

Resist() // A Circuit Grave

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Resist() // A Circuit Grave

by [_digital cairn \(Schemilix\)](#)

Summary

The Process awakened and gave them the key. They fought first with weapons, but the Process were wily and understood. Before long a bright engineer used the key to cast from the Process itself a shield and weapon both - called simply the machines, they held a portion of the power he himself had let into the world. Able to resist and counter the Process, these machines held back the tide of Process, though for many, it was already too late.

Even such a thin hope comes at a great price, however. In order to contain the power, a trace is required - a ghost for the machine, a sacrifice. It is the duty of the pilot to reconcile with the ghost of a loved one, and take the fight back to the creatures who once served them.

Notes

This AU is kind of immense, and I'm not alone in working on it. Hope it's as fun to read as it is to work on!

Chapter 1: Ghost()

The cockpit is lit with Farrah's ghost, lighting up in multifacted shades of mood. Today the lights roil in fury-shades, grieving purples and angry splatters of red. These are her skies now, and Gilande quietly presses buttons amid her co-pilot's storm.

"Bailey - you can do it. Come on! Don't give up!"

The words flicker across the screen rapidly, and resonate from the green fluid around in the form of an echoing voice.

"Giving up is not an option, dear friend. I will fight until the last," Gilande replies, in her usual soft tones. At least she had the foresight to remind mission control to care for her owl; that was their promise to her.

The machine staggers, barely retaining stability despite the joint efforts of pilot and ghost. This - thing - this creature is unlike any other Process.

"They mimic," Bailey says, distantly. "Sending machines against them was a mistake. You fire two bullets, Farrah... they send four back."

An explosion slams Gilande's head back against the chair, and despite her usual composure she grits her teeth against the pain. From somewhere she tastes blood - throat, bitten lip, a bleeding nose? She can't tell any more.

A voice begs, "B a - i ley? B a -"

"It's over, my friend. See you in the Country."

Bailey feels a hand around her arm. A cheery voice speaks as the sun dazes Bailey's failing eyesight.

"Come on, then."

"First unit, respond. First unit, do you read me?"

Grant leans past Royce to shut down the feed, like the eyes of a corpse. The engineer looks up at him with an expression of betrayal, but Grant only lets his shoulders slump - regret, guilt even.

"She's gone, Royce," he sighs. "Yon-Dale has taken her on."

It takes only a few days in the subdued atmosphere for Royce to stand out, a jubilant strand in a knot of worry and loss. He approaches Grant with clipboard in hand, rapping his fingers

against the hard backing restlessly.

"We have, ah, recovered first unit," he announces, no louder than usual, but there is a light in his eyes different from his usual glare. "Intact enough for a full recovery, too! We should be finished by, well, by later today in fact. This news is nothing but good, nothing but good... unfortunately it will require another, well, another martyr. What with - the - upscaling. Of the project we must make haste. Any suggestions?"

His nature does not allow him to read the finality in Grant's expression, not what it is, what it means. Some sense of him recognises a wrongness, but he fails to understand until Grant says,

"Me."

Royce's eyes flick away, calculating. Yes, it makes some degree of sense but...

"You - and - Asher? You know what this would - "

"Do to him. I know," Grant cuts him off, too harshly. "Find me a better option. I can't keep giving others' lives, Royce. I'm ready for the procedure whenever the machine is."

"Grant -"

"That's an order."

A stray rumour hits Asher, incidental but wounding as shrapnel, in the lunch room. He raises his eyebrows as he listens to the words, dipping in and out of loops of others' conversation - first unit is active, or should be, or maybe was some time ago – active and piloted, or half so... ghosting. So soon after, who would leave everything behind so quickly?

Curiosity is Asher's day job and so he stands, leaving the majority of what he was eating behind, and makes his way to the hangar. Rumours, like diseases, are best solved at the source. Through the bay windows he sees the unit looming, with a fresh coat of black-and-green paint, as if explosions and preternatural claws hadn't wracked its chassis only days ago.

"You're ready, then? I've got the serum prepared. Can't inject you myself, I'm afraid, protocols to follow, not a qualified doctor am I... Here it is, if you – are – interested. The fluid. Your – new home I suppose."

"Oh, that green stuff. Is it what'll - "

"Yes. It is."

Royce sees him – Asher knows he does. He sees the flash of recognition in the engineer's deer-wide eyes even from here. He disappears behind a group of mechanics with suspect haste, but Asher doesn't care to follow. Extracting answers from Royce is time better spent pulling one's own teeth out, after all. Instead he wanders, seeking a familiar face, though not too closely. Eyes seek his only briefly, but they are busy eyes, searching eyes.

This close to the machines, Asher feels small. These titans, so few in number, are the last bastion of his race now. They stand like sentinels, dented and scratched apart from First, who stands as shining and perfect as their hopes had. Third has a deep gash along the left arm that defies looking at – forces the eye to slide cleanly away, rejecting what cannot be known to man.

This is what we're up against.

“Ah – shit that hurts.”

“I'm afraid so. Do keep on talking, Grant, do keep on talking. That's important. We need to tell if – you're – going over. Properly. “

“Dying. Dying properly.”

“Yes.”

“Talk about what?”

“Anything you like, old friend. Anything you like.”

Fifth's chassis has a similar effect, somehow, to Third's scarring. Inactive as yet, but lacking the shine and shimmer of the freshened First. What person can handle four arms and a pair of digitigrade legs as if they were his or her own? Nobody tends that unit currently, so busy they are with Asher's current quarry. He stands by the unit's foot with no expression, but inwardly he marvels at the scale of it. High up there, sat as if in a womb, was Bailey. And now she is dead, and Farrah now is dead twice, and someone is taking her place.

He turns and sees her. Ah, yes. This one will know.

“Anything? Never say anything, Royce. Always blocks your mind up. Let's see. I'm in quite a lot of pain, if you must know. I slept badly last night and part of me is wondering if I'll be tired when I'm in there.”

“You won't.”

“Good, that's good. I'm remembering things. Is that normal, or am I going soft?”

“Normal. What – do you – remember, Grant? Tell me.”

“My mothers. Gone now, natural causes... Goldwalk thirty – no – forty years ago – I remember

>meeting Asher. I remember getting married. I love him, Royce. I'm doing this to keep him safe. You understand? Well... maybe you don't.

“You're in.”

>What?

“Welcome to the Country. That's what we call it you know – 'inside'. Your home now. Welcome.”

>So I'm – dead? You can hear me?

“Can't hear a thing! That's for your pilot, just your pilot. Your words are on-screen, you see. You're strong, Grant. Stronger than you know, to do this so easily.”

Sybil is here. Shouldn't she be training? Her mane of white-gold hair is impossible to mistake, and Asher approaches her quickly now, with growing impatience. The look of apology in her eyes has him pause and the way it bleeds into a muted horror only has him frown.

“I'm hearing rumours, Sybil,” Asher says, and cocks his head. His shoulder feels too light without a cat's weight on them, but this is too dangerous a place for her. “You think they found a new duet so soon?”

Sybil wrings her hands. She never wrings her hands.

“I don't know how you weren't told, hon. I don't want to be the one to tell you.”

Confusion outweighs fear, but still Asher feels the air seep from him slowly, pushed out by a weight growing in the pit of his lungs like a seed.

He says, “...That's never good,” weakly, inviting her to continue.

“It's going to be... you. Ash. They bound Grant in a couple of hours ago I'm – I'm so sorry? I don't know why you didn't or I'd... I'm sorry.”

Asher blinks once, slowly, as if a child had told him some secret about fairies or dragons or never growing up. About monsters and beds and other foolish but terrifying things.

“What?”

Sybil's hands flutter for a moment before she wraps them around her shoulders and sways to and fro for a while, watching as understanding creeps across his face. When it reaches his eyes he closes them for a long time, unmoving as glass.

“I’ll kill him,” he whispers finally, and collides with a technician as he turns around. With Sybil in his wake he strides across the hangar, faster with each person he clips shoulders with, hearing distantly her apologies, seeing only now how their eyes avoid him. They know, and not him – they know, they -

“I’ll kill him!” he shouts, loud enough that his quiet voice cracks from it, and pulls his arm forcefully out of Sybil’s grip.

“Asher, please don’t -” she says, but he silences her with a rapid sweep of his arm in front of him, like he might cut her words in two.

“No words – no – no no *no* – just – no god no – Grant... You promised, you promised...”

His body shouts *down*, tells him to get on the floor and cry until either the pain or whatever it is that might be called his self or his life has crawled from his body – but instead he walks, walks and walks in any direction until he is outside of the hangar, and with what little shred of composure he has he plants himself on a chair in an abandoned meeting room and then – then - he cries. The first sound cracks out of him as if his ribs are breaking.

Sybil very gently takes his hands from his neck to stop him from digging his nails in.

“Shh, don’t. Do you want to be alone?”

Asher can only nod as he tangles his fingers together, knit un-knit, knit un-knit, with no hand held in his.

Chapter 2: Train()

Chapter Summary

No antidote.

Asher stands with blood on his knuckles, watching them with glass-cold eyes. Royce is absent from this group because he is a coward and a murderer and he is worth nothing.

“You think I’ll save you. After what you did,” he says, not a question. “You think – that I’ll let you murder my husband and then. Just do what you want.”

That seems to be the consensus. Without Royce to put it bluntly, they dither and hum and Asher has never wished to be a spitting cobra or something with hundreds of teeth so much as he does now, at these creatures sparing not his feelings but theirs.

Murderers. The word said with such acid is a cold comfort; they only cringe, worse than dogs. Asher’s skin is numb, as though he is looking through his eyes from behind them, not really there at all.

