable. It felt fragile. Everything felt as if it’d skitter away when he tried to touch it.

Tim drank more slowly. He was still on his second drink while Rhys rounded his third. The more Rhys drank, the more fascinated he became by watching Tim. He found it hard to stop. Even when it hurt.

It hurt now, as he slowly brought Helios to its sorry conclusion. As he talked about finding Jack in the remains of his office. Their talk, Jack’s betrayal, and how far Rhys had gone to be free.

“But I couldn’t make that last step,” Rhys said. “I kept the eye. Well—“ His looked away from Tim’s curious gaze. “You know. I can’t say it’s the one thing I regret the most because I—I’ve done a lot worse. But it’s maybe the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.”

Tim didn’t say anything to that, which made Rhys feel more nervous. He didn’t know why he thought that Tim would be easier to read without the mask. The brief flashes of emotion he’d seen before Jack took him for a joy ride were long gone. Tim’s expression was a placid pond. Rhys tugged at his shirt cuff.

“I know I said it already but—but I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’d give anything to—“

“Rhys.”

It was like a warm blanket on his shoulders. Tim didn’t sound scolding, his voice wasn’t harsh. He said Rhys’ name like a gentle reminder, like Rhys had forgotten. Or maybe that was the scotch talking. Rhys fell silent, the tension boiling inside of him dying down until it felt calm and still.

How could he have forgotten this man?

He considered his drink, but didn’t pick it up. Instead he reached for the water Tim had set beside it almost a half-hour ago.

“He begged me at the end,” Rhys said. The water helped his throat, but didn’t help with his head. He still felt drunk. “I think that’s what pissed him off more than anything else. I saw him on his knees and it burned him. I saw him at his weakest and he needed me to suffer for it.”

“Prick,” Tim said.

Rhys choked on his drink, the water going a bad way during the swallow. He felt it burn through his nose, but he couldn’t help it. Sputtering and laughing, his eyes watering. It felt good.

It felt better when Tim began rubbing between his shoulder blades.

“You okay, stretch?” he asked and it was the most he’d said to him since his earlier admission. He was seated on the couch now, beside Rhys. Rhys’ better self knew he that he shouldn’t, but he leaned into Tim.
Tim stiffened, but he didn’t move away.

Rhys took a breath and continued the story. He spoke more quickly, more easily now that the hard part was over with. It felt so good, being there, inside Tim’s little sitting room listening to the rain outside. The lamp made everything look cozy, and Rhys felt warm. Warmer now that he was pressed against Tim’s side. He was glad Tim let him stay.

Somewhere around the time they rebuilt Gortys, Rhys’ head had begun to list. By the time he’d gotten to opening the vault, his head was on Tim’s shoulder. Tim kept his hands between his knees, but he didn’t push Rhys off.

“And that’s… pretty much it,” Rhys said. “Sasha and I dated for a while after that but things didn’t work out. I kept Atlas going. Hired Yvette as my COO. Things were good. Then I got on the trail of Pyrphoros and, well…” He sighed. “You know the rest.”

Tim hummed thoughtfully. He tapped his fingers against his knee. Rhys could feel the little movements of his chest. He closed his eyes and tried to listen for his heart.

It was funny. He shouldn’t be so comfortable. Seeing Tim again—seeing him without the mask—had been like walking into a waterfall. A cold, hard slap to the face. But Rhys had spent so long just trying to remember him, chasing that phantom longing that haunted him for months, that he couldn’t bring himself to look away. And the longer he looked, the less it worried him.

It was a strange contradiction. Rhys could see Handsome Jack, just as though he were sitting there with him. But at the same time, he could see Tim. Tim’s face had lines Jack’s didn’t. Scars and freckles Jack didn’t. He wore his chestnut hair short, the greying obvious at the temples and sparse throughout the rest.

After a while, Rhys almost stopped seeing Handsome Jack.

“What was it like?” Tim’s voice startled him.

“Watching him beg? Not as satisfying as you might think.”

“No, I meant…” Rhys could hear Tim swallow. “I meant, when he was piloting your body. What was it like?”

How to explain what it felt like, feeling your lips move, your throat rumble, your chest expand. Feeling your tongue and teeth and lips and hearing your voice inside your own head and having no control over any of it. Rhys had taken those memories and buried them deep.

