

THE PERFECT RUN



MAXIME J. DURAND

Information

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The Perfect Run

by **Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)**

Original COMPLETED Adventure
Comedy Mystery Sci-fi Anti-Hero Lead Genetically
Engineered Loop Male Lead Strong Lead Super Heroes Time
Travel

**The Perfect Run is now available on Amazon and
Audible: Volume 1 (Audiobook), Volume 2
(Audiobook), Volume 3**

Ryan "Quicksave" Romano is an eccentric adventurer with a strange power: he can create a save-point in time and redo his life whenever he dies. Arriving in New Rome, the glitzy capital of sin of a rebuilding Europe, he finds the city torn

between mega-corporations, sponsored heroes, superpowered criminals, and true monsters. It's a time of chaos, where potions can grant the power to rule the world and dangers lurk everywhere.

Ryan only sees different routes; and from Hero to Villain, he has to try them all. Only then will he achieve his perfect ending... no matter how many loops it takes.

The Perfect Run updates on Tuesday and Saturday. Cover by [Vitaly S. Alexius](#).

1: Quicksave

It was May 8th 2020 for the third time, and Ryan had already caused two traffic accidents.

He blamed the people of New Rome for this. The city's inhabitants were as nervous as coffee addicts in the morning, and drove their cars like monkeys out for his blood. Moving on the walkway would have been safer.

Thankfully, he had saved right before passing the '*Welcome to New Rome*' sign at the end of the highway linking the city to the rest of the Campania region.

Driving his highly customized red Plymouth Fury, Ryan stopped right before a tank truck would have hit him to the left, dodged a *Bliss*-addict meth-head, and then finally reached New Rome's strip.

Owing to its reputation as the largest metropolis in Italy and a ravaged Europe's capital of sin, New Rome was quite the sight. Built around the shores of the gulf of Naples years after Mechron's drones bombed it to oblivion, it had the tallest buildings Ryan had seen since the end of the Genome Wars. None held a candle to the Dynamis Tower north of town, a glass spire symbolizing the company's power over the region; corporate money had built New Rome, a city with no gods nor kings. Only money.

At the left of the driveway, Ryan could see the pristine Mediterranean Sea, glittering with the sunset while a distant

island cast a long shadow on the horizon; on his right, he could glance at the countless casinos, gambling dens, and luxury hostels that drew so many tourists to the city. He even glimpsed the famous Colosseum Maximus, a modern replica of the old world's Colosseum.

This district truly deserved its name of the Golden Coast.

Ryan himself attracted a few glances from tourists since he drove in his Quicksave costume. He covered his adorable face with a metal, mouthless mask with two rounded glasses for eyes, and his black hair beneath a black top hat. Add to that a navy blue trench coat, a purple shirt, blue pants, black gloves, and boots, and you became *style incarnate*.

The outfit was hot to wear, and not very practical for fighting, but it looked amazing. To Quicksave, that was all that mattered.

As he continued moving north towards his destination, Ryan noticed a few eye-catching publicity boards. One of them portrayed the superheroine Wyvern, a beautiful amazon of a woman with shoulder-length black hair, sharp greyish eyes, and a white bodysuit, showing off her muscles with a green potion in the background.

'Want to be as strong as Wyvern? With our Hercules Elixir, what Hercules did in twelve labors, you will do in an afternoon!'

'One hundred thousand euros, only at Dynamis!'

Meh, everyone wanted to be a Genome these days, even the shadow of one. Then again, who could resist superpowers-in-a-can? Ryan hadn't, although he had taken

the *real* stuff, not a cheap knockoff giving just a fraction of a real superpower.

His life had been a rollercoaster ever since.

Driving in front of a cliff tourist spot and a Miami-like beach, Ryan reached a tourist district, full of bars, nightclubs, and restaurants. The place smelled of drugs and alcohol, but it didn't look seedy either. The worst neighborhoods were in the north, from what he had heard.

Having memorized the city's map, Ryan quickly found the place he was looking for; an unremarkable pub located between an Italian restaurant and a closed nightclub. Parking his car nearby, the courier stepped down and opened his trunk.

Never good at organizing stuff, the young man had left all his belongings in a chaotic mess. His tools, computers, and weapons formed a mass of metal almost overflowing from the car; although none compared to his white rabbit plushie, the most devastating tool in his arsenal.

After searching, Ryan quickly found the black briefcase he had been hired to deliver, seized it, closed the trunk, and then entered the pub.

It was something of a cozy place with ten tables, only a third of them occupied. He briefly noticed some Latin muchacho trying to impress his date by levitating a coin in the air—he must have wasted fifty thousand bucks on a knockoff elixir. A balding, wrinkled old man with tanned skin stood behind the counter, looking at the newcomer suspiciously.

"Hello, local humans, I come in peace!" Ryan addressed the carbon-based lifeform called a barman. "Is this Renesco's *Jolie Wrangler*?"

The man behind the counter glared at him. “It’s written on the front door. What do you want?”

Why did the bar’s title involve both French and English words, while the barman sounded like a true Italian? Multiculturalism struck again! “Then you must be Renesco!” Ryan handed the poor fellow the briefcase. “I’ve been hired to give you this! It’s full of mushrooms and a bomb, but I didn’t open it this time.”

“This time?” the barman frowned. “Are you...”

“I’m Quicksave,” Ryan introduced himself, tipping his hat. “I’m immortal, but don’t tell anyone.”

“Man, you said it loud enough for everyone to hear!” someone jeered at the back, the few clients laughing.

“That’s your power?” the barman asked, unimpressed. “Immortality?”

“It’s part of a package deal,” Ryan replied.

“Whatever,” Renesco grumbled while he seized the briefcase. “I’ll tell my boss and you should receive your payment soon.”

“Good to hear!” Ryan replied, a hand on the counter. “Hey, look, since I’m here, have you seen a girl called Len? Black hair, blue eyes, Marxist-Leninist?”

“Never heard of her,” the barman said with a shrug. “If you’re looking for a girl, try a brothel.”

“That’s not really the type, but thanks anyway.” Knowing her, Len was probably hiding in some underground Kremlin

bunker. "Any place where you can buy custom genius tech? Homemade?"

"Try Rust Town in the north, if you're brave enough. You can always find interesting stuff at the Junkyard, but it's full of cutthroats and Psychos nowadays." The barman looked at Quicksave head to toe. "They're going to eat you alive."

Ryan shrugged, while he heard someone enter the bar. The temperature seemed to suddenly drop a few degrees.

"Renesco?" the newcomer asked.