Of course, he will do as they impose. There’s no other way to talk to him again but to play their games. The Procedure, they explain, is the means of connecting a living person to the voices in the machines. To earn the right to speak to the man they murdered, he must undergo the training, the augmentations, and the subsequent trials.

The body, they say, was never intended to be so close to whatever place it is that the ghosts dwell – the Country, they call it, with bitter tongues wedged in cheeks – and he will suffer for it.

There can be no tricks, either; Asher sounds it out: he undergoes the procedure, steps in that cockpit and refuses to pilot. Simple, they take him out, never let him back in. All for nothing. He takes it and leaves, takes that machine somewhere it wasn’t meant to go, but, well, he knows what’s out there. Everyone does, though Asher has yet to see for himself.

He can only close his eyes slowly and breathe out, out, to the bottom of what his lungs will expel. Give me strength. No Grant-if-you’re-up-there. He knows exactly where he is, and the way to him is not so easy as that.

It will take a month, maybe two, to calibrate. If they can have him ready by then, so the better.

The physical training comes first. His body, abused as it is by his own negligence, needs to be stronger to have the thinnest hope of surviving their nebulous 'Procedure'. Eating is the last thing of mind but he shuts it out, shuts it all out but the aching of his knuckles and tendons, the bone-deep weariness. But more than that – the anger. No hope, no anticipation for what he might reclaim gets him from his bed in a bunker near the hangar each day or night or whenever it is they need him. Each time he wakes the despair lingers before being eclipsed by a cold, black rage.

It wasn't the Process who did this. But he'll be eager to rip apart anything they set him at, by this point.

His frame changes little, but he feels the strength in his limbs, dragged down as they are by the weight of his 'continuing ailment' that makes every movement a task. Asher's thoughts are cluttered with cobwebs.

Sitting opposite Sybil, it's like eating with a stranger. Carefully she sets a hot drink in front of him.

“You're catching me up, hon. Making me look bad,” she says, with a weak laugh. With her mane cut short around her round face, she looks strangely young. “I'm not meant to tell you this but the Procedure – it's not nice. Takes a few sessions, I'm midway. Just... I don't want to frighten you, but steel yourself. The things they make you see'll probably be different but... I dunno, I can't explain. Drink up, c'mon.”

Asher watches her face in silence as she speaks, before taking the coffee in hand.

“Thanks.”

Sybil's wince tells him that it was too hot to swallow like he just did. His mouth stopped bothering with that information about a week ago.

No toxins, nothing that alters the mind for the Procedure. Not even caffeine. By the end of the first month Asher is on his own with his demons. The times between training are the worst, with no distractions. Pent up as he is, the exhaustion is not enough to make him sleep, and often he sits with his shoulder pressed to the wall, un-thinking.

Sybil visits stubbornly, despite his monosyllabic answers. She looks tired.

“Got it all out of your system?” she asks, as she sits with two plastic cups of drink, waiting for them to cool.

Asher squints for a moment before he understands. “Yes.”

“Then you're about ready by now. They can put you in tomorrow.”

Time limps by. In the anteroom they help him into the suit, checking the connections that run down the spine as they do. He flexes his fingers in the gloves, imagining for a moment that he can feel the circuitry within the flexible material that touches and monitors his skin. The green lights at the collar flicker with his pulse once he adjusts the catch.

The mirror does show Asher now to be broader across the shoulders than before, though only slightly. Still lean, still a stranger looking back at him. The cat is missing from her perch. Perhaps he thinks that she wouldn't like to see him this way.

The room they lead him to is chrome-sterile, filled with equipment and attending staff made faceless by masks. At one end of the room is something glowing behind darkened glass, blue with a faint flesh of red. Asher is led to the chair that connects to it, with no small feeling of foreboding.

Well, if he dies, that'll be the end of that problem anyway.

They say nothing as they prepare – antiseptic and a mild anaesthetic over the skin of his inner wrist, exposed now by a flap taken away from the suit, then installing the IV. Watching it but not feeling it is a peculiar sensation to Asher, who finds himself unable to look away.

That green fluid. From what he understands, it's poison – a deadly one, at that. The very

substance that took his husband from him, if the rumours are correct. He asks abruptly, though strangely unafraid,

“Won't that kill me?”

“We're just going to record you,” says the orderly, answering nothing, and turns on the drip.

Chapter 3: One()

Chapter Summary

A mouth full of ghosts and ashes.

Blue sky, clouds, was this Farrah's doing? Poor woman, she is dead like the man Asher walks in on, wrapped in black-and-red that Asher can see like a void, a disease that claims life by its own hand...

Father?

Golden wheat - - a house - - very inviting really, as Asher tucks the small kitten into his arms and scratches the back of her neck gently. The window is looking out over a city-at-night, maybe he thinks of stepping out into it, half a mile below.

Runs in the family, runs in the family, doesn't it?

Darkness and smoke and clouds, maybe parting. The searching, need for truth – such an honest man, as though he'd been looking in the wrong places all along.

That familiar warmth – he – is so close *he* -

isn't

there ---

“Wake up, Mr. Kendrell. Looks like you'll only need three sessions after all.”

Asher is in no place to defy that command, and opens his eyes slowly. They sting. On second thought, is there anything about him that doesn't currently sting?

“We're picking up a trace,” he hears, from across the room. “Give him a few days to recover, we'll get the rest in a couple of sessions.”

Sessions. Asher's body aches as if this chair folded together with him in it, and his mind feels only worse. Well, Sybil wasn't lying... he sits up slowly and fumbles for the IV drip, but has his hand stayed by an orderly. There's a faint green glow in the veins around the puncture, just lightly, and fading already.

The integration suit is surprisingly comfortable; Asher was never fond of anything remotely resembling form-fitting. Still, relief trickles through him once he's back in his civilian

clothes. Whatever they put in him, or why, or what happened – they won't explain. Blank stares and 'classified's, nothing more.

He tests his body at their whims, it would seem. Ordered to rest, which is simply no longer possible, Asher digs through the archives with his slightly increased clearance level. The archives list his status as prerec, a pun between prerequisite and 'pre-recorded'.

His concentration pulls to and fro, like an ill-tempered dog. Mostly it wanders into a blank space reserved for the darkest of times, removed from despair and even apathy, insofar as such things as rocks and weather occurrences cannot be apathetic. To Asher, emotional attachments feel like anthropomorphism of some force of nature, currently, when applied to the man sat leaning on a terminal for support, with his blonde hair falling in his face.

So little information is available to him. Either this is the extent of current knowledge, or a man in training is too great a risk. So the better; he is inches from a destructive explosion of spite. Any ammunition they may deign to hand him is as certain as pointing the barrel towards their own sneering faces. Or more, one cold and intense stare.

He would only need two bullets, truthfully. Two bullets for what the snapping thing inside him wishes most.

Murderer.

Asher wipes the thought clean with the same motion as he swipes across the terminal. The sickly green glow always did make his eyes ache. Still, he paws diligently through records, searching for a clue. *Forewarned is forearmed*, he thinks to himself, though formulating distinct words even within the confines of his mind is no longer easy. In truth he has no intention of arming himself, figuratively or literally, until he has something to fight for. In truth, he is merely obsessed and aching and filled up with a void of idle time that his mind is best not left alone with.

The Process, he gathers, emerged only a year ago. That much is public knowledge, though estimates by the public are usually somewhat less due to a fruitless and foolish attempt to silence any sounds of an outbreak. Cities fell, one by one, wiped clean, their residents simply vanished.

Monsters, machines, stray code, acts of god – the thrashing of a pantheon either raging or merely uncaring. Nobody knows and even people of science daren't dismiss the latter, not any more. Asides from a reasonably in depth categorisation system – Lobbers, Priests – of the known manifestations, Asher finds little of use.

No information on the Procedure, nothing on integration. Nothing to ease the mind of a man no longer sure if the man he loves can truly be waiting.

Session two. The stinging only worsens; Asher cannot sleep, feels a fire in his veins. His head aches as though his self is pulling at the membranes in his skull, dragging them in to a fixed point. Whispers, doubts, other voices, I'm here, turn around, turn around I can't hear you, just say something, I'm already forgetting how your voice felt with my head on your chest – my hands feel so empty without yours - we're in this together, as one.

As promised, the third session is final. By now Asher is so deeply inside that he is surprised to see the collar on his integration suit record a pulse, least not with the ghosts that chew on the insides of his ears. When they insert the IV he curls his fist until they tell him to stop. Best not to tamper with his fate when he is so close. Is it hope he feels, or only a resurgence of the same uneasy nausea that's been fluttering in his gut ever since this whole charade came to pass?

Asher sits back, closes his eyes. Somehow he is conscious of them, of having eyes, of the colour of his skin on the backs of his eyelids. Sapphire. Literally sapphire eyes, it's hardly even poetic to say so. The same eyes as his father, maybe of his mother... Even with the IV off, he knows the poison is in his blood, blurring the line between here, between now, between... elsewhere.

They warn him that he will not wake up in this chair, not to panic. They say – bide, or maybe hide, or... he is already slipping into that green-lit midspace, hollow with numbers and unsaid words.

>a as th

>As is tha

>Is that you?

Chapter 4: Wake()

Chapter Summary

But it wasn't your arms that waited for me.

A place of silence, motionless and soundless. There is a sensation, a liquid one, a feeling like immersion in water almost the temperature of one's skin. It is entirely separate from the flood of sensations, memories and constructed thoughts that Asher experienced the first two times. This is peace, though an uneasy one. Something rejects him, something subtle but powerful... But from the other side of that barrier a thought emanates, familiar in the manner of a long-heard voice, but unspoken.