“It was bad,” he said. He could feel the way his lashes brushed against Tim’s skin when he blinked. “I’m glad it’s over.”

Slowly, Tim shifted his weight. Rhys stiffened, anticipating that Tim would move away but not ready to lose the warmth yet. Instead, Tim pulled his arm out from between them and placed it over Rhys’ shoulder.

“I’m glad it’s over, too,” he said.

Rhys moved closer, slumping against Tim until he was practically in his lap. He soaked up the feeling of being held, enjoyed the calm and security he felt. He felt his muscles relax, his eyes slipping closed once more. The rain had slackened, but it hadn’t stopped and he could hear it still. A hissing whisper just outside. He wondered if Tim would let him sleep on the couch.
Tim squeezed his shoulder. “I’ve got some left-over stew in the fridge. There’s enough for two, if you’re interested.”

Rhys was tempted to say he wasn’t, if only to try and eke a few more minutes of cuddling, but his head felt as if it’d been stuffed with cotton and his stomach gurgled a reminder that something hearty and filled with starch might be a good idea.

But because he was greedy, he sighed and pushed his face into the crook of Tim’s neck, so that he could brush his lips against Tim’s skin when he said, “Okay.”

Rhys drank only water while they ate and when he finished his serving of stew (decent, nothing spectacular, but thick and filling), he seemed a little more sober. He didn’t speak much through dinner, but that was fine. Tim figured his voice could use the rest.

Tim took his turn and filled the silence. He talked about sheep and Virtanen the shepherd, and Batu the bartender/sheriff/mortician, and Huang the chef/butcher/town treasurer. He told the story about the time Virtanen asked him to collect a sheep that’d gotten too close to a stalker nest. Tim had gone out, fully expecting to find nothing of the sheep but bloody tufts of wool, but instead finding an empty nest and a sheep settled in a bloody clearing.

As he spoke, Rhys edged closer and closer, until he was once again pressed against his side. As incorrigible as a cat.

“Still don’t know what happened. Pretty sure Roz didn’t kill them all, but I have no proof she didn’t.”

Rhys grinned at him, his cheeks pink and his expression completely guileless.

“Maybe sheep are tougher than you think.”

“I’d be disappointed if they were. All this time and ammo I’ve spent trying to keep them safe… I’d hate to think it’d been for nothin’.”

Rhys settled against Tim. He tucked his head between Tim’s shoulder and neck, and sighed quietly.

“Maybe they just like watching you work,” he said, as if he’d done nothing strange.

Perhaps he hadn’t. Perhaps Tim was the weird one. His nerves jangled in his stomach, stirring up what the scotch couldn’t tamp down. He envied Rhys’ ease.

He wanted to touch Rhys. He wanted to wrap his arm around him again and hold him close. But every movement felt like a risk, and Tim felt as if he’d gotten lost inside his own head. He’d never been good with this sort of thing. Even without all the baggage between them.

Jack was there, even though Tim hadn’t spoken his name out loud. He’d come around anyway, too familiar now to need a typical summon. No matter how close Tim held Rhys, he would always be between them.

“You’ve gone quiet,” Rhys said.

Tim eyed the bottle of scotch, contemplating drowning Jack. It worked sometimes, although the morning afters had gotten harder.

“Tim.” Rhys gave Tim’s knee a squeeze. “What are you thinking about?”
Tim would rather chew a bullet than admit he’d been thinking about Handsome fucking Jack. The mood in the room felt too fragile. Tim didn’t want to ruin whatever peace Rhys had found through telling his story. Rhys felt so good. He seemed so happy.

Christ, he deserved better than Tim.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Rhys said. Tim flinched, terrified that Rhys had somehow heard what he was thinking. But Rhys continued, “When you go all quiet like that. I can never tell what you’re thinking. It seems like it makes you unhappy.” Rhys turned his head, his nose bumping against Tim’s chin. “You can tell me, you know. If you’re thinking about him.”

Tim was ready this time. He didn’t react, which, he realised, was probably the only confirmation Rhys needed. Rhys sighed.

“Please talk to me.”

Tim wanted to, but he didn’t know what to say. He didn’t want the night to go on like this. He wanted Rhys to stay. He wanted the calm to stay. Hadn’t they gone through enough for the night?