"Yes?" the barman replied, frowning.

A second later, an ice spear tore out Renesco's throat and nailed him to the back wall.

Ryan tried to activate his time-stop, but a sharp icicle hit his chest at astonishing speed. It pierced his bulletproof jacket and his ribs like a spear, then came out on the other side; leaving a gaping hole where the lungs should have been.

The room erupted in screams, as projectiles shredded the tables and clients alike. Struggling against the sharp pain in his chest, Ryan collapsed on the counter but managed to glance at his attacker.

The newcomer removed his hoodie, revealing his face... or rather his lack of one. He looked like a walking, skinless skeleton with vestigial muscles, skeletal fingers, and frozen eyes. An unnatural, chilling mist came out of his mouth and nasal cavities, transforming into ice weapons.

A Genome. Considering his physical mutation, maybe even a Psycho.

"Adam sends his regards," the killer rasped. The muchacho man in the bar's back tried to telekinetically throw a chair at him, but the hostile Genome grew an armor of ice over his bones. A few icicles later, the Spanish guy and his date had their face redrawn in a cubic style.

"I will get you..." Ryan dramatically raised a finger at his murderer, blood flowing from his mouth, "on my next save..."

The undead froze him alive with a wave of his hand, and all went dark.

It was May 8th 2020 for the fourth time, and Ryan was *pissed*.

Three times! Three times he had died trying to make this damn delivery!

Then again, that was what he got when not paying attention. With the exception of his save point, his powers needed a conscious action to activate; his enhanced timing sense, in particular, didn't kick in until after he had lived through events once already.

Ryan didn't mind dying, since he had gotten used to it after the first two dozen times... but dying so soon? Less than two hours after establishing a save point, three times in a row? His loops usually lasted days, allowing him to try new and interesting stunts; while repeating the same things in quick succession bored him to death.

This meant war.

Ryan entered his autopilot mode, his mind wandering off while his body repeated all the actions of his previous save.

He only stopped and regained full consciousness as he reached the bar.

Instead of entering, Ryan remained in his car, waiting for his killer to show up.

He didn't have to wait long, as the assassin walked out of a street corner, hands in his pockets and his ugly face hidden beneath a hoodie. It said something about New Rome that this crook didn't draw attention, as he entered the *Jolie Wrangler*.

There was only one rational, responsible way to act.

Ryan moved the car right in front of the pub, set an ACDC song on the radio, and then smashed the accelerator.

Pedestrians screamed in panic, some leaping out of the way as the car drove into the Wrangler's entrance. Having been reinforced specifically for this kind of stunt, the Plymouth demolished the wall and hit the assassin from behind before he could attack. The collision propelled the hostile Genome against the counter, like a deer on the road.

Quicksave briefly looked around, in case he had accidentally hit any of the clients; he had been very careful to position himself in an angle with nobody but the assassin on the path, but you could never know. Thankfully, he hadn't harmed anyone, and the Spanish muchacho was too busy holding his terrified girlfriend in his arms to throw stuff at Ryan.

Good. He wouldn't have to reload again.

"Hey, guys, I'm Quicksave!" Ryan told the shocked clients, as he stepped down and moved behind his car. "I'm immortal, but don't tell anyone!"

"I'm calling Security!" Renesco shouted while hiding behind the counter.

"Don't bother, I will be done in a minute!" Ryan replied before opening his car's trunk, unconcerned. He looked at his weapons, trying to find the right one for the job.

The pisto-gauntlets? Too intimate.

The gauss rifle? Too quick.

The shotgun? Tempting, but overdone.

The rabbit plushie? Far too powerful.

The baseball bat?

Bat it was.

Ryan whistled while playing with his chosen weapon, approaching the assassin as he rose back to his feet, using the counter as support. Any other person would have died, but all Genomes possessed enhanced physical abilities.

"Who the fuck are you?" the undead assassin hissed angrily, trying to manifest his armor of ice over his body as he did in the last loop, but too stunned to focus. "An Augusti?!"

"Nah, I'm just a courier," Ryan said, trying to think of a good one-liner. "Sorry, can you give me your name while you still have teeth?"

The skeleton responded by raising his hand, unleashing a volley of ice shards.

In response, Ryan lazily stopped time. The world turned silent, everything gained a purple hue, and the icicles froze in midair.

Eh. Froze. The courier memorized that pun for later.

"Yeah, you took me by surprise last time," Quicksave said, as he moved around the path of the attack until he was right in front of his target. Neither clients nor the enemy Genome could move, trapped between two seconds. "Not gonna happen again."

When time resumed and the world regained its colors, the skeleton kissed the aluminum bat intimately. The undead Genome lost a few teeth since his jaw was tight. Must have been his first time.

The attack tossed the killer to his knees, and another strike introduced him face-first to the ground. Ryan started beating him up to the tune of *Highway to Hell*, singing to himself. Between the shock of being hit by a car at full speed and the blow to the head, the enemy Genome couldn't mount a resistance. Also, it seemed he had some frozen blood below the bones and vestigial flesh.

"I feel like the healthcare system, beating up a helpless granny." Ryan shook his head in disgust at the assassin, before hitting him again. "Look at what you made me do!"

The wicked fossil couldn't offer a good excuse, so Quicksave continued his assault. His unnatural resilience would allow him to survive far worse, and considering he had killed Ryan once, the courier didn't feel bad beating him up within an inch of his life.

"Drop your weapons!"

Ryan turned around, three men in black riot gear pointing energy rifles at him from behind. They surrounded his car, while they proudly displayed the ouroboros symbol of the Dynamis corporation on their chests; probably members of

Private Security. A crowd of civilians had gathered outside the bar, looking at the scene while maintaining a respectful distance. Some had even started taking pictures.

"Hey, I'm just trying to help!" Ryan protested, waving his bloodstained bat in surrender after kicking the assassin with his boot one last time.

"You blew up my bar!" Renesco protested, emerging from behind the counter with a crimson face.

"Oh, you want money?" Quicksave quickly searched inside his trench coat as three red circles appeared on his mask, before bringing out a wad of banknotes worth fifty thousand euros. "Here, have a treat!"

Renesco looked at the money, grabbed it, counted, and then made a conflicted face. "That's more than enough to pay for the repairs," he told the guards. "The guy on the floor tried to attack us, the other weirdo came to help."

"You have a license?" one of the security guards asked Ryan, who shook his head. "You're a vigilante? An Augusti? Company Genome?"

"Nope!" Ryan replied.

"Well, if you don't have a license, why shouldn't we take you into custody alongside that bone guy?"