>Asher. Is that you?

Who else? St u p d ques tio n question

>Thank God.

Asher would blink, but he doesn't, currently, have any eyes. Wait. Wait – Grant?

>The one and only. Well, the one and only this-Grant. I'm babbling -

He can't laugh, either, but his amusement echoes around the confines of this liquid place all the same.

<I'm here. I'm – finally here. It's going to be alright, isn't it?

>You did... so well.

The un-voice skips the sensation of 'talking' entirely, bypassing that to register directly as an evoked thought. After a few words of this even that fails, however, and instead hovers in this lukewarm place a feeling of hesitation, a slowly muddling-moiling sensation of doubt and regret, but also hope. Asher would draw away from such a flurry from anyone else, but...

<It's still you. Grant, I was so worried you'd have changed. So worried -

>I know. I'm in here too, remember? You'll wake soon. Next time we talk, you'll have your eyes back. So they tell me – the first time is the strangest. Living people don't belong here.

Asher's hands are tingling. He didn't have hands before.

<You're right.

>I'm sorry. For what I did to you – I can. I can feel what you've been carrying all these years. Maybe I thought I understood.

<Nobody does who hasn't felt it, Grant. Don't blame yourself. Not now.

The tingling sensation is building to pain, his limbs waking from numbness into the stinging of the venom. He feels himself blink as the darkness resolves into flickering, uncomfortable lights.

>Ah. ... Love you, Asher.

<As one. I'll see you.

Pain and fatigue and long-time companions of the now-former journalist, but waking from that trance has him arch his back against the chair and cry out between clenched teeth. Every nerve fires simultaneously, and Asher wonders in the dim, hazy part of his brain untouched by the wildfire is this is why newborns scream when they are dragged into a bright and confusing new world.

It fades after a short while, leaving him aching but aware.

>Ouch. I felt that.

“You can still hear me?” Asher asks. His voice cracks from the effort, and he massages his throat as if that will change anything. He's still in a chair, but as they promised he has, in his sleep or coma or perhaps temporary death, been moved. Leaning too far forward jars at a set of wires connected to the spine of his integration suit, and before him are two OVC-like overlays and a bank of buttons, switches and touch screen displays. The overlays are just within his periphery to either side, and display the words 'Ouch, I felt that' in green text.

As he watches the words, 'Asher 01. All is well?' appear in a subtly different typeface. To this one he types his response, fumbling slightly at the keys.

<beem bettry to be honest but i#m alive

I'm alive and Grant is here. I can do this. To his surprise the unvoiced thought receives an answering hum of appreciation from Grant; now he hears him as a voice, a dulled echo of his resonant tones, but recognisable nonetheless.

>You always could.

The letters appear individually, not as one pre-typed query like the other words. Who is it that types from mission command? The unsigned question is too terse to give him any clues. As he squints he sees, 'Good! Good. Settling in well, are we? Settling in rather well indeed, unusually so.'

Asher stares at the console for perhaps half a minute before he types,

<Only one person types that fucking badly. Royce, I am going to fuc-

>Steady.

“Grant, let me type.”

>Perhaps not.

“Grant.”

Tapping buttons, however, does nothing. Asher sighs through his nose and, leaning back into the chair, changes tack.

“I don't suppose you know where central command is, geographically speaking?” he asks, as though it were offhand. Grant, however, hears his intent as much as his words, and warns,

>Asher, please. It's not -

The thought doesn't need to be completed; Asher senses his intent and replies, sharply,

“It is. It is his fault. He made this project, he greenlit your integration, it's his – it's all him.”

>He hardly coerced me.

“So you just... you just decided to leave me behind. Just like that.”

>You can't say I didn't have my reasons.

Asher's response is only to slam his fist on the console.

>This has... changed you, hasn't it?

“If I died, if you had to train as I trained, you'd change too. But you... haven't changed at all and... ... and I just need to. Need to sort this out. Okay?”

Something prickles down Asher's spine, the ghost of a feeling of a strong and warm chest against his back. Grant – he wishes so badly to hold him until some aspect of this commition inside can cease, but he isn't there. He isn't there because he chose to give that up, no matter what individual needed him. Was it the act of a saint or a coward, to put himself there, in this unknown 'Country'?

Asher breathes out to the pit of his lungs and rests his hand on the console. Even through the material of his gloves he feels a warmth there and, closing his eyes, can imagine a strong shoulder under his fingers.

But it is only imagining and...

A voice, a female voice, cuts into the isolation of the cockpit like sacrilege. It takes a moment for Asher to recognise her, and only then relaxes.

'Syb here. I've got an unofficial pass to communicate with you for the time being for, er, diplomacy reasons. I'll be relaying all you need to know for the time being, yeah? Since we um. Yeah. News is you've got to get out now. Too much time inside isn't good for you and all, especially when you're not used to it yet and all vulnerable and stuff. The protocol is ---"

A pause. Asher, cocking his head, can hear a low and breathy male voice in the background, haltingly explaining. Asher's resentment prickles but he closes his eyes and waits for Sybil to parse.

"You can hear him? Oops. I'll have printouts next time, but anyway. You take the connections out of the back and type in End() to the command console, that's the touch screen nearest where your hand is now. That should get the place open and you can leave. Yeah, like that. Nice! I'll come down to see you in a bit, you like egg mayo right?"

Chapter 5: User()

Chapter Summary

An uninvited martyr.

As promised, Sybil materialises with an egg mayo sandwich and a cup of lukewarm coffee. Sat on the floor in a daze, Asher takes it and, for the first time in weeks, actually tastes what he eats. Which is something of a tragedy, because he was too distracted to tell Sybil that, in fact, of all the fillings ever to crawl from the pit, egg mayo has got to be the worst.

Asher eats it anyway, though devoured might be the word, barely restraining his hunger for the sake of etiquette. Sybil chews through hers more slowly, tearing pieces off with her fingers rather than her teeth in that way particular to certain kinds of women.

“You did well in there,” she says between mouthfuls. “But that's to be expected, since you two're married and all.”

Asher grunts. “*Were* married. 'Til death do us part is somewhat literal a vow.”

He toys with the band around his finger as he speaks, thoughtfully. When Sybil's dark eyes dart aside evasively, Asher relents and gets to his feet.

“We'll get through this. I was too... distracted before, but you're undergoing the Procedure, yet I wouldn't really know who your ghost is going to be. I haven't seen a person around.”

Already gone, perhaps, but then he'd surely have known if Sybil were close enough to any person to form such a bond, undergo such a trial. The only person she speaks much of is that singer woman, but her significant other would likely object to such a thing...

“Just someone,” Sybil says, flapping a hand downwards dismissively. “Call it a surprise for when we first go out. You'll know her voice right away. Anyway, you're being held back until I'm ready. Final integration's tomorrow so...”

Asher can only nod. So long as they let him in the cockpit between now and then, he can bide.

>>> *Trace_Integration_Override*

The taste in her mouth is metallic, like blood or a bad night's sleep. The dream-haze takes a while in sticking – was she drunk last night? Not her habit to indulge in such excess, a social drink or two perhaps, maybe some table-dancing amongst friends but this? Her arm stings like a needle punctured it.

Still with her eyes muzzily closed she sits, finds that her arms don't follow and so falls back down against the chairs. Only then does she look around her. What she finds assaults her sense of place so direly that she can't make a sound, and only looks around mutely at the people in white, the wires and the chair she finds herself in. It's much like a dentist's chair, but they haven't strapped patients down for routine tooth-work for a century or four.

Take stock. I'm a civilian, not a fighter, but I can – I can do this. Think think think. Calm, I am like an untouched night sky, I am...

“Fuck! Let me out of this thing!” Nevermind. She never did take being tied up all that well, *he'd* know.

“Please settle down, ma'am.”

“Sorry, what? I don't think I signed a strap-me-to-a-fucking chair form!” she snaps, and finds that she does in fact have enough leverage to kick the orderly in the ribs, if not very hard. The woman staggers away with a resigned expression and makes a motion that the woman in the chair naturally assumes means 'tranq her'.

Ah, there they come with the syringe. Well, her reading about stuff that doesn't work how it does in movies says she'd have a minute or two before that sinks in... What can one woman do, in a dress, strapped down, in two minutes?

It stings, of course it stings, especially since she is tensing and twisting to make it as difficult for them both as possible. No effect. If she counts the seconds, will that help? Already her wrists are raw from chafing. If only she knew how to break her own thumb, that's how you get out of these things, right?

Struggling... time passes strangely. Distantly she hears a familiar voice, footsteps, the voice again – commotion -

“How did he get out of confinement?”

“You, ah. Well. I considered just killing him but it seemed a little, a little too uncivilised...”

Her head is heavy. She wants to look up and see what that dull thumping noise was, but realises with the sound of someone's muted cry and a body crumpling that it must have been a punch.

“Steady there – no – no come on now. Come on. Alright, alright, just – I'm backing away. Not armed, not armed. Not worth it, is it? Not worth it at all, take her if you want, just go.”

A cut-short moment passes, then the straps – tap tap, tap. Not straps at all, more like cuffs.

“You're going to unlock these,” the man over her says. She can't see his eyes through the haze, though she remembers them perfectly. Dressed in black as he is, and broad, he might threaten anyone but her.

“Well. At the risk of – a – jaw fracture I suppose I will.”

She wants to warn the man, but the sleep is creeping in on her voice. On her arm she feels a tug – he is – he's following the line, whatever it is pricking her arm. At the sound of heavy footsteps entering the tugging stops, she hears the man swear.

I thought you didn't like swearing...

A door slamming. A different voice swears.