“You can, you know. I’d understand. I—“ Rhys’ voice hitched. He paused. “I saw some of it. What he did to you, when you were together.” He spoke carefully, just as he had when he recounted the difficult parts of his story. Weighing each word.

Tim froze.

“I didn’t mean to spy. I couldn’t help it. Jack, or his AI, I guess, kept flashing back to what—what happened between you two. I don’t think he knew I could see it too. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Tim said automatically. He could feel this night slipping through his fingers. He tried to imagine what Rhys had gone through, imagined what Jack would’ve shown him. How Tim must’ve looked to him. All the old poisons rose to the surface, black sludge swelling from between cracks in the foundation.

“It’s fine,” he said again, even as he felt it inside of him. Cold and thick, swelling into his lungs.

He pulled himself back, shrinking away from Rhys. Rhys said something to him, but Tim couldn’t hear. He felt sick, heavy. The scotch sat like acid in his stomach. He swallowed, trying to keep it from coming up, but he could feel it.

What had Rhys seen? Tim at his worst, his weakest, his ugliest. He saw Tim the way Jack had seen Tim. Pathetic. Psycho. Covered in blood and pinned under Jack. Begging for release, for his attention, for mercy, desperate and sick—

“Tim.”

Rhys’ hand was on his back, rubbing soothing circles between his shoulder blades. Rhys sat beside him, close enough that Tim could see the silver-white stitching in his trousers, a repeating hexagon pattern. He traced it with his eyes. Somewhere along the way, he’d put his head between his knees.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, everything’s okay…”

Tim drew in a long breath, held it, and released it slowly. He did it again and felt his heart’s pounding grow less desperate.

Fuck. A panic attack. After he’d been so good these last few months.
Rhys deserved better. Anyone would. He’d seen the truth of Timothy Lawrence.

“I’m sorry,” Rhys said. Tim could hear something off in his voice, a roughness that Rhys had been trying to suppress. Rhys’ one eye was wet, half-filled with unshed tears. His chin wobbled. His face was red and getting redder under Tim’s gaze. He expected Rhys to turn away, maybe try to collect himself. But Rhys met his stare without flinching.

“What are you crying for?” Tim’s raw voice made it sound harsher than he intended. Rhys’ hand fisted on his thigh, and the rhythmic circles he’d been rubbing into Tim’s back paused.

“Because…” He laughed, a brief and unhappy sound. “I ruined things. I don’t know if I should have told you, but I felt like…” He sniffed, rubbing at his eye. “I don’t know. It felt like something you should know.”

“Right,” Tim said.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know how to handle this.” Rhys sounded so frustrated. Tim could relate.

“It’s not like there’s a guide for this stuff.” He straightened up, pinching the bridge of his nose. Rhys’ hand went still, but he didn’t pull away.

“One time I saw a monitor turn on in the corner of my eye and I locked myself in a closet until I calmed down,” he blurted. Tim stared at him. “It was after Helios, and Jack. That’s how he’d show up. A blue flicker, like a hologram. I thought—I mean, I knew he was dead, but I kept having nightmares. And for a split-second it was like I’d seen him again. I thought he’d come back for me.”

Tim didn’t deserve this. Everything inside of him told him that all he could ever hope for was a lifetime of loneliness. Like a penance.

But he reached out anyway, and took Rhys’ other hand in his.

“That was my big fear, too,” Tim admitted.

“I bet it was harder for you. With your…” He trailed off, nodding down at the gnarled, blue scar on Tim’s wrist. The remains of his old digistruct device. “I bet all of it was harder for you. I mean, all I had was a vengeful spirit that no one else could see or hear. And I was a mess. I was such a mess, Tim, and I didn’t have any right—”

“That’s not—” Tim huffed out a soft breath. “You’re allowed to feel whatever you want to feel, Rhys.”

Rhys’ gaze sank. “Still. After everything you went through… I mean, you had it bad.”

“It’s not a contest.”

“If it were, you’d win,” Rhys said with a wobbly smile. And maybe it was all the good chemicals that flooded his brain after the adrenaline receded, or maybe it was just seeing Rhys’ smile again after so long, but Tim found himself returning it. Rhys’ eyes widened.

“What?” Tim asked, feeling a little self-conscious.