"What, you want money too?"

And Ryan threw a bribe at him.

The security captain grabbed the wad with one hand, counted while keeping his weapon aimed at Quicksave's

head, then chuckled. “You think you can buy our honor with that?”

Ryan threw him a bigger bribe.

“Better,” the Security guardsman said, putting the money in a pocket full of grenades. He lowered his rifle and had his two compatriots gently grab the assassin, after punching him in the gut. “I’m glad we helped make the neighborhood safer today.”

“Me too,” Ryan replied. “Me too.”

“Renesco?” The captain asked the barman, as his men carried the assassin away. “Don’t forget to pay your monthly subscription. We won’t always be there to protect your establishment.”

And on these wise words, the trio left without looking back.

“Do you always carry wads of money on yourself?” Renesco asked Quicksave, astonished by the surreal scene.

“When you cause as much collateral damage as I do, it’s a real time saver,” Ryan replied, the baseball bat still dripping with blood. “Who was that skeletal fellow anyway?”

“Ghoul, a Psycho from the Meta-Gang. Elixir junkies who have been hitting places like mine recently.” Renesco glared at Ryan, then at his car, and then back at its driver. “Now, get the fuck out of my bar.”

“Uh, not until after I finish the damn delivery.” Ryan handed the briefcase to Renesco, not really caring about the attention he brought on it. Quicksave *always* delivered; no matter how many deaths needed!

The barman's eyes flashed with recognition, and then confusion. "I don't get it," Renesco said, as he grabbed the briefcase. "You aren't paid half of what you spent in the last minute."

"It's not about the money," Ryan replied. He looked around as if worried that anyone listened, then whispered into Renesco's ear.

"I'm just bored."

The man looked at Ryan in silence, while the courier whistled to himself as he returned to his car, driving under the sunset towards new adventures.

Sidequest, complete!

Author's Notes

Hi guys, if you have enjoyed the chapter, please consider purchasing or reviewing the Perfect Run on Amazon and Audible to help me keep posting free content. It really helps!

[Perfect Run III Ebook](#)



And,

Perfect Run II Audiobook



A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Hi guys, if you're interested in LitRPGs, you can check out my new story, [Apocalypse Tamer!](#) A System Apocalypse full of adorable monsters, Kaijus, and epic storylines!

APOCALYPSE TAMER



MAYTIME DREAM



Link: <https://www.royalroad.com/fiction/55672/apocalypse-tamer/chapter/932077/chapter-1-man-vs-wild>

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2: Story Branching

Ryan always did science in his underwear.

Clothes embodied society's restrictions upon the human spirit, the crushing power of civilization attempting to make the individual fit into the mold. But by being mostly naked, Ryan reconnected with his creativity, unbound by conformity; while his boxers represented his lingering attachment to his mental stability, preventing him from going completely off the rails. The one time Ryan had worked completely naked, he ended up building his rabbit plushie.

Also, his boxers felt comfy and warm. Len had made them for him, years ago.

Having rented a hotel room near the city center, Ryan spent the early morning splitting his time between researching information about New Rome and improving his gadgets. The receptionist had given Quicksave a strange glance upon seeing him move upstairs with his hands full of weapons, but didn't call the Private Security. Masked strangers were nothing unusual in this city.

Of course, Ryan took the time to hack the bedroom's camera to protect his *secret identity*, and to avoid panic. He had a lot of unsafe stuff in his arsenal.

Resting on a chair, Ryan typed on his computer with his toes—a skill he spent many loops mastering—while he worked

on his coil gun with his hands. The client had wired him his money for yesterday's delivery, with compliments for Ghoul's arrest, although the courier didn't care much. The job was just an excuse to travel across Italy, looking for new adventures.

Though he had put his endless wandering on hold, once he heard Len might be in New Rome.

From what Renesco had told him, he should go to Rust Town for information; according to the local Dynanet, that was the nickname given to New Rome's poor northwest neighborhood. The corporations controlling the city had put all the industrial plants there, turning the area into a dumpster. They had even built a wall to prevent vagrants from moving into the other districts.

According to the receptionist, the 'Junkyard' was a landmark of that area, an old coal mine transformed into an open landfill. Many rogue Geniuses and adventurers exchanged stuff there. Maybe Len was among them.

Someone knocked on his bedroom window.

Ryan glanced at it, a woman waving her hand at him from the other side. "Hi," she said. "Can we talk for a minute?"

Ryan's room was on floor ten, and it had no fire exit.

"Hey!" Ryan grabbed his mask and put it on, alongside the hat. "You're violating my secret identity!"

"You don't have one, Ryan Romano," the woman replied, raising an eyebrow. "And according to your file, you never did anything to hide it."

“I have a file?” Ryan asked, overtaken by happiness. “I’m famous! How am I described?”

“*Deranged, but reliable.*” Sweet! They got him halfway right! The flying woman eyed him from head to toe through the glass. “Don’t you intend to put on your other clothes?”

Ryan chuckled. “No.”

He would always stand against oppressors.

The personal space invader responded with a frown, knocking on the window again, albeit with a bit more frustration than before. “Can you...”

Ryan rose from his chair to open the window with one hand, and kept the coil gun aimed at the newcomer with the other.

Now that he had a better view, Ryan immediately recognized the woman, having seen her on a publicity board yesterday. She was floating in midair thanks to translucent dragonfly wings flapping at high speed on her back, her hands on her waist. This made her look as graceful as a fairy, especially since unlike bugs she made no sound while hovering in place.

“I’m Wyvern,” the show-off introduced herself. She wore a sleeveless, skintight white uniform with Dynamis’ D-shaped logo on the left, and a silver star surrounded by golden laurel on the right. She was probably between her mid-twenties and early thirties, and quite the eye-catcher. “I wanted to thank you for Ghoul’s arrest yesterday.”

“Oh, you’re welcome.”

Then Ryan started to close the window.

"Hey, wait!" Wyvern caught the window and kept it open; Ryan had heard she could bench press a school bus even while partially transformed, so he didn't press the issue. "What are you doing in town, Quicksave? Can I call you Quicksave?"

"Sure." Ryan then shrugged. "I'm a courier, I deliver mail. No matter how many people want me dead!"

"So the Augusti didn't hire you as muscle?" the superheroine asked, a bit amused by his last comment. "The place you defended was one of their fronts. I figured they might have hired you to defend their turf from the Meta-Gang."