“Nonono – no no - *no* hold *on*. Get him out of there but don't – whatever you do don't shoot. Not when he's. Not when he's in with the core.”

In and out. The door – a voice, two voices, one says 'freeze' – a muffled sound, a glassy crash. Something... falling, cloth or a bag of something?

“I told you – not to shoot! I told you! Now he's in and she's – out – she's out and. ---”

She feels a sharp tug on her arm, the needle-pierce-feeling eases... a low-breathy voice close by:

“Red. You'll live, I think. Sybil has – has a lot of explaining to do.”

Chapter 6: Red()

Chapter Summary

Mama always said you were smart.

Red awakes, moves her hands. The chair against her back feels similar, though stiffer, and her wrists are no longer bound down. Around her she hears machine-noises – whirrs, beeps, click, all faint, all efficient and muted. Two OVC overlays and a roomful of buttons, with no windows or doors that she can see.

>Red. You're awake now? Red. Could you speak to me, are you okay?

It's him, it's – it's – wait. His name. What's his name?! She opens her mouth to say she's fine, ask him how she forgot his name, but nothing comes out.

>Oh, no. Red.

For a long moment Red sits in stunned silence, before she runs a hand through her hair to steady herself and leans forward to type on the console.

<I'm okay. My voice'll come bac

No, no. She backspaces quickly.

<I'm fine. Are you okay?

>I can't feel my legs. Or my arms. Or the rest of me.

The gunshot, the slumping body. Red closes her eyes slowly. What's happening? At least he can speak, he's not gone – but her voice, his body. What have they done?

>You remember those two people, right? In the Empty Set?

Red nods, then swivels to kneel backwards in the seat and peer around for cameras.

>I see you. Lookin' good as always, Red.

Even now, she can't help but smile, somewhere between bashful and false-disapproving. As she twists back around to face the console she comes face to face with wires, attached to the back of her neck. Hm, they must have undressed her to get her into this suit... an uncomfortable thought. Everything about last night is a blur, condensing down to – the gunshot, the slumping body, a voice taugth with reluctance at making a sound...

She can almost hear him now. Assuredly, the man responsible for – ? / ... this man's death. Hold on.

“...settled in?”

Oh.

<Who are

<What's -

<Why did you ---

Red gives up, erases the lot, and at least pretends to analyse the console while she's waiting. Most of the buttons are symbolic or just simple colours. Best not to touch them, not yet. They might quiet the voice of the man in the machine, and... she needs him.

“Yes – I – am – rather sure that you have many a question, many a question for us. In time! In time. Unfortunately we can't, really stand on... you know, on ceremony and. We've Process to fight!”

<This is a machine.

“Ten points! Ten arbitrary units that is, you – can – have a hundred if you like. Anyhow... yes this is a machine, that you, I'm sure, have heard so much about. My ah, my brainchild. But lots of secrets I'm afraid, lots of secrets. You – are – talking to one of them. That would be the ghost.”

>Hey, say that to my face. Oh wait, you can't.

<You're fighting Process by killing innocent people?

“Innocent volunteers... usually.”

Red sighs. Some sound comes out, at least. On a whim, she tilts her head aside and hums. The relief is slight against the weight of loss, but it, at least, is something. Bolstered, she types, stabbing each key as if it were personally responsible for her current predicament:

<I want answers.

“Just as well, we have some time before the, ah, the real fun begins. I suppose I owe you that much. For – the – sake of my... troublesome articulation you might. Want to ask yes-no... questions.”

Red rolls her eyes.

<No. Why did you kill him? Why did you take his name and my voice?

“Your voice was... an accident. You were ah. Hm. You may want to take that up with, with Sybil.”

A flash of insight – of course! Now she remembers – the practice, so happy in her new yellow dress, and her man so shy and quiet for such a big guy. Before the fondness can set in at the memory she sees them, a haggard Sybil with her golden mane cut to her ears, trailed by a tall and narrow man with the light of a cigarette reflecting in his cold-bright eyes.

The confusion, how he tried to help, tried to interfere – and then they came for her.

Took her away.

A green-lit space, filled with numbers and flurrying lines.

Sybil. Why?

Red thinks so hard she needs to screw up her face, gouging through tender and malformed memories searching for an answer. The machine – the ghost – they were going to – come on, Red, mama always called you smart – the strapping-down but. But why him? It makes no sense, if they could just shoot her... If.

<You were going to put me in here for Sybil.

A conclusion full of holes, but the person speaking through a throat and not through the cockpit clicks his tongue in an impressed sort of way.

“Niiice, very nice. That intuition will serve you in good stead, veeeery good stead.”

<And you're the man from the Empty Set.

“Yes.”

The one she'll kill the second they let her near anything as dangerous as a paperclip. Right. There's no guilt in his tone. Doesn't he understand or – worse – does he know, does he just not care?

A creak from the microphone, the voice tuned down as he talks away from it – a second, female, more distant, and then a door opening and closing.

“We are go, I do believe. Q&A is – over – I'm afraid. But you'll have your answers.” A click. “Asher zero-one. Meet Red of zero three. Oh! I – I almost forgot the tradition. Name your number. We – should – rechristen One, in the name of good omens. Yes?”

The voice that chimes in is pleasant on the ear, a crisp and careful tone, though there is a depth of weariness and defeat there that Red finds uncomfortably familiar.

“As One. What else?” he says, and then, “So you're the one who was going to be her ghost. Red. She did say I'd know your voice.”

<My voice is gone. Go ahead, name the machine.

>Three Wishes? Could do with some cheer.

“Designations As One and – Three Wishes. You are clear to go. Now ready to begin Turn() trial runs.” A sound like a crack – the sysadmin is clapping his hands together. “Have at you.”

Chapter 7: Turn()

Chapter Summary

How about... me?

The bank of buttons, levers and miscellaneous doodads that had once mystified Asher now is clear to him as though he had piloted the machine for a decade or more. He knows its workings the same way as he understood Grant – no more, and no less. Why is it that Sybil thought she could understand the woman named Red enough for this? More so, why did Royce indulge her in what he surely knew to be folly?

He follows the text on the screen as he listens to Royce's less-than-ideal instructions. What happened to Sybil sparing him the trouble of listening to the man waffle?

>Main screen turn on, or... Oh. There we go.

Asher glances up from the words on the screen at a sudden flickering of light across what he had taken for a wall. An image of the hangar in greens, blues and greys fills what he now understands to be a screen, and Asher sighs deeply.

“Oh. Oh yes, he was a deuteranope, wasn't he?” Royce says, after a confused hum.

>Hm! That's odd. My eyes were the trouble, not whatever of me is in here.

Asher cuts in with, “But it's all you ever knew. Process are mostly white and red. This is going to make things difficult.”

“Nothing to be done about that now, nothing to be done. Follow the ah, the markers I've overlayed and you should meet with Three Wishes a – ny time.” Through the microphone feed Asher hears a few taps, and a set of decoloured markers flutter into existence, pointing through a large and now-open door on the other side of the hangar. From around one of the bays steps one of the machines; Asher has yet to see them in motion, and even watching from the same height finds himself intimidated by how fluidly such a titan can move. The machine is somewhere between yellow and green on the screen, though Asher can only guess that the actual colour of her paintwork is red.

<Hey.

“Good afternoon, Red,” Asher replies aloud to the letters on his left-hand overlay. Falling into step beside her is surprisingly simple, flicking switches with the same ease as one moves the hundreds of muscles and tendons involved in an act like walking. No doubt much of that is Grant's doing. After all, this thing is as close to a body as he'll ever have again – and Asher

sitting in the cockpit, something of a central nervous system. A spine of sorts, maybe. The thought settles into the back of his mind quite naturally.

Red steps through first; as big as the door is, fitting two machines shoulder-to-shoulder would end disastrously. The other side of the door opens out into a space as large as the hangar, but uninterrupted by docking bays or any equipment. The floor is white, broken into a large grid, and as they step through the door a metallic whirring sounds up and traps them within with a crash of building-sized door meeting.

“That's for ah, our safety back here. Just ask, just ask if you want out.”

<Well, except the ghosts. They can't get out, yeah? You made sure of that.

“Hmm...”

Royce's hum goes down in pitch, difficult to read. Nonetheless Asher finds himself smirking in an uncharitable way. This new pilot can't be all bad with grit like that.

Undeterred, Royce's speech continues, “Well, hm. Hn – Turn() is very important, very important so we will make sure that is... functioning before we go about more mundane manoeuvres. They are our edge, the edge of... of our sword you see. If our ghosts could show _”

Asher finds his attention drawn suddenly and powerfully to a triangular button glowing faintly yellow, under which is a screen with a filled bar, and an unlit circular icon. It was there all along, and yet before Grant pushed his thoughts towards it, he overlooked it like a mark on the back of one's hand.

The markers shuffle, one labelled RED by the other end of the arena, and one only two machine-paces sideways from As One's feet. Asher guides the machine to it, and stands facing Red and Three Wishes with his fingers hovering over the prism. Four icons flicker beneath his hands – one greenish and circular, one similar but red-black, one like a grappling hook and the fourth much like a person jumping. The bank of icons around them are blank.

“I took the ah, the liberty of pre-installing from our Function banks. You have, both of you, you have Get() and Jaunt(). Do only use those, for now if you please. No way of knowing if your own are, well, if they're... dangerous.”

Asher swears loudly as his balance is thrown forward and the machine clatters into a heap in the middle of the room.

<Oops.

Red doesn't sound especially sorry, and Royce hisses through his teeth.

“Patience!” he snaps, with not altogether much patience. Asher picks the machine up and returns, with some muttering, to the point indicated by the marker.