“Sorry. It’s just—” Rhys giggled, flushing. “That’s just the first time I’ve ever seen you smile. It’s nice.”
Tim didn’t know what to say to that. He was certain now that he’d entered unknown territory. He looked down at their hands, unsure how to continue.

Rhys turned his palm over and entwined his fingers between Tim’s. It felt like an invitation, and so Tim closed the space between them. When he looked up, he found Rhys watching him with an expression that set something warm spreading through Tim’s chest. Rhys squeezed his hand.

Tim woke up, confused and a little angry. The memory of the dream still clung to him, but it fell away the more the seconds passed. He couldn’t remember what made him angry, only that he’d been involved in something that frustrated him. A conversation, maybe, that didn’t go anywhere, or kept circling the same points. Or maybe he’d been listening to a band play the same four notes of a familiar song, never getting to the part that everyone could sing along to.

His anger dwindled away and soon he was left staring up at the dark ceiling, mentally working out how many hours he had left before sunrise. The sky outside was dark as pitch, Elpis’ light reduced behind a thick cloud cover. The rain had stopped at some point.

Tim closed his eyes and listened to the sound of Rhys’ breathing.

They’d talked. It wasn’t a grand spilling of guts, draining a poison (there was too much for a couple hours’ worth of conversation to handle, anyway). Tim told a bit of his story, shorter than the lurid tell-all he’d given Lilith, but more fleshed out than the snapshot he’d handed Batu. It’d gotten easier with each retelling. Like watching a scary movie so many times that it didn’t scare you anymore, because you knew when the monster would pop out.

They’d drifted towards each other without talking about it. Rhys molding himself against Tim until they were curled up together on Tim’s stuffy couch. It was perhaps the longest he’d spent in the sitting room without writing.

It was also, he realised somewhere along the way, the first time he’d entertained someone in his home. Although Tim didn’t think he was being particularly entertaining. Unless Rhys was the sort of person who slowed down when passing a car accident.

Actually, that would explain a lot.

They’d had more of Rhys’ excellent scotch. Tim kept himself to only one drink. He didn’t know why, just that he felt obligated to keep a sound head. He owed it to Rhys. Rhys only had one drink, too, which had brought back the drunkard’s flush to his baby face. Tim couldn’t stop staring, he’d found it so endearing.

Rhys could’ve thrown up his dinner all over the floor and chances were Tim would find it endearing. He was so stupid, so far gone over Rhys.

Part-way through their last drink, Tim noticed the way Rhys’ blinks took longer and longer to end. By the time they were finished, Rhys had practically fallen into Tim’s lap.

Tim called him a drunk and told him to take his bed. He expected a fight, or at least a little back and forth.

“Okay,” Rhys said through a yawn, surprising Tim. He stood up and held his hand out, surprising him further.

“I’m not kicking you out of your bed,” he said, wiggling his fingers when Tim didn’t move.
“I don’t mind,” Tim said. Rhys sighed, and shook his head.

“I do. Come on, I don’t bite.” Tim stared at his hand and didn’t move. Rhys’ expression softened. “We don’t have to do anything. We can just sleep.”

We don’t have to do anything. Tim replayed the words over and over. Not, I don’t want to do anything.

Rhys took off his arm and set it on Tim’s coffee table, beside the cold kettle. He accepted Tim’s pajama pants, and wore them with the drawstring cinched tight. Not that it helped; they still hung dangerously, wonderfully low on his hips. Tim stared before he could remember all the reasons he shouldn’t. Rhys caught his eye and grinned.

Rhys’ breathing evened and deepened minutes after his head hit the pillow. He began snoring not long after that.

Drunk, Tim thought, disgustingly fond. It’d taken a lot longer for Tim to fall asleep. He had no idea how long he’d been asleep, but he had a feeling it wasn’t long enough. And now he was awake again.

Rhys’ breathing had gone soft and quiet. He was on his side, his back to Tim, which Tim felt a little grateful for. Had it not been, Tim might’ve been tempted to watch Rhys sleep and there was just no coming back from that sort of thing.

As Tim’s eyes adjusted, he could see more clearly the blue, geometric tattoos on Rhys’ back. He traced them with his eyes, pretended to himself that the action calmed him. His fingers twitched. He gnawed on his lip.