"Nah, I beat that geriatric disaster because he was in the way of completing my side quest." Wyvern made a strange face, unable to understand his jargon. The Genome Wars had all but destroyed the video game sector, making Ryan feel very alone. "Oh, by the way, have you heard of a girl my age called Len? Black hair, blue eyes, Marxist-Leninist?"

"Marxist-Leninist?" Wyvern's frown deepened. "You mean communists? Those guys still exist?"

"I know that's probably a dirty word in this city of unbridled capitalism, but yes."

"No, never heard of her." The superheroine shook her head. "But I can look at our files. Is that why you are in New Rome? Looking for her?"

"Oh yes, she's beautiful and kind and she's my best friend!" Ryan couldn't help but gush about her. "I've been looking for her since forever!"

"I'll help if I can," Wyvern replied with a smile. "Actually, I believe I can help you a great deal."

Oh.

Here comes the recruitment offer...

"I belong to a group called Il Migliore," Wyvern said, confirming Ryan's suspicions. "You've probably heard of us."

Il Migliore. A bunch of corporate superheroes who were the official protectors of New Rome, and modern celebrities. Of course, they were also on Dynamis' payroll, who owned their image, merchandising rights, and told them whom to fight. Nothing like Leo Hargraves' Carnival.

Now *those* were real, pro-bono superheroes, wandering knights style! Ryan couldn't help but admire them, even if they had caused the worst day of his life.

"We're always on the lookout for new talents, and while you have a... reputation for collateral damage... you possess an extremely useful superpower, and as far as we know you haven't dabbled into reprehensible enterprises, nor closely associated with wanted criminals." Poor girl, if only she knew. "Since you stopped Ghoul before he could go on a killing spree, I think you have your heart in the right place."

"So what, you want me to audition for a movie or something? Because I've only ever tried theater once, and it wasn't funny."

Wyvern laughed. "I wish we did fewer commercials and more arrests," she admitted, Ryan sensing a little bitterness in her tone. "But we do our best to protect citizens. Come visit our HQ, see if you match with our organization. After

that stunt with Ghoul, you'll need people to have your back."

"I can take care of myself, thanks," Ryan replied, a bit insulted that she thought he needed coddling.

"Look, Quicksave, the Meta aren't reasonable like the Augusti," she insisted. "They are a roving band of Psychos, and you've beat up one of their own. Their boss, Adam, eats people."

"Then he must have a lot on his plate!"

Wyvern didn't like the joke, her smile straining and her wings slowing down a bit.

"Alright, alright," Ryan said. "I'll think about it if I ever get sidetracked on my main quest."

The superheroine frowned, looking sideways. Ryan suddenly noticed an earplug in her left ear, although he couldn't hear anything.

"Understood," Wyvern said, although not to Ryan, before handing the courier a business card. "If you change your mind, visit us at this address."

"Sure."

"Take care."

And on these words, Wyvern flew away. Her wings moved so fast it became impossible for the human eye to notice them. Yet they made no sound either, except for the wind they produced. She was gone within the blink of an eye, moving north and accelerating until she reached near supersonic speed.

The sound frequency of her wings must have been inaudible to humans, or run on abnormal physics; everything was possible with Genomes. The courier memorized that observation for later.

Finally alone, Ryan closed the window and returned to his task. But no sooner did he sit back in his chair, that he received a vocal communication demand on his computer. The Genome immediately recognized the caller as the same person who ordered the Renesco delivery.

He lazily opened the vocal channel with his left toe.
“Quicksave Deliveries, what can I do for you?”

“What did the bitch tell you?” an encrypted voice on the other end answered.

Ryan raised an eyebrow behind his mask. “Wait, am I being spied on?”

“Few places are off the grid in New Rome.”

Note to self: find a more discreet hotel next loop. “I’m pretty sure the last person who used that line didn’t encrypt their voice. Who are you, creepy mystery voice?”

“My name is Vulcan,” the caller answered. “I represent the Augusti. We are the organization that runs things in New Rome, and most of Italy.”

“I thought it was Dynamis?” Ryan deadpanned.

“That’s what they say,” the voice laughed. “But Italy only has one emperor, and his name is Augustus.”

Hard to disagree, the guy was invincible and could shoot homing lightning. He had more victims to his name than the

cigarette.

"You have our thanks for saving our employee from that Meta trash," Vulcan said. "All this to say, whatever the winged lizard promised you, we can offer more."

"Is it an offer you can't refuse, or an offer-offer? 'Cause I'm allergic to horses."

"We need tough people who get things done," Vulcan replied. "You want women or boys? New hardware, good weapons? Enough Bliss to fly you to the moon? All that shit can be yours... if you prove you're a team player."

"And how do I do that?"

An email notification popped up, indicating an address. Ryan quickly checked, identifying the location as a casino called the *Bakuto*. "We own the establishment," Vulcan explained. "Come tonight, alone, and don't make us wait. We never ask twice."

Ryan ended the call, pondering about the offers. Phew, you beat up *one* guy—showing extreme restraint and delicateness by your usual standards—and suddenly everyone wanted a piece of you.

Then again, either group could help him find Len, and he had created a save point before coming to town.

That could only mean one thing.

"Multiple routes unlocked!"

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Checks the comments and ratings Well, that was unexpected, but very welcome. Thanks a lot!

Chapter schedule for now is Tuesday/Thursday/Saturday.

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3: Men of Honor

As per the name, the *Bakuto* was a Japan-themed casino.

Having parked his car nearby, Ryan glanced up at the building with amazement. The architects had recreated a perfect copy of an oriental pagoda tower, as large as a mall; a red carpet led to golden, ostentatious *tori* gates with the casino's title plastered on them. Hordes of gamblers walked inside, some dressed in traditional Asian clothes like qipao, others in tuxedos and expensive gowns. Of course, none were as stylish as Quicksave's own fabulous outfit, but the Genome gave them points for trying.

The staff had even dressed the bouncers as samurai in low-grade, Genius-made armor. They looked almost like feudal armor, but heavier and bound by flexible circuits instead of clothing fabric. Very nice design, especially the stained glass visor. Ryan wondered if they had lightsabers to go along with it.

"No weapons allowed inside," one bouncer said, as he and a compatriot checked Ryan out. Due to their armor, both were at least one head taller than the Genome. They immediately found the throwing knives hidden in his sleeves, and then examined him very thoroughly.

It took them a few minutes to find most of his stuff.

"Twenty-five throwing knives, two revolvers, including one desert eagle, one energy pistol, one frag grenade, a

switchblade, a hand buzzer, and..." The bouncer frowned, seizing a tiny metal sphere the size of a baseball. "Is that a bomb?