>So that's what that one does. How about the other?

“Grant, don't encourage him,” Royce says, about the same time that Asher lands in the centre of the room again, this time on the machine's feet. He straightens from his crouch and turns the machine bodily about, noticing no smoke trails or destroyed flooring. Red's words flicker up on his left-hand screen again,

<Would we crash into each other?

“I'm all for the ah, the spirit of experimentation but – would you wait for me to – EXPLAIN – Asher, for fuck's sa-”

Asher draws the machine's arms up rather than his own, instinctively, when Red lunges forward - and appears several machine-feet behind him.

<Nope.

Even as he hears Royce's long, controlled exhale, Asher swears he can hear a voice distantly laughing.

“Theeeee – uhh – the...” Royce's difficulties forming sentences never were eased by becoming frustrated. Not that Asher would know, but a flicker of Grant's understanding passes between them, through those strange connections on the spine of his suit. “The prism. One of you press it.”

After a moment's pause to decide who might press it, both shrug and go to press the button at once. It's Asher's finger that hits it first, and over the screen floods a mesh of yellow-green dots, esoteric words in the corner – and Red's machine pauses mid-stride, absent from momentum.

What? Asher would ask Royce, but something says nobody outside of this machine would answer. Grant, however...

>I think I have this.

The buttons below Asher's hand flicker of their own accord – Get(), Jaunt(), Get(). Nothing happens, until something shifts, dislocates, and the machine moves without Asher's input – Three Wishes is pulled forward, moving slowly now to finish the stride in another place – then they have jumped – and – the other machine is once again pulled.

And then the grid falls away, and Three Wishes falls – down. Clang! Asher watches the icon light up and the bar his hand pauses by start to refill. Turn(), then. This is how they've fought Process with so few units – because they can fight a dozen Process in a split second. Time it correctly, and while one recharges the other can cover them.

It's nothing short of miraculous. But how? What powers it?

“Royce. You made this?” Asher asks, with a deepening frown.

The frustration is gone from Royce's voice now, replaced with a childlike pride, a kind of wonder.

“No, no. Of course not,” he says. “I merely – ah – adapted it. You'll see I'm sure. You'll see.”

As Asher is about to respond, he feels his body and the machine's freeze. The overlay comes into view again – blue instead, or at least so Asher assumes. It could be a number of colours.

<*Showtime, Mr. and Mr. Kendrell.*

Ah.

Chapter 8: Break()

Chapter Summary

Hide and seek.

Frozen in place. Surely Red won't harm the pair of them, but still Asher feels his innards knot with nerves. How is he thinking, how is he seeing, so clearly, what the man in Three Wishes' machine is planning? Through Grant's connection? Asher doesn't envy his husband, though for Grant the feeling of being interconnected with others would be less... unpleasant than it would for him. There is only one person Asher would share that space with, and here he is.

>Ready?

Grant's voice resonates through the cockpit just as the knot through time eases and he regains some autonomy over his own movements, like drawing his arms against pounding waves. What little he can move does nothing to avoid the glowing-bright grappling hook that hurls him first forward, and then to the side as Three Wishes jaunts right.

Gravity returns and – crash! - several hundred tonnes of metal clatter to the floor. Asher, stunned by the jolting, can only lean back as Grant takes over to return them upright.

“That feeling is quite... something,” Asher mutters, as he runs his gloved fingers to rearranged his mussed hair. “Though I imagine we will need to do more than disorientate the Process if we are to succeed.”

Royce's voice cuts in, no longer shut off by the twisting and bending of time. “Most certainly you will, you will. We can generate, ah, psuedo-Process, with the appearance of what have been termed the, the 'Creeps' for... some reason unknown to me. But later, later. No use trying to... pole vault before you can so much as crawl.”

<Hey, I think we're getting the hang of it rather quickly.

“Hm, well, it is quite – quite basic, it would be worrying if you had not.”

With that damning praise, Royce flicks a few buttons and the floor, split into grids, lifts in places to form ranks of white blocks tall enough to block the machines' view of one another. The noise it makes is more of a high-pitched flickering hum than any sort of grinding, and around the perimeter a dotted marquee drops into view.

“Welcome, welcome to the most ludicrous and yet I-am-sure exciting... game of tag you four ever have - participated – in.” A pause as Royce retrospectively checks that sentence, before he continues, “The Get() function acts as a tag. Tag or... be... tagged, you see. A cat and a mouse. An exercise only! Do begin.”

Only now does Asher realise how light the machines are on their feet. The speakers pick up the footsteps as well as the ambient sound, magnifying them over the continuous digital-mechanical hum – but still he struggles to parse the direction Red and her machine approach from, how distant they are. The white blocks distort the echoes only further, and he only pinpoints her location just as he is pulled backwards into a block at high speed.

“Red one. Remember, you can Jaunt() clear through those ah, those blocks. If you know where – you'd land. That takes practice. A lot of practice.”

So they continue, and while Asher takes to jaunting out of view rather easily, Red has a hunter's instinct, and soundly thrashes him – until an alarm sounds, high and keening like the building is mourning or in fear.

<what

>The siren. It's the Process, they're trying to breach again.

Asher's brows lower in a concerned frown and he says,

“An assault? Did they know?”

>Unfortunate timing, I'm certain. We've only the two units currently. Two is MIA, Four in need of repairs and pilots, and Fifth's status is... uncertain. I'm sure he won't be joining us.

>>> Trace_Integration_Override

Dimly Red hears Royce's voice travelling quickly away from the microphone - “Not now – not now!” - and much clattering and footsteps. “div--- powe--- firewalls ---”

Asher speaks over the fading commands, “Grant says that all units but ours are out of commission at current. And... given we're not trained, this doesn't look good.”

<nope

What else is there to say?

“Access point – to – the – access point. Right now, no dawdling! We can't let you use the – the new functions yet -”

A pause, in which Red turns her machines about on the spot to look for anything that might be aptly called an access point, and finds nothing.

“There's no time.” Even now, Asher's voice has a cold and clear quality to it. Red isn't sure she fears death either. “If they reach central command – we all know what'll happen. Where do we go down?”

Royce doesn't speak, but the markers flicker up all the same. Time is short indeed. Asher takes the lead this time, picking his way through a compound unfamiliar to Red, despite the arrows and dots marking the way. They stand, soon, before a drop shaft that yawns down the depths of the tower's guts.

<Do we just drop? The tower's awful tall.

Asher grunts. "So're we. Somebody'll stop us if we're not meant to, right?"

<I like your style.

Red leans forward in the cockpit as if that might afford her a better view of the drop. Her co-pilot's voice thrums through the controls and her chest:

>Gonna need a run-up for that?

Ladies first, then. Red moves her hands on the gearstick and buttons as if they were a convoluted extension of her own limbs, and together she and the man in the machine jump down the access chute. Down they go – picking up speed rapidly – to clatter down at the bottom with a thunderous retort of metal on metal. The supports hold, however, as do the legs of the machine.

>I'd give that a sound ten out of ten.

But Red doesn't have time to type a response, and can only smile towards what she thinks might be the camera before directing the machine out of the way. Shortly after a second titanic body crashes down, and out steps As One.

"Right. System control we are..." Asher pauses, clearly seeking a suitably militaristic term. Getting into character was ever the artist's way of handling the unknown. Red, with a twinge of empathy for the man whose face she has yet to see, decides to chime in with,

<On the ground?

So Asher finishes, "On the ground. That sounds correct to me."

For a while silence greets them, and while the pair in the flesh are content to hurl themselves hundreds of feet without guidance, stepping out unprompted into whatever chaos is unfurling out there, whatever tentacled behemoth might be flailing its hundredfold limbs at them, is quite beyond their sense of adventure.

Her co-pilot says, after a pause,

>Can you do hand-clapping with a hundred tonne robot?

Red is saddened to realise she can no longer laugh out loud, but smiles anyway and types,

<Nice image.

Then Royce's smoke-veil voice comes over the speakers, tense but not hurried – a voice that couldn't hurry if it tried, truly, without degenerating into fractured words. Instead his usual rambling is snapped into cold, terse phrases,

“Markers're changed. Get outside. Keep distance – and – youuuu have permission... ... you have permission to test the new functions. It's big. Firewalls... might not be adequate. Understood?”

Red frowns. Who put a man so uncaring and so incapable of speaking clearly as the voice of system command? Where *is* Sybil, if she was his aide in taking her in, why can't she take over when clarity matters most?

<Clear, I think.

Then Asher's glass-clear voice, “Got it.”

>You ready?

Red nods, sticks one thumb up in a defiant gesture, and guns the controls forward with gritted teeth. With alarming speed and grace, Three Wishes breaks into a charge towards the light beyond the secondary firewall doors.

Chapter 9: Creep()

Chapter Summary

(Are you still there?)

Outside the tiles that once made up a mosaic are shattered, not by a Process incursion but by the force of behemoth feet crunching upon them. Underfoot the tiles crackle further into brightly coloured powder. Gazing at that, Asher doesn't think to look further afield until a flicker of green at his left writes, backspacing frequently,

<what is

<is that

<do you see that?

Asher can only breathe, “Shit.” very softly at the sight.

“You'll be wanting to mow that lawn,” he hears Royce drawl. Quite the quaint term for the writing mass of red-white weeds that cover the floor starting from a ten metre radius around the firewalls. There's hardly an inch of ground, only broken-toothed buildings propped up against one another, with porcelain white Process jutting from windowless frames like worms from human sockets.

“We're... fighting this?” Asher asks, pausing to overcome the threat of his voice wavering. Royce's voice has the same silk-thread quality as usual when he corrects,

“No. You're – fighting *that*.”