Rhys deserved so much better—

Rhys rolled over with a suddenness that made Tim flinch back, guilt making his face hot. Rhys caught his arm and tugged him back. Tim could see the golden glow of his right eye. The way it brought definition to his face, even in the shadows. Rhys moved closer and all Tim could see was the wet shine of his lips.

“I’m sorry,” Rhys said, although he didn’t sound it. And then, “Can I?”

It felt too good to be true, and if Tim was still asleep he knew he didn’t have much time. He closed the distance between them, his hand carding through Rhys’ hair, and kissed him.

Rhys tasted like peppermint toothpaste and just a bit like scotch. The combination should’ve been revolting, but Tim was so stupid over Rhys that he didn’t care. Rhys smelled like expensive aftershave, hair products, and like Tim’s bed. The sort of thing people could make millions on if they bottled it, Tim thought dizzily. And then Rhys’ hand slid down to Tim’s hip, and he slotted a leg between Tim’s thighs, and thinking became very difficult.

For a while, Tim didn’t think at all.

And then, his horrible brain remembered the buzzard, and the last time he’d kissed Rhys’ lips. He thought: How could you ever mistake Jack for this kid?

“What’s wrong?” Rhys asked. Tim buried his face in his sheets and inhaled the scent of synthetic fabrics and laundry detergent. “Is it too fast? We can slow down. We can stop, if you want.”

“I don’t,” Tim said. “Just… gimme a minute.”
Rhys rubbed calming circles on his back. He was close enough that he bumped his nose into Tim’s every time either of them moved.

Slowly, Tim reached up to cup the back of Rhys’ head. He tangled his fingers in Rhys’ hair. Outside, he could hear the wind pick up, tossing his home’s shutters against the wall. He toyed with the hair at the back of Rhys’ neck. He kissed the tip of Rhys’ nose.

They were so close, he could feel it when Rhys smiled.

“You good?” Rhys asked.

He should warn Rhys, he knew. There would be other moments like that, probably even tonight. Tim’s damage would always get between them.

Except…

Except the way Rhys smiled at him, the way he kissed Tim’s jaw, the corner of his lips, the bridge of his nose, the way he slid one teasing finger along the line of Tim’s hipbone, like he was still excited. Like the last few minutes didn’t happen, or didn’t matter. Rhys kissed Tim like he was happy just to kiss him. Happy to let him take the lead.

Tim rolled them over, until he was sitting up, straddling Rhys’ waist. Rhys leaned up, tried to follow his lips, but Tim pulled away. Rhys fell back with a pout. And Tim took a good look.

Bathed in the soft blue-violet-black light of the sky outside, and the soft gold of his cybernetic eye, Rhys looked like someone from those romance novels Tim used to read under his covers. He looked dangerous, wonderful. Tim traced the blue tattoos on his clavicle, down his chest, his finger barely skimming Rhys’ skin, goosebumps rising in his wake. Rhys bit his lip.

He should warn Rhys. This was a haunted house and he had to escape now. Tim would always be sick. Jack would always come between them, and those old poisons ran right down to the core of him, toxic straight down to the bedrock.

“Tim,” Rhys said. Tim watched his throat move. “Please?”

But Tim was stupid. Tim was selfish. Tim had a fool heart, too big for his brain to corral. And the future seemed so sweet, and all those old pains might just be alright, might be something he could handle for the rest of his life, if he didn’t have to be alone.

Tim kissed promises into Rhys’ skin, things he couldn’t bring himself to speak aloud, as though afraid they might bring something ugly into the world. Old incantations of long forgotten demons. Tim pressed bruises into Rhys’ hips. Sucked them into his neck, his chest. He found a spot under Rhys’ ear that made him gasp, made his toes curl.

I promise I’ll protect you from the worst of me. I promise I’ll be good whenever I can. I’ll keep you safe. I’ll make you happy.

“Tim, Tim, Tim,” Rhys panted, his hand clawing at Tim’s shoulder. “Please— Please let me—”

Tim pulled Rhys up, let him wrap his arm around his shoulders and bury his face in Tim’s neck. He mouthed at the skin there, his hips rolling in time with Tim’s thrusts. His lips found a place that made Tim snap his hips, rough and hard, and they both groaned.