"Yep," Ryan answered. "Genius tech."

"EMP? Gunpowder?"

"Thermo-nuclear."

The bouncer chuckled heartily until he realized Ryan was serious. He then exchanged a glance with his fellow guards, all of them put their hands on a saber around their belts.

"You keep an A-bomb in your back pocket?" The guard wagged the device at Ryan's face.

"It's only for dissuasion!" the courier promised while crossing his fingers. "I Korea swear!"

The bouncer remained silent a moment, then touched his helmet and hushed words which Ryan couldn't hear. No doubt he was contacting his manager.

"You can get your... stuff back after you're done," the bouncer declared, putting his weapons in a bag. "But one wrong move and that bomb will find its way in another A-place. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Ryan replied as he waltzed into the casino like a child.

He immediately found himself walking through a corridor of *pachinkos*, those strange Japanese slot machines; gamblers toiled on them, enslaved by their otherworldly power. The sight reminded Ryan of the four loops he spent addicted to these machines, before getting bored.

Ah, the nostalgia.

A few steps later, Ryan entered the main gambling hall, mixing both Japanese art design and western gambling entertainment. Roulette wheels stood side by side with blackjack tables, and they even had an arena for sumo wrestling next to a sushi bar. An elevator at the center led to the higher floors, each probably catering to different tastes.

A giant screen above the sushi bar showed a promotional image of New Rome's colosseum, and a T-rex roaring on its grounds, under the acclaim of the crowd. A voice over hyped up the competition.

"This mutant dinosaur has been cloned from ancient times and improved to fight at Colosseum Maximus! MAXIMUS! And if dinosaurs won't do it, our robots will!" The screen changed from the picture of a Jurassic Park ad to a humanoid mecha straight out of an old Japanese cartoon.
"Coming straight out of our weapon development program, Dynamis introduces you to the Megafighter Mark III! Meant to fight the deadliest Psychos and marauders, this killing machine will keep you on your toes! Will any contestant get the better of these bloodthirsty monsters? You will see it in tonight's episode of Colosseum... MAXIMUS! Only at Dynamis!"

Ryan noticed a smaller screen showing the odds, people betting either which contestants would survive, or if the T-rex would eat them all on the first round. For some obscure reason, most betted on an overwhelming dinosaur victory.

Ryan wandered towards the roulette near the sushi bar and immediately started placing bets, throwing stacks of euro bills on the table.

“Quicksave?” a man asked Ryan, the clinking of his outfit announcing his presence long before he called out to the courier.

This guy also wore samurai armor, but one blue and far sleeker, almost skintight. Instead of a faceless glass visor, his helmet took the shape of a black demon mask, allowing Ryan to see the black eyes and mouth below. The bouncers nodded at him in respect, and quite a few people gave the man a wide berth. Yeah, clearly a Genome.

“Yes?” Ryan asked, feigning innocence.

“You don’t have precognition right, I hope?” the man asked, crossing his arms. “Because I will have to kick you out if you do. We don’t allow Blue Genomes to play.”

“Precognition?” the courier shook his head. “Naaaah, of course not. I’m as Violet as they come.”

Genomes were classified depending on the color of the elixir which gave them their power. Blue focused on information manipulation, from precognition to infohazards, while Violet had spacetime-related abilities.

“Then you can’t peer into alternate timelines or a cheat like that?” samurai-guy asked. “Or rewind time and send information to your past self?”

“But if I can rewind time and erase this conversation so it never happened, do you even exist right now? Or are you a mere simulation of my feverish mind?”

Samurai-guy simply decided to watch, trying to make sense of the terrible existential conundrum Quicksave just threw at his face.

In the end, the courier blew thirty thousand bucks, but he had memorized the roulette numbers and the victorious gladiators' names for a later loop. Strangely, while the dinosaur won, one firecracker had managed to survive all the way to the end.

"Alright, you definitely aren't a seer," samurai-guy said, having acted as Ryan's chaperone during his entire gambling spree. "I think you should slow down though. At this point, you're pretty much burning money."

"I'm sorry, what's your name?" Ryan ended up asking his mysterious samurai overseer.

"I'm Zanbato. I'm an Augusti."

"Are you Japanese? Because you don't sound Japanese."

"No," he replied, a bit confused by the question. "I'm Italian."

"Your supervillain name is Zanbato, but you're not Japanese?" Goddamn counterfeit.

"I'm not a supervillain," the man protested, clearly missing the point. "My girlfriend is Korean though."

"You have a girlfriend?" Ryan gasped. "That's wonderful!"

"Thanks," the man replied with a smile. "I hope to marry her soon. I'm curious, why did you come to us? I heard Wyvern made you an offer too."

"You guys won the coin toss," Ryan replied bluntly.

Zanbato chuckled, rather amused. He quickly invaded Quicksave's personal space by putting a hand on his

shoulder. “I’m buying you a drink.”

The samurai-wannabe invited Ryan to the sushi bar, taking a beer while Ryan ordered tea. Bouncers formed a security perimeter around them, to allow them some privacy.

“Ghoul escaped,” Zanbato told Quicksave. “A mole in the Private Security told us his pals bust him out, probably with inside help. And knowing that maniac, he will be on your trail shortly. I thought you should know.”

Ryan gasped, promising to inform Wyvern that Ghoul’s friends would bust him out on his next save. “Are you telling me that Private Security is *corrupt*? I would never have known!”

“The grunts are underpaid, so some are... open to negotiation. Their elite squads, especially those working for Dynamis’ executives, not so much.” Zanbato sipped his beer. “We know you have a pretty powerful ability, but you did good in approaching us. Safety in numbers I always say.”

“You know I’m immortal?” Ryan asked. “But I didn’t tell anyone!”

“You’re immortal?” Zanbato raised an eyebrow. “You can’t die?”

“I think I can, but I never succeeded.”

Zanbato paused, unsure how to answer. “Well, we know you can stop time for an unknown duration as your main power,” the man said. “Now what do *you* know about *us*?”

“That you are the biggest supervillain organization in Italy, and that your boss is invincible.”

"We are not..." Zanbato sighed. "We are a family and profit-minded society, men and women of honor. Not supervillains. That's what Il Migliore labels us as because we aren't corporate sellouts, and we build houses, churches, and hospitals for the poor. We are good for the community."

"Your drugs are good for the heart too," Ryan deadpanned.
"But your weapons are better."

"It's not *illegal*," Zanbato replied, which was true since there wasn't a true government nowadays. "We have to fund ourselves. I'm telling you, where we rule, things are peaceful, people feel safe. There's no pillager taking your stuff, no Psychos running around. When Augustus takes over Italy, and he *will*, you won't recognize our country. It will be like before the Wars."