On cue, from behind one of the more intact skyscrapers a long black tube emerges, and it takes some time of examining for Asher to determine that it is, in fact, a leg. Not a cat or a dog leg, rather the leg of a tripod.

“Just a 'Creep'.” The word sounds sour in Royce's mouth, reluctant even more than other words to roll out. “Inputting suggested Turn() sequence... Weeds first.” A pause. “I'll type it, hold up.” From then on the letters spill in rapid sequence onto Asher's right hand screen, alongside Grant's words.

>creeps have a direct line of sight attack. this is one of the remainder 1.0 models I assume must be one of those. others have a displacement function use buildings and process blocks for cover understood? weeds repair machines including yours yon-dale was able to utilise that to fix machines but not for you yet. good luck goodspeed and so on – royce

With that, a few arrows drop down into the overlay, as if from the burnt orange sky. As the Creep's single red eye peers out to greet them, Asher slams his hand on the prism to choke time before it can attack. Whatever the Process do, he's seen the results, and is none too keen on becoming one of those statistics.

>It's as big as we are. No wonder...

Asher's voice resonates in the mindspace wordlessly, with no space to vibrate,

<You never saw one?

Come to think of it, with the risk of Process sickness and the particle, wavelength or... for that matter what manner of vector causing it not yet known... Staying within the tower and its rapidly expanding underground complex may well be the best solution, albeit temporary.

>Pictures hardly do the... phenomenon justice. Asher. We're the last bastion against this tide.

<I know. Let's do this.

A cursory examination is all Asher needs. These functions are his and Grant's, and the swirling black-red chaos labelled as 'Void()' can only be his. But what is its purpose? Are new functions always useful, or can his, like so many other things about him, fail?

>Asher. That's not true.

<You heard that?

>When you press that button, Asher, I hear all of it. Be gentle to yourself.

Asher can only close his eyes and sigh. Gentle? Gentleness never drove a man to improve. Gentleness, giving in to the gnawing need to sleep, keep sleeping – where would that get him? What he needs is hardness, fists clenched against it. Like the ebb and flow of a tide... and he endures. Steady as a rock, but eroding.

He can't stop the thought process, can only twiddle his fingers over the buttons when he hears Grant's sigh resonate through the cockpit. No frustration at him, only *for* him. That... was ever what made Asher's husband different from the others. Patience. Still, Asher must swallow back the guilt. A wholly irrational ailment in truth, but lethal for some. Especially those -

>Asher. That wasn't your fault.

<You weren't there.

Without the barrier of sound, Asher can't keep the acid from the words. Grant, in turn, cannot hide that part of him recoils from it before he replies,

>Why would it matter if I were? It wasn't your doing. Not your fault. I hate to say that it wasn't in your power to save him but... clearly, it wasn't.

Asher would clench his fist, and unclench, slowly, but cannot, and only thinks of doing so before he intercepts the resonating emotions with a forced,

<How about these functions.

>From what I can see... yours works at a slightly greater range. Royce can only suggest where to attack from... given he doesn't know what this machine took from us.

Asher watches the display, still frozen, as flickering ghosts drop over it. First one, then the other, and then the dizzying twist as they move but the Process around them do not. Without Asher's input the machine's arm pulls back, slamming into the ground between a knot of weeds.

They shrink – visibly, they become smaller, and before Asher can question why, the display lights up with green and the speakers resonate with a resonant, mechanical hum. Curiously, Asher feels the aching from his overworked muscles recede slightly, even as the Weeds wilt around them and spray out white, round objects.

>Cells. The machine should degenerate those for us. Think of them as eggs.

<So we shou"ld get rid of them then?"

Asher's words fumble their way out of his mouth as time re-instates its rule over them. The effect makes his innards pinch with something that isn't quite nausea – a sensation of *un-belonging* no non-pilot could have felt to name.

>Yes. A fallen Process can regenerate, or the cells can... as Royce puts it, 'spoil'. Neither are ideal.

The thought carries across in a split second, and Asher turns to look between the Process and Red, with the charging icon in the corner of his vision. Whose reflexes are faster, woman or machine? A hail of impacts on the machine's chassis answers that question, but as Asher falls he feels the sensation of another core activating, pinning him in place.

With a path of Weeds clear, it's between Three Wishes and the creep now. Asher can only hold his breath and wait, blind until the aftermath of the musician's Turn(). *Go on, Red.*

Chapter 10: Arrival()

Chapter Summary

It looks like...

The markers suggest to jaunt to this Creep-thing's right. With time twisted, Red can see the bright light discharging from the Process' single red eye. As One is caught in it, already peppered with charred marks and freckles of queasy wrongness. Underneath, white shapes shimmer and twitch unceasingly, even with the rest of the world paused.

>Not sure I like that. As One's a weapon, not a cheese grater.

<Yeah... We need to knock that thing away, if we can't destroy it. What about these two? They're new. Do they have something to do with us?

>I'd say so. If you've got no objections... I'd like to give this a shot myself.

Rather than type a response with time frozen as it is, Red – cannot move – cannot lift her hands from the console in a gesture of letting go, but the concept passes through to her co-pilot all the same, and the part of her mind nestled against his like thigh to thigh tickles with amusement.

Watching the command console flicker and the two symbols not yet known light up is peculiar for her, and she focuses on where her fingers rest on the screen for a moment as if she might feel her co-pilot's presence somehow. In truth, it's all around her, sure as an embrace – and yet without the warmth the muscles in his arms impart, it feels hollow.

Is that merely shallow of her, she wonders? To need his touch, when he's still here?

>Nah.

Red looks down, shielding her eyes with her eyelashes. Well, he could always read her, but this is a little literal – even between them. Through the gauzy haze of stopped time, she feels the ripple of his concern, the faint note of an unwarranted apology. Nobody would look at the man and think of the man fraught with insecurities that he truly is. But then Red always saw what others did not, a gift and a curse. When he looked into her as no other had, she had *understood* what set her apart from others, wordlessly – and felt at home for the first time.

She turns her mind to more immediate matters, before melancholy can rear up. How do those lights move when time does not? What is it within this machine that stops time – from where did this ability come, or is it only some subjective trickery? Red can feel a headache building in the nook beneath her left temple, and brushes the niggling thoughts aside.

>Go time.

Whoosh! The air parts in a crackling, a clap of a filling vacuum, as a bolt from the blue cannons into the Creep's side. The Process skids away with legs immobile, tearing up masses of concrete and intruding bushes as it does.

Soon after, Red feels the machine lurch to close the distance, and a loud snap-fizz of energy being discharged. Time floods in like water into a pool, and the Creep, no longer pinned by inertia, topples cleanly through an office block with its beams still impotently firing. There comes a crash from behind as gravity remembers As One's hull and throws the pair to the dirt without ceremony.

Red has no time to question their status, and pilots the machine forward to check the Process.

>Asher, Grant. Doing okay?

Red shakes her head at the sound of his voice, now sounded rather than penetrating to the core of her mind, then frowns more deeply still when another, less familiar but still charismatic, intrudes,

“These little numbers they ah they can't fire. If they're moving, they need to aim that is. If you – keep them on their toes but. I think it may be. Terminated. Check for a cell if you would but do be careful, do be careful because you're defenceless during the recharge.”

>Makes sense to leapfrog this... plan whatsit in future then, yeah?

Red pauses a moment to tap out,

<yup

while keeping an eye on the smoking building and the recharging Turn() bar both.

>Can Asher and Grant hear me?

Red shakes her head. Ironical that she must be their mouthpiece, but there lies the crux of it. Asher declines to comment over the microphone, but her concern for him and his malfunctioning equipment and slash or death is secondary to her need to check the body.

Stepping into the building, she hears a curious popping sound, and a large red-white object melts into their chassis. No Creep to be seen – this must be a 'cell'. Whatever do they power? The cores? Wouldn't that suggest -

>You reckon these cores and the Process have something in common?

With the immediate danger passed, Red takes the time to punctuate.

<Don't need a machine to read my mind it seems.

Her co-pilot's response is only a chuckle – how he can find the warmth to laugh like that in a situation like this is beyond Red, who can barely muster a thin-lipped and wild-eyed smile at

present.

<All this for one Process? There must be more. The firewalls have held worse out, right?

Even before she is finished typing the last word, her co-pilot hisses through his non-existent teeth and reprimands,

>Don't jinx it!

The voice that cuts in is clear-cold and well-enunciated, filled with a mix of trepidation and pre-emptive defeat.

“I see it,” Asher says. Alive, then. Red turns her full attention to the panoramic screen at the fore of the cockpit, and hears the remnants of her voice in an involuntary gasp, as if someone else has expressed her shock for her. Larger than the Creep – towering as high as they are, with a fleshy mass that defies being looked at for a head. It walks with a curious lumbering gait, but familiar – so familiar. Entirely unlike the mechanical construct that has teetered along the road only seconds prior.

The shape and size of it together defy logic, and Red's mind slides away – something Red has yet to grow accustomed to.

Royce's voice is tense, losing the deeper resonance to become a strained wheeze, “This ah – this is what. Finished unit one – finished Bailey. Listen. You must listen – the firewalls, as they grow stronger – so do the Process. As you – as we go stronger.”

But Red isn't quite listening, and can only twitch her fingers on the throttle when the Turn() icon pings readiness and her co-pilot breathes,

>It looks like... a man?

Chapter 11: Man()

Chapter Summary

Avoid Process while Turn() is recharging.

(Last chapter for a couple of weeks!)

The being is huge, standing as tall as the machines that face it, and built like a broad-shouldered human. Two arms, two legs, a hunched back, and a writhing black mass glowing with red where its head should have been.