“Let me— Please, let me—” Rhys nipped at Tim’s neck, his ear. He moaned, filthy and shameless. “Tim, please let me—”
“What—what is it?” Tim was strong enough, even with Rhys fully seated in his lap, to keep his rhythm. “Rhys, tell me.”

Rhys rolled his hips, locking his obscenely long legs around Tim’s waist, his heels dangling off the side of the bed. His dick leaking, smearing pre-cum across their chests. Tim grabbed his hip with one big hand, nails digging into the skin of his ass. He was close. He slipped his hand between them, sliding his hand around Rhys’ cock.

“I’ve wanted this,” he said as Rhys moaned. “You, just like this. So good. Fuck, Rhys, you’re so good.”

Rhys shivered. He nosed at Tim’s neck. He dragged his teeth across his skin. “You’re perfect,” he said. “Let me—let me keep you,” he said. “Let me— Please, let me keep— I want—you—” He came with a gasp, spilling over Tim’s fist.

Tim didn’t last much longer after that.

The sky lightened but the sun was hidden, another day’s worth of rain hanging over the plains like a smothering pillow, a uniform grey-white that made Tim feel as if he were inside a giant blanket fort. Morning chill had seeped into Tim’s bedroom, but it was easy to ignore. Having Rhys beside him was like sleeping with a hot water bottle.

“Hey,” Rhys said, his voice thick with sleep. He lay on his side, facing Tim. He smiled. “Sleep well?”


“Me too. Although, you snore.”

He grinned at Tim and what right did he have to look like that? With his hair sticking up and somehow also falling over his forehead, with his eyes half-lidded, his skin sleep-warm and soft, his leg between Tim’s, lying in Tim’s bed like it was perfectly natural. Tim wanted to wrap them both up in blankets and spend the next week like this, just like this.

“That’s rich,” he said, swallowing past the lump in his throat. “Comin’ from the guy who sounds like a garbage disposal full of matchsticks when he sleeps.”

Rhys pouted. “Do not.”

Tim grinned and pulled him close. “My neighbours came by. They were worried I had a skag with a throat infection in my room.”

“Shut uuuup.” Rhys hid his face behind his hand. Tim’s grin widened. He slipped his hand behind Rhys’ neck and planted a kiss atop his head.

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“My closest neighbour lives 700 meters away.” He kissed where Rhys’ fingers covered his face. “The kids in Karamay will have stories about the plainswalking bullymong that gargles human teeth.”

Rhys whapped him in the head with a pillow. Tim laughed and took advantage of his exposed face to kiss him.

“Oh.” Rhys pulled back, his nose wrinkling. “Morning breath.”
Tim stared at Rhys, his brow furrowed. He rolled Rhys onto his back, leaned down and planted a wet, obnoxious smack of a kiss right on Rhys’ lips. Rhys squealed.

Tim tried to pull back, but Rhys caught him and tugged him back down for a proper kiss.

Tim sat up a little while later. Rhys let his arm flop to the bed with a sigh. He closed his eyes and wrinkled his nose again.

“Gross,” he said, his cheeks pink. Tim flicked his ear.

“Where are you going?” Rhys demanded as Tim stood.

“Coffee.” He stretched his arms above his head, listening to the joints pop. He arched his spine and pressed his hands against the small of his back, taking a little longer than necessary.

When he looked back, he was gratified to see Rhys watching him.

“You’re not going to put on clothes, are you?” Rhys asked, utterly shameless. Tim laughed and plucked his jeans off the ground. “Nooooo, I order you to remain naked.”

“You’re not the boss of me anymore, Atlas,” Tim said as he buttoned up the fly.

“I could be,” Rhys muttered. Tim shook his head, grinning.

Tim drew water from the cistern and scooped grounds into his percolator. He didn’t normally drink coffee, the beans being hard to come by since the original Atlas and then Hyperion both sank. It was cheap stuff, delivered in large sacks that Huang would buy and portion out to their customers, pre-ground.

He didn’t know why he thought about Huang and their public house now. Why he felt nostalgic for it, like he’d already left and maybe this morning was a memory he was having. Which was an odd thought to have.

Tim rubbed his head. He never understood his feelings anymore, although he always took a moment to try. He sifted through the contents of his pantry, looking for something half-way decent to make.