The man sounded like he really believed it too. He seemed a bit young to rant about the 'good old days' though.

"Oh, also, do you have anything child related?" Ryan asked.
"Because I'm pretty flexible, but if I find you do anything reprehensible to teens and below, then we're going to have a problem."

Zanbato's mouth twisted into an expression of absolute disgust. "We don't even sell *Bliss* to minors," he said. "We aren't savages. Not like the Meta. Anyway, do you know how we work as an organization? Because if you want to join us, you will have to bend to the hierarchy."

"I'm more of a free spirit kind of guy," Ryan said. "I'm just looking for help in finding a friend."

"Oh?" this seemed to surprise the Genome. He must have thought Ryan a money-only kind of guy. "Whom?"

“Her name is Len. Black hair, blue eyes, Marxist-Leninist.”

“Do you have a photo?” Ryan shook his head. “Is she your girlfriend?”

“No, just my best friend. Been looking for her for years, until a client tried to pay me in tech she made. He said it came from New Rome.”

“Tech. She’s a Genius?” Zanbato finished his beer, mulling over that information. “Okay, look, if she’s what matters to you, then we’ll help you find her. Favor for a favor.”

Ryan could live with that. Once he had the information, he could always start a new loop and go to Len directly, without having to put a horse’s head in someone’s bed. “What favor?”

“We need muscle,” Zanbato said. “New Rome has a new problem called the Meta-Gang. They’re all *Psychos*.”

“I know them,” Ryan replied. “Had a skirmish with them years ago, back when they were small fries.”

Ghoul hadn’t joined then, but they were already vicious assholes.

Not that Ryan could blame them. The human body wasn’t made to handle more than one Elixir, even knockoffs. The combination of two powers made the genetic code unstable, usually driving the recipient mad. Sure, they gained an additional ability—nobody ever developed more than two as far as Ryan knew—but needed periodical injections of Elixirs to stabilize their body. These Genome mutants had the well-deserved nickname of *Psychos*.

You would think people knew better. But the thought of exceptional cases like Augustus, who gained two obscene powers with no ill-effects, always drove fools to try their luck.

“Long story short, these junkies started moving into our turf recently, especially the north neighborhoods,” Zanbato explained, as shouts erupted behind them. Ryan glanced behind him, noticing a new Colosseum battle had begun on TV. “They attacked our guys, we hit ‘em back, and now they assault our associates and suppliers like Renesco.”

“Can’t you...” Ryan mimicked a beheading motion. “You know...”

“Yes we can, but for now they’re just an annoying nuisance and the bosses want our best men to focus on more important matters.” Zanbato asked for another beer. “So what do you say? Help us beat up some mutants, get your girl?”

“Oooh, business.” Ryan joined his hands. “How many?”

“How many what?

“How many casualties?”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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4: Random Encounter

It was May 10th, 2020 for the first time, and Ryan hadn't blown up something yet.

Frankly, this surprised him. Seventy-two hours were almost a hard cap for him for non-destructive behavior; he didn't always *cause* it, he just had a knack for getting into exciting situations. Ryan wasn't drawn to adventure. Adventure was drawn *to* him, and he couldn't wait for a new adrenaline rush.

Driving at night up north, the courier and his Plymouth left the wealthy districts for more industrial ones. Hotels and casinos slowly vanished, replaced with railroad stations, grey buildings, taxi centrals, and other businesses. According to the map, they should reach the old harbor in no time.

"Existence is subjective."

"Mmm?" Ryan asked, turning his head to the passenger to his right. He had to lower himself in the car, to avoid reaching the roof with his head.

"Your question, about whether I exist if you can roll back time," Zambato continued. The man had put crates full of chemicals at the car's back, then insisted on chaperoning Quicksave during his first job for 'the family.' Both were supposed to protect a shipment from attack and beat up the

Meta if they dared to interrupt it. “We can never know we exist, so there is no objective truth to existence.”

“You’re still thinking it over?” Ryan asked, a bit surprised. He said so much nonsense in such a short time, that people usually forgot what he said halfway through.

“Yes. It’s disturbing.”

“Eh, you get used to the uncertainty.” Better not tell him the truth.

The sound of cars gave way to that of waves crashing on the shore, and the faint rustle of the evening wind. The city’s old harbor seemed rather derelict, rusting buildings standing next to abandoned waterfront warehouses. The remains of a massive supertanker overlooked the sea, having crashed against a stony beach; the captain must have been drunk when it happened. If humans lived in the area, Ryan didn’t notice any.

They had entered the *Poor Zone*.

The quality of the air also drastically declined, to the point that Ryan felt like he was kissing a professional smoker; the stink even overwhelmed the smell of the sea. He blamed it on the proximity of a nuclear power plant, industrial facilities, and the famous Rust Town further north.

“Somebody call Greenpeace,” Ryan complained. “They can’t *all* be dead.”

“Dynamis uses knockoff Genomes to keep the pollution in Rust Town,” Zanbato replied as they drove towards the stony beach. “But they don’t do much to protect this area.”

“Is this what remains of Naples’ old port?” Ryan asked, curious. He had always been interested in pre-war facilities,

especially since most cities had been transformed into nice, aesthetic craters.

“Yeah. Dynamis is building new docks in the south for freighters.” Zanbato pointed at a spot at the waterfront.
“We can stop there.”

Ryan parked the car between two warehouses, then stepped down alongside his chaperone. A group waited for them near the remains of a pier, next to a huge pile of crates and a minivan.

The leader, and the youngest, was an African-Italian barely above eighteen, yet taller than Ryan himself. Physically fit, he kept his hair short and dressed fashionably; he had invested his drug money on a stylized sweater, boots, and refined pants. He really gave off a cultured middle-class vibe, even if he was busy smoking a joint as the duo showed up.

The rest... well, they were grunts with submachine guns, nothing special. Cannon fodder with a short life expectancy, and even shorter opportunities for career advancement, whom Ryan could identify on sight nowadays. The courier nicknamed them *Grunt 1*, *Grunt 2*, and *Gruntie*.

“Finally!” the leader complained upon seeing the two Genomes arrive, “What took you so long? You were supposed to arrive first! We’re in the open!”

“Sorry Luigi,” Zanbato replied, much calmer. “Traffic delayed us.”

“Hey, Luigi!” Ryan said with his best accent ever. “It’s-a-me, Mario!”