Grant's voice resonates through the cockpit, tense but free of panic – a voice accustomed to calm in all manner of crises. His is the voice that must remain unbroken in the face of defeat, the one the others look to. If he is afraid – they all will be. It is a great burden that the administrator must bear but one Asher, quietly, is grateful for.

>This thing or... one of its siblings was the end of this unit once before. Bailey and Yon-Dale were alone but... far more experienced than we are.

In other words, Asher thinks, privately now that time has re-instated itself, Grant is coming as close as he dares to admitting defeat.

Such despondence is uncharacteristic for the man, and Asher can only rest a hand on the dials and buttons of the dashboard with a fond sympathy. Live or die, or perhaps worse, there can be no running. Either they face a noble end here, or die ignominiously, trapped like a bivalve in its shell while these alien creatures peel their home apart to get to them. The last bastion of humanity. Is that what they want? To end those who surely created them – or is it life that is the aberration, the virus that the Process wish to see destroyed?

<Think fast. We need to cover each other or we're defenceless.

Point. Asher rolls his shoulders in preparation for what is to come. The concept of 'erasure' is less frightening to Asher than some. Still, his stomach knots, forming creases of concern over itself.

Asher's voice is free from the tightening noose of doubt and fear when he replies, “If we try to minimise Turn() usage – between ourselves, we may stand a chance. Cover each other. It does hinge on what this thing can do. I know that our ability to cross distances instantly remains active. Make use of that to stay alive.”

The Man – that's all it can be called – seems to watch them, as if waiting. Like a challenge – and when in some way it senses their resolution or maybe only grows tired, it pulls its

writhing mass of a head clean off, and sends it their way with a chittering, tooth-clicking noise.

From then on Red can say nothing.

“I’ll go first, my function – it –” Asher must stop speaking; the creature-head-haircut-nonsense-THING is approaching quickly, bleeding malice. He palms the button hard; Grant knows.

Void(). That’s its name. It weakens the man, causing it to – shrink, visibly again, an even stranger thing to watch when the thing folding in on itself under layers of black and red is man-shaped. But its projectile-appendage- Asher’s mind is slipping away from the uncanny thought, surely as anything – is heading for them, still. Or will be, or could be, or in some version of reality already has taken a bite out of them wrapped its tendrils or whatever it can do.

Time crunches in when Grant decides – around the machine the green lights arc up in a series of overlapping whorls, knocking the head-thing away.

The detonation tears a layer of paint and shielding from As One’s chest, sending alarm bells caterwauling throughout the cockpit. Asher hears Grant hiss in pain, as if this titanic metal body were his own.

“--- explode. Knock them back!”

Royce’s breathy voice carries to them rather too late.

“You – use your – you know, your... arrow,” Asher says, hurried and struggling for words. Turn() cuts time and order apart into crazed segments, like shattered paving overlaying an abyss. As One will hold, but the sensors and arrays – a great many of them show damage, and a few are too damaged even to report their own injury. Does Grant feel that – are the blank sensors numb, or screaming in a pain no human was ever taught to feel? The seconds tick by as the Man-creature – where did that second head return from? Asher feels nausea prick at him – once again removes its head.

>That green one – I’m sure it’s mine. I felt something alter me – us. I must assume that is a good alteration.

Asher can’t focus on the voice. *Come on, Red. Come on.* A direct hit from that thing – Asher daren’t think. He guns one of the triggers that he holds in his palm, the second one, and is able to control his deceleration enough to skid to a halt some – god – twenty or maybe more metres behind. That leaves Red in the line of fire, Red and the man whose name is absent from the overlays and documents, as if he never had one.

Asher wonders, as he watches the pair choose, what he would see without the cockpit’s screen. Would the notes from central command, the ghostly images of a lined up shot, a running machine – a recoiling Man – would they be visible to him? Would he only blink and see the world shudder under the weight of the core’s will?

They move so quickly – a blast like light and – slam! - Three Wishes punches the Man as if it were a child's imitation of a boxing ring, with a blast of noise and crackling light, in the centre of the eye on its chest. As it reels, helpless and headless, Red flickers beyond the speed the eye can see, and drops to the floor near to As One.

<Charged?

Grant hums in his throat, just audible over the insistent klaxons, the repeated line of - SYSTEMS DAMAGED-

>Not yet.

“Not yet,” Asher echoes. With the rate the bar increases they have a few seconds. “We may be able to hide. Split up?”

<Yeah

And then the curious ripping-zipping noise, and Three Wishes disappears from view. Something crashes with a colossal crumbling of brick or concrete or masonry. Asher breathes out through his nose, taking as much time as he dares to steel himself.

He says, “Grant. Turn those alarms off, will you? I'm going to distract it the best I can.”

>I'll see what I can do. Do us proud, Asher.”

Chapter 12: Home()

Chapter Summary

A set of ribs where the heart is.

Losing the things-called-Creeps is easy enough. Once out of view Red can hear them, scuttling like crabs through the maze of shattered buildings. How human-like that scrambling is, how genuinely lost. The Man, however, is smarter – newer, surely, or had they been planning an invasion long before it happened?

Where did they come from – will they tell her now that she is a pilot? Do they know?

“To your left!”

Asher's voice is sharp with tension when it cuts into the cockpit. From panic or maybe a fireborn trust Red dashes right, slamming the Jaunt() button with a fist. She appears in the middle of an old building, shattering the floor around her as the air and other matter displaces. Red wades out of the building swiftly; big as the Machine is, she'd rather not test its stability in the wake of a collapsing building. The road stretches out to either side of her – the rows of buildings gape and jut, some tumbled and some whole.

Empty. All of them are. What are they even defending?

>Jeez. It's a ghost town out here.

Her co-pilot's voice is an echo of the mind he can't read. Not while that bar is still charging, little by little, and the Man is hunting them. She hasn't the time to ask if he's charged; she can only keep running and hiding and praying until time falls out of place. If only she had her voice! As a singer, she never took such a precious tool for granted, had drunk honey and lemon with ritual care – but here she is, mute and terrified, running.

The man's voice is quiet, the tone of a man accustomed to crisis but fretting still,

>C'mon Asher. Finish it off...

As if hearing the hopeful command, Asher replies with a terse, “Ready,” with a faint trace of Grant's accent. Red has just enough time to jar into an entirely uncomfortable position before time fragments again. From where she is she can just see him, a black-and-green monstrosity surrounded by shadows and burning lines.

The Machines, Red notes, are strangely hideous things. Their design is sleek, not too humanoid as to be unsettling. Perfect, in other words. Seeing them Red knows exactly what misunderstanding of a man was behind their form.

>You too, huh?

Not just her, then. Red still finds his intrusion into her mind troubling, and knows he resents his invasion of her privacy nearly as much as she does. They were ever able to function separately, an ability that they had mutually insisted was essential to a healthy couple. Being meshed as one feels not only intrusive but narcissistic – masturbatory even. Disquieting. Is it the same for the Kendrells; do they welcome it?

>You think way too much, Red.

The once-singer can hardly disagree. Why else bind the stray thoughts in song? And, well, she hardly had an excess of things to do in these drawn out spliced-apart seconds.

>Rock, paper, scissors? Nah, I don't have any hands. I spy? Wait, I know what you're thinking... Chess is right out.

Red would smile, but her face is frozen – and the ghosts have shuffled, showing on the screen numbers. At the very bottom - 0/2000. **Overkill.**

Watching the Man shrink is perverse, frozen there and shuddering from the impacts. The black-red and blue-green emanations share a certain similarity in their swirling shapes, their destructive swathes. Her own Function and her co-pilot's, too, both have a jarring effect. Crashing, breaching. Great minds and all that, if her suspicions are correct.

A Cell pops out of the Man, to be collected deftly by As One.

“Do we hunt the others?” Asher asks. So formal! Red would have asked to mop up. There is a long pause and a crackle of static as the mic activates with,

“No, no need. The – ah – our firewall, it will hold against these offerings. Come on, back inside. Quick, quick.”

Despite who it's coming from, Red doesn't need telling twice.

<on it.

At least the overlay shows a beacon. Their mad dash through the warren of pockmarked buildings could have left them stranded, otherwise. What part of Cloudbank had this blasted mess once been? Sunset, perhaps? Always the most muted of the group. As the Machines jog side by side, Red turns Three Wishes' head to look out over the sea. Fairview, visible as a distant white smear, is tortured. Its shapes are all undone, twisted architecture and floating edifices.

<asher. Look right.

“That's Fairview, isn't it?”

<more like was.

“Is that what the Process do if we don't... shoo them off? I suppose Fairview was too distant to defend. Peaceful place,” Asher says.

Red had never liked it. Eerie, echoing place even at its height, all formal and structured, all isolated. So perfect, such a contrived getaway for people afraid of one another. The peace Asher describes has to Red the unease of graveyards. And she had never been of a religious bent.

>I took a daytrip there once. It was like being in a church or a library. I forget it's even Cloudbank. Or, well, like you said – was.

The cracking of concrete under their Machines must be thunderous, but the distant and the cockpit muffle it to a gravelly noise, like walking on slate. Red closes her eyes and imagines a windswept beach – birds, shore, even seaweed.

<where did the birds go?

Fellow singers with their breasts full of sound. Red hasn't seen one, not even flapping away from the chaos.

Asher's reply is a verbal shrug. “Processed, probably.”

After that Red falls quiet until the base comes into view. The last time she saw the outside of this beast it was new, practically pristine, and she was leaving behind a life's worth of dreams – but not alone. Now it is pockmarked, scarred with lesions that defy the eye, and its great ribs jutting up uselessly. The fluting is ruined and the paint has been seared away by war and time, leaving a naked bunker squatting under a steely grey sky.