Rhys emerged eventually, while Tim sliced his lamb meat into thin fillets. He padded into the kitchen on bare feet and wearing nothing but Tim’s robe. He wrapped his arm around Tim’s waist and pressed a kiss to the knot of his spine.

“It’s cold,” Rhys grumbled, leaning into Tim. “Where’s the coffee?”

He pointed to the percolator with his chin. Rhys poured them both a cup, leaving Tim’s beside the range.

They ate breakfast at the kitchen counter, sitting side by side. Tim’d made a stir-fry, thin slices of meat with onion, a green root vegetable that smelled like garlic and tasted sweet when cooked, and wilted, leafy greens, all cooked in a sauce Huang sold by the jar. He served it with day-old rice that had been sitting in the cooker. It was an odd breakfast, but Rhys didn’t complain. He ate with gusto, telling Tim about Captain Bell, and Eunjoo, and the remaining members of Atlas’ security team slash private army.

When the guilt came for Tim, he didn’t try to fight it. He let it pass over him like a wave, closing his eyes and picturing his old students. A lot of them hadn’t made it.
“It’s good,” Tim said at last. “That you’re rebuilding.”

“There’d be nothing to rebuild if it weren’t for you,” Rhys said.

Tim pushed the last of his stir-fry into his rice bowl and licked the sauce from his spoon. It really was the best part of the meal, if he were being honest with himself.

Rhys had been quiet for a while and when Tim looked up, he found the younger man watching him.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you it’s rude to stare?” Tim asked.

Rhys leaned forward and kissed him. Tim made a quiet, pleased sound at the back of his throat and let Rhys manhandle him closer. He ran his fingers through Tim’s hair, ruffling the short strands across the palm of his hand. He licked at the corner of Tim’s mouth.

“You had a little…” Rhys said, when they’d broken apart. He tapped the corner of his own mouth.

“Thanks,” Tim said, a little breathless. Rhys’ smile widened.

Tim took him back to bed, where Rhys pulled Tim’s jeans off like they’d offended him. They stayed there for a few hours.

Tim was pushing forty, and Rhys was hardly a teenager, which meant they spent a lot of their time just lying together, kissing lazily, touching, talking. Rhys took stock of Tim’s scars, tried to find each one across his back by feel alone. Tim traced the edges of Rhys’ tattoos, favouring the circle of unmarked skin around his areola.

“When do you have to go back?” Tim asked.

“Tomorrow,” Rhys said. He traced patterns in Tim’s chest, toying with his hair. Tim said nothing. Rhys took a breath, pressed his face against Tim’s neck like he was trying to hide, and blurted, “You could come with me.”

Tim remained silent.

Rhys ploughed on, his voice a nervous patter, “There’s jobs for you, if you want them. Bell could still use help training the recruits. Or you could do something else. There’s plenty of space, you could have your own room with lots of windows. We could find you a place that’s removed from the main complex, I know you like your privacy. And I’d pay you of course.”

Tim stared at his ceiling. Rhys had really meant it, he realised. What he’d said last night. He wanted to keep Tim.

And once again, Tim had that strange feeling of disconnect between what he should have been feeling and what he felt. He should’ve been upset, or scared. He wasn’t.

“Can I think about it?” he said.

Rhys stared hard at his reflection, scrutinizing his appearance for even the most minute flaws. His heather grey and silver three-piece suit was brand-new, tailored to his usual exacting standards. It hugged his frame perfectly, accenting what needed to be accented and hiding what softness he still felt self-conscious over. The hemline of his trousers hit his shiny cream-coloured shoes in a single fold. He fiddled with his silver and pearl cuffs. He leaned close and examined his straight, white teeth in the mirror.
A sigh made him flinch back. He saw Yvette’s reflection a few feet behind his. She had her hands on her hips and a patronizing look on her face.

“Really?” she said. Rhys flushed.

“Really what? I’m just getting ready,” he said, smoothing down his lapels.

“You’re primping.”

“This is a big deal, okay? I mean that literally. Do you know how long it took me to nab this contract? Months!”

“Yeah, I can tell the negotiation process was a real hardship for you,” Yvette said.

“Things were dicey for a while,” Rhys said stiffly. “There were times where I thought the deal was sunk.”

“Yeah, speaking of your ‘negotiations’, you’ve got a little…” She tapped a spot on her neck, just under her chin. Rhys flushed and tugged his collar up over the fading red mark on his neck.