Luigi frowned, trying to make the connection, and failing. “I don’t get it.”

“I think it’s video game stuff,” Gruntie said, the other mooks shrugging their shoulders.

Ryan sighed. “It’s exhausting,” he complained, “to be an island of culture amidst a sea of ignorance.”

“Luigi, this is Quicksave, the new muscle I told you about,” Zanbato made the introductions. “Quicksave, this is Luigi, alias Crypto. He’s our supply guy.”

“You have a superpower too?” Ryan asked, faking astonishment. Could the only guy *without* a weapon be special?

“Yeah, I have a bullshit filter,” Luigi replied, tossing his joint into the sea to share with the fish. “Who’s your favorite Genome?”

“Well, I don’t—” A foreign force took over Ryan’s mind, twisting his tongue. “Mr. Wave is so cool.”

“Seriously?” Luigi asked, a little peeved. “You like that cringey weirdo?”

Ryan couldn’t stop himself. “Also, I’m pretty hetero, but if Leo Hargraves sneaked into my room at night, I would still let him—”

“Okay, okay, stop, I don’t want the details,” Luigi said, the effect lifted from Ryan’s mind. “See? Once you start talking, you can’t lie to me.”

“One day,” Ryan warned, wagging a finger at Luigi, “You’re going to ask me the wrong question, and you won’t like the

answer.”

As in, he would have to reload and start over. Bragging about his time stop was one thing, but Ryan *always* kept quiet about his save point. Someday, someone smart might figure out a way around his ace in the hole, so Ryan always kept it hidden up his sleeve.

“Why did you bring this guy instead of Sphere?” Luigi complained to Zanbato. “Or Chitter?”

“They’re busy elsewhere,” the samurai replied. “And you have five bodyguards.”

“Bullets aren’t going to stop any of the Meta,” his fellow crook replied, turning to the grunts. “No offense guys.”

Zanbato cleared his throat. “We can always argue about security *after* the job.”

“The submarines should arrive soon,” Luigi replied. “I paid off the Private Security to look the other way, so no problem on that front.”

“What about Il Migliore?” Ryan asked, curious. “Can you even buy superheroes?”

Luigi chuckled. “Those over-marketed clowns? Don’t worry, they make a show of hitting our operations from time to time, but they’re too scared of us to try anything truly disruptive. They usually go after independents, not professionals.”

“They let us do our business, we let them do theirs,” Zanbato explained, removing the crates from Ryan’s car. “It’s like the Cold War. But we’re close to Rust Town and the

Meta already hit delivery runs like this one, so prepare yourself.”

“Then time to fist,” Ryan said, opening the trunk of his car to get his pisto-gauntlets.

Pisto-gauntlets were metallic gloves, first developed by the infamous Genius Mechron to equip close-combat drones. Quicksave’s own weapons looked like gauntlets with a hydraulic piston-powered ram built upon them. The mechanism pushed the ram forward, knocking back the enemy upon smashing; the courier even improved upon the original design by adding an electrical shock effect to the mix, for double the pain.

“They are pisto-gauntlets, but they aren’t *any* pisto-gauntlets,” Ryan boasted at Luigi, as he put his gloves on and showed them off. “I call them *The Fisty Brothers* because they fist people to oblivion. Everyone is afraid of nuclear bombs, but these? These are the real A-bombs.”

Only Grunt 2 laughed, proving that he alone had a future. Luigi looked at Ryan’s gauntlets, then at Zanbato. “Zan, I don’t know on which planet your guy lives, but it’s clearly not ours.”

“They say madness is a pit,” Ryan replied cheerfully, hands on his waist. “They’re wrong. Madness is a rollercoaster.”

“I kinda like him,” Zanbato told Luigi, as the other grunts helped add their crates to the existing pile. “He’s funny.”

“You like weird people, period.” Luigi shrugged, raising his sweater’s sleeve to reveal a watch. “Anytime now...”

The waters near the pier grew agitated, the trio looking over the edge. Three strange, spherical bathyspheres emerged

from the waves, each large enough to house many within their confines. The machines lacked any form of cables, unlike old bathysphere models, and instead seemed powered by small propellers. Their reinforced glass door opened, but Ryan couldn't see any controls or buttons inside.

Ryan gasped, instantly recognizing the design. "That's Len's stuff!"

"Hey!" Luigi shouted as the courier summarily pushed him out of the way to observe the machines better.

It barely took a few glances for Ryan to confirm his hypothesis. He could recognize her work among thousands; the fondness for an outdated, steampunk technology made viable again; the ruggedness of the design, with beauty sacrificed on the altar of barbaric efficiency; the crimson paint, her favorite, dulled by the sea.

The sight of the bathysphere awakened old emotions in Ryan, long-buried beneath the apathy and boredom. Nostalgia, joy, longing... and even hope.

Finally, after years of fruitless search, Ryan was *finally* on the right track. His days of solitude would soon be over.

He knew this mission would further his main quest!

"Len..." Ryan struggled to avoid having a flashback, turning to Zanbato and pleading like a child. "Where did you find it?! Please, please, please!"

"I dunno," Zanbato replied. "Vulcan's division takes care of the tech, not ours. We just transport and manage the supplies."

"I'm not even sure we even own these machines," Luigi said, dusting his clothes and bringing out a phone. He started typing as the grunts threw the crates in the bathyspheres, perhaps sending a signal to someone else. "Just help us put the supplies inside and I'll look into it afterward. It's getting cold, and it ain't safe here."

Speaking of cold.

Now that Ryan thought of it, it seemed to be getting chillier by the second. Unnaturally so.

Zanbato noticed it too, and immediately braced himself for an attack. A swirling sword of solid crimson light appeared in his hands, the perfect replica of a katana. "They're here," he said, the grunts immediately raising their machine guns.

Ryan looked around and quickly noticed them coming from the north.

A distant figure froze the sea, creating a bridge of ice on which he skated. Ryan immediately recognized Ghoul, although instead of a hoodie, the geriatric disaster had covered his body in sheets of ice, forming a multi-layered armor. His body released a cloud of white mist, making it difficult to clearly distinguish his features.

Another figure flew behind Ghoul, although floating might have been a better term. The second Genome wore a black hazmat suit and gas mask, giving them a spooky vibe. Their gauntlets unleashed streams of compressed air, allowing them to propel themselves on the sea. In short, a living Chernobyl holiday ad.

"Ghoul and Sarin," Zanbato recognized the two. "Maybe more."

"I'll take care of them," Ryan said, eager to continue his main quest without interruptions. "You can continue with the menial manual labor, minions."

"You want to take them on alone?" Zanbato asked, a bit concerned. "You're sure? They're killers."

Aw, he cared! Ryan raised a thumb up and walked up north towards the stony beach and the supertanker. He almost slipped on the oiled stones, caught himself, and then glanced at the sea. The two Psychos clearly aimed for the pier and the bathyspheres, perhaps having been forewarned.

Then Ghoul noticed Ryan, who mimicked a home run with an invisible bat.

Like how a bull challenged a matador, the Psycho *instantly* veered off course, much to his companion's surprise. He charged at Ryan with murder on his mind.

"You motherBLEEPer!" Ghoul screamed over the sea, the stone beach mimicking the arctic as he came closer. A dozen ice shards formed from the moisture around the Psycho, while he said so many insults that Ryan's mind automatically censored him. "You BLEEP, I'm going to BLEEP your skull and BLEEP BLEEP BLEEP with my BLEEP!"

That wasn't child friendly. That wasn't child friendly at all.

"You grew back your teeth?" Ryan noticed. "You must have drunk a lot of milk."

Ghoul responded by leaping on the beach, unleashing a dozen ice daggers at Ryan at the same time. Apparently, he no longer played baseball but throwing knives. The courier accepted the challenge.

Ryan stopped time, brought out the knives hidden under his trench coat, aimed, and threw them. When time resumed, Ghoul's projectiles were deflected by Ryan's own; most ice shards hit a warehouse behind, missing their targets, while a throwing knife found its way to the Psycho's unprotected eye.

Nailed it! It took him so many restarts to master knife throwing, but it had been worth it!

"I'll peel your skin, like an orange," Ghoul hissed in pain as he removed the knife, his screams music to Ryan's ears. The eye's blood turned to strawberry-colored ice cream when it came out of the socket, making the courier hungry. "Then I'll drink your blood, and the sweet Elixir it carries!"

The other Psycho chose that moment to land on the beach, hitting the ice floor with a loud thump and somehow avoiding slipping up. Ghoul's white mist slowly widened the ice layer over the beach, which now spread to the sea and the walkway; Ryan suddenly wondered if he should add a scarf to his outfit.

"Ghoul, what the hell?" While her voice was somewhat muffled by the mask, miss nuclear disaster was clearly a girl. "You heard Adam. The shipment first."

"That's him!" Ghoul snarled, creating blades of ice over his forearms and pointing them at Ryan. "That's the bastard who beat me up! I told you he was an Augusti!"

Slander? That was the thanks Ryan got for trying to alleviate that old fossil's suffering? And they said euthanasia was progressive!

"I guess Adam can't be mad at us for dusting one of 'em then," Sarin said, raising her gauntlets at Ryan as if he

should be intimidated. She mustn't have washed her hands. "If you knew what's good for you, you should have stayed the fuck out of Rust Town, but I guess you pussies are pretty slow to learn."

"Don't worry," the courier replied. "Whatever happens, Blower—"

"Blower?" the hazmat girl interrupted him, confused. "That's not my na—"

"Your name is *Blower* now because you blow air." Ryan then pointed a finger at one-eye, *menacingly*. "And now his name is Picard because I liked French frozen food."

In retrospect, calling a girl Blower might have sounded a little dirty, because she became really upset.

Her gauntlets began to vibrate, unleashing a blast of compressed air at Quicksave. The ice below them began to crack from the shockwave, and Ryan realized he should have nicknamed her the *Vibrator* instead.

Stopping time for a few seconds, Ryan lazily waltzed out of the blast's way, almost slipped on the ice, caught himself, cursed, and then let time resume. The compressed air blew up the walkway behind the beach, grinding stones to dust and redecorating the pavement in a straight line for at least ten meters.

Trying to make it a threesome, Ghoul skated after Quicksave speed rivaling that of a car, blades raised. Not swinging this way, Ryan dodged the attack by lowering his head. His time stop could last for up to ten seconds—and you could do a *lot* in ten seconds—but suffered from a cooldown duration afterward. It was equal to the amount of time Ryan spent freezing time.

Use the time stop for five seconds, can't do it again five seconds afterward.

Not understanding the concept of *personal space*, Ghoul kept trying to nail Ryan with his blade and received a punch in the stomach for his trouble. *Fisty* activated on contact, the ram smashing through the Psycho's ice armor and sending him flying backward to take a bath in the sea. The water froze right after he entered it.

Unfortunately, the contact with Ghoul's white mist froze *Fisty*, jamming the pistons. Goddamnit, it always had performance issues when things heated up.

Not caring about her teammate, Sarin kept focusing on attacking Ryan, who chuckled at his own mental joke. The courier had to run away from the beach and on the walkway, as a shockwave collapsed the ice, even briefly stopping time to make it.

"You blow air very fast? That's your power?" Ryan struggled not to laugh, but almost slipped on the frozen pavement, ruining the moment. Why didn't he dedicate a loop to learn ice skating again? "My fan can do the same, and it cost me fifteen bucks!"

Seeing Ryan escape and still pinning for his undivided attention, Sarin pointed her hands at her feet and unleashed a new shockwave. A column of compressed air propelled her upward, allowing her to leap over the harbor. Ryan looked up and got a perfect view of her back, but much to his disappointment, she seemed to float *inside* her suit. Very strange.

"Why the obsession, Blower?" Ryan asked, trying to unjam *Fisty* so he could introduce her to that crazy girl's face. Nothing dirty. "Have you fallen for me at first sight?"

"Unfortunately for you," Sarin replied, vibrating her gauntlets from above to rain short blasts at the walkway, "I'm a necrophiliac."

Oh, a fellow quipper! Ryan was so happy to have some back and forth interactions, even if he needed to focus on avoiding the blasts. So many people just tried to kill him without exchanging pleasantries, it was just rude.

Stopping time again, Ryan ran away and managed to reach the part of the walkway which *hadn't* frozen over. Running on ice was a lot harder to do than it sounded, and more importantly, made him look like a klutz. When time resumed, Sarin's volley had turned the frozen pavement into a cheese. On the horizon, the courier noticed Zanbato and Luigi finishing the supply run, seeing that he could handle the situation well. "I'm sure we'll break the ice between us."

"That's just *pitiful*," Sarin replied upon landing on the roof of a waterfront warehouse. The height gave her a better view of the walkway, and solid ground allowed her to focus entirely on Ryan. This time, having resolved her own performance issues, she switched from short bursts to sustained fire.

"Did my invitation leave you... stone *cold*?" Quicksave shouted innocently to