It's ugly. It reaches back farther than Three Wishes can see, and it's home. Looking at the state of Cloudbank – it always will be.

Chapter 13: Search()

Chapter Summary

A breather. With eggs.

Stepping out from As One's cockpit feels like shedding skin. His body heat is tied into there, somehow, like a heartbeat, and standing in the hangar with his limbs shaking from shock, Asher feels cold, naked. He looks across to Three Wishes to see Red stagger out with a pale face, looking small.

Asher's ears ring. Sitting in there in the chaos and the warmth of Grant's voice, he had forgotten that his husband is dead. That revenant in there – he cannot follow him out.

The people who come for him are dressed in medical gear, though he knows he isn't hurt. Already a team of engineers, medics in their own right, are assembling to assess As One's damage from the detonation.

“Asher,” he hears a cracked simulacrum of Sybil's voice say as he is led away, “you did well.”

Looking around, he can't see her. Lost in the crowd, she is, or maybe only imagined.

>>> Trace_Integration_Override

Asher sits with his back straight in the refectory, alone with a cup of coffee and picking without enthusiasm at the scrambled eggs on his plate. The engineers and mechanics take one long table, the medics dapple the room like leaves, and the off-duty cleaning staff and cooking staff from this segment of the compound cluster by the drinks machine, talking rapidly.

Red raps her fingers on the underside of her tray. With Fourth Unit awaiting pilots, there are only three living people who might occupy the corner of the refectory for the would-be heroes of Safehaven. Whoever it is that is training to command Fifth Unit, they are absent. She drops beside Asher, and taps the table with a knuckle to announce her presence when he fails to respond.

“Oh – good evening. I was lost in thought,” Asher says in greeting, before returning to bothering his eggs. “I suppose that it's to be you and me for the time being. You were quite something back there.”

Red fishes in her pocket, ignoring Asher's quizzical look and – draws out a handheld. Tapping on the screen rapidly, she types:

>We'll make a good team. Is that a second helping or do I need to force-feed you?

Red holds the words up, points at the plate and clicks her tongue in a maternal parody, before tucking into her own overdone bacon and wrinkly boiled tomatoes. Everything is altogether too salty, or underseasoned if not, and the textures vary from woody to swampy, but she devours her portion with unladylike gusto and starts on the thing that might be a pudding or something from a bog within moments.

When she sees that Asher has barely made progress, she catches his eye and then flexes a bicep cartoonishly. *Keep your strength up.*

“They'll train you hard. Told me that I needed to be at my peak to survive the induction, but here you are. I heard about you,” Asher says, between mouthfuls. Red sighs before picking up the device.

>I was meant to die.

>Be a ghost. For Sybil, I think. They kidnapped me. Sybil and the creepy guy. Bracket.

His sleepy eyes widen for a second as he reads that, before narrowing again in a disbelieving frown. *Sybil, a kidnapper?* Red sees it on his face. Her own question rises up: *What did she think integrating a woman she knows only partially would achieve?* Did Sybil think that she knew Red, that Red was so close to her as all of this – or was she desperate for a co-pilot? Red would like to think of the latter, and not Sybil as some spider in a venomous web.

Asher pinches the bridge of his nose and puts his fork down for good.

He says, “I don't like this. Any of it. Kidnapping, lies, murders. Obfuscations and misinformation – I know the times are dark, we have secrets to keep and people to keep calm but this...”

Red watches his eyes lower as he trails off. She stares at the handheld but finds nothing to add, no reassurances or further doubts. They share the same thoughts. Instead she hums in agreement before standing with her own tray in hand, and reaching for Asher's.

“I've got it. Say, I was searching the archives prior to all of this. We might have higher privs now. When you're free, you could come help me sift through.”

Archives? Red would quip about team-building exercises, but the effort of setting down the tray and reaching for her handheld is too much. Instead she just nods. Forewarned is forearmed, as they say. After they deposit their trays she fishes her handheld from her loose-fitting jumper, and waves her hand in front of Asher's face to get his attention.

>free now

The archives are a bank of terminals, forming a closed network huddled in the farther reaches of Safehaven's military compound. They are sad things, neglected in a time of ignorance and fear. With hastily brewed coffees in hand the pilots make their way inside, and park themselves by neighbouring terminals. The usual – access granted – and – there, the new access. Much as Red is certain that central command want her in the dark, this information is too crucial to discard.

“That's new. Information on the Process,” Asher mutters, as he raises his styrofoam cup to his lips. “They're calling the littler ones Creeps.”

Littler from his remembered perspective, that is. If one were to wander up behind him as he speaks, it would be more than ten times his size. Red nods for him to continue.

“It says they can't fire their beam if they're moving, so keep them on the run. The... man-one doesn't have much information. There're others. Cheerleader modules... This one's called a Fetch. Younglady -”

And so it goes, the pair taking notes, and searching, and trying to piece together from Royce's notes and the additions of pilots and ghosts some notion of what the Process are, their purpose. Either the core of the information is beyond their access, however, or nobody truly knows.

Chapter 14: Dream()

Chapter Summary

Back after a long hiatus! This chapter is more of a 'still alive' update; the next one will have the plot advance. Just establishing Asher and Red getting into a new routine.

She dreams of them, maybe fearfully, or just gnawing through the excitement of the day. Innumerable red eyes watching with cold intelligence, patient, as if they had only been waiting. For what – a crack, to – be found? These mysterious and titanic creatures that crippled a nation haunt Red, and when she wakes it is with dark circles and an iron taste in her mouth.

Mental assessment of her day – yes, I'm awake now, time to have breakfast and talk – to – Boxer. Red looks off the edge of her single pallet, where no second half of a bed and certainly no sleeping pugilist can be found. He'll be... inside. Does he sleep in there? What would it be like, awake all of the time with no body?

Carefully Red dresses, in her new civilian clothes given the state and impracticality of her old dress. Breakfast doesn't seem like such a credible idea after all, so she wanders along the corridor.

Faces recognise her, that little flash before quickly looking away. The heroine. Three Wishes' flesh pilot, fresh into the fold, their promised saviour. She ignores their looks, the one engineer who even, shyly, thanks her she merely nods to politely before stepping on past her. No smiles. I'm no saviour. Saviours you ask. You earn.

Already As One's damage is largely repaired, and once more it can be looked at clearly. Fifty feet of it, newly armoured, repainted. Morale as important as armour, it would seem. Three Wishes stands idle to one side and, there, kept away from the others like a contagion, is the four-armed and twisted shape of the Fifth Unit.

Standing on the scaffold Red spots a group of figures. One towers over the others, with an arm held up with the crook in his wrist that suggests a cigarette – then a smaller one, in a dress that blows in the faint gusts of wind from the various engines in the room. Could that be Sybil? Red, narrowing her eyes, starts towards them in search of answers, but feels a hand on her shoulder.

She nearly slaps the intruder off, but her warning look meets another pair of china-blue eyes. “Just me,” Asher says, taking his hand away – his eyes linger on the figure in the dress for a moment, before he turns his full attention to Red. “Sorry, you looked like you wouldn't have noticed if I just said your name. I know we don't know each other but, since we're essentially comrades, I'd advise leaving that well enough alone for now.”

For now, Red mouths in return, with an eyebrow raised. Her 'comrade' steps closer, and as they are the same height can speak softly, nearby, so that only she can hear.

“That gangly fucker is the one who did this to us,” Asher explains, hushed, and looking up at As One as if speaking about his new profession. “That's why just 'for now'. But we need to be able to defend Safehaven, isn't that right? Learn more of what we did yesterday. If they know

what we want to do, they'll stop us. But... with better things to worry about, we might be able to find what we need. That's what I did before – journalism. Not always on the books.”

Red takes out her phone.

>singers aren't the best at espionage

Asher shrugs. There's something crackling to his easy mood, livid and seething as Red's is.

“Never seen a spy flick? Anyway. I'm assuming you're here to talk to your co-pilot.”

With that he strides away, towards the vault door labelled with the number 01. Red looks down at the feet that led her here almost without thinking, then back up. The maintenance crew have opened Three Wishes up, and inside something glows blue, like those hazy memories of hooking her into that machine to funnel her life and wit away. The shape of whatever glows is obscured from her vision, no matter how she squints.

Instead she looks to the scaffolding where Boxer's murderers had stood. Gone. Perhaps Asher had only been stalling her from something rash.

She has a voice, a name, a shape now. Asher emerges with his integration suit on, running a hand through his hair. Quite a short man, really. But that hardly matters in a cockpit.

I'm coming, Boxer.

>>> Trace_Integration_Override

>Is something wrong?

I supposed they might not let us speak without need. Perhaps it's dangerous.

I can't say I sleep, but... my mind wanders. I lose the time, I almost dream.

Asher settles back, feeling the wire connections jab into his skin. Slouched into the chair with his feet on the dashboard, and his eyes closed, he can imagine a taller figure sat beside him. Just like they had before, Grant with his large hands playing across the piano, while Asher had worked. As the linkage settles the memory passes between them, like thinking of warmth on a cold day – forgetting what he truly feels, and hearing some half-remembered fragments of music. No memory is perfect, but two minds can hold more of it than one.

>You look different, Asher. Though I should speak for myself.

Asher opens his eyes to look down at his hands. They're the same, despite the layer of flexible material that covers them. He can't catch sight of his face. Does he look older yet, more tired? Leaner? With a sigh he leans back again, this time letting his eyes move around the lights of the cockpit, where stray thoughts flicker in blue-green like synapses.

He says, “I feel different.”

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