“For the record, Vaughn and I still aren’t sure this is a good idea,” she said.

“You’ve made your opinions clear,” Rhys said. He frowned at his reflection, tugging at his waistcoat. “And you’re both wrong. If anything, I’m the one who can hurt him.”

He wouldn’t, though. Not intentionally, not if he could help it. Rhys knew he wasn’t a good man. Probably never had been. But he’d be good for this. He’d swear it on the graves of his loved ones, he’d write it in blood, carve it in bone. He’d be good. Tim deserved his very best.

Rhys’ ECHO chimed, alerting him that a buzzard had entered Opportunity’s airspace. He pushed his hair back, fingers jittery with nerves and too much caffeine. He’d pulled an all nighter in R&D because he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep. Yvette turned and barked some orders into her own ECHO. Todd’s voice carried over Rhys’ intercom system, stiffly informing him that his ‘guest’ had arrived.

Rhys didn’t run, but his long legs took him quickly up the stairs to the landing pad, where, he was annoyed to discover, Fiona was waiting for him.

“What are you doing here?” he snapped, raising his voice as the buzzard began its descent. The sun was setting, its light blue and gold through the city’s shields.

“I came to say hello,” she said with her ‘trust me, I’m very honest’ smile. Rhys scowled.

“Don’t cause trouble,” he said, but his words were practically lost as the buzzard touched down. He jumped away from Fiona, his spine stiffening. The engine died down and the carriage door popped open.

“Hell of an entrance, huh?” Tim said, rubbing one hand through his wind-tousled hair.

Rhys felt his lips part but no words came out. He was here. Tim was here, in Opportunity, with his sack over his shoulder and his old man glasses on his face and he’d brought his freckles and his stupid grin that made the lines around his eyes crinkle with him. Affection swelled so large in Rhys’ chest, he felt like if he’d opened his mouth, it would come flying out like birds. Everyone would see just how bad Rhys had it.
He felt Fiona’s gaze on the side of his face. Who was he kidding? Everyone could already see it.

Tim stood in front of him, warm and smelling of metal and high altitudes. His clothes were rumpled from the long trip, his hair stuck up a little on one side, like he’d slept on it. Like it looked when he rolled out of bed, all soft and messy.

Rhys had fully intended to be cool. To shake Tim’s hand and maybe say something clever and sexy with a hot little smirk.

But he’d forgotten his script. He wanted to get on his knees and propose right then and there. He slipped his hand around Tim’s neck and pulled him in for a kiss. Tim met him eagerly. Fiona might’ve mimed gagging, but Rhys couldn’t be sure. He could feel Tim’s smile against his lips, Rhys’ own elation bubbling up inside of him. God, he was in trouble. He didn’t care.

“Welcome home,” Rhys said. He meant it, but he meant something else, too.

Tim couldn’t seem to stop smiling, dopey and beautiful, doing funny things to Rhys’ insides. He slipped his arms around Rhys’ waist and planted a chaste kiss on his lips.

“Thanks, boss,” he said. And Rhys knew what he really meant.

Chapter End Notes

I wish I had more time to prepare a better goodbye, but I don't want to delay posting this chapter any more. I'm so grateful for everyone who's commented, for every single reader, and kudos. The last few months have been incredible. I've never had such an engaged reader base before and it was truly special. I hope you all enjoyed this. It seems like a lot of you did, which makes me very happy.

If you're looking for more music for this fanfic, Scootsaboot got me wise to this song: https://youtu.be/o98YijA8NI. You can also check out the playlists I made on 8tracks, assuming it still works for everyone. Vol 1 https://8tracks.com/wheatfromchaff/come-back-kid and Vol 2 https://8tracks.com/wheatfromchaff/ignore-the-shrill-alarms.

I don't know what's next for this universe. I have a few ideas for some follow ups, but I can't promise for sure I'll actually write them out. I'll try though, because I think it'll be good practise. Whatever I do next, it definitely won't be as long or as detailed as this monster.

In the meantime, you can check out my too-long annotations here: http://spentgladiatornumbertwo.tumblr.com/htmt. You can also follow me on tumblr if you really want, but I wouldn't recommend it.

For now, though, let's say goodbye. It's been a genuine pleasure.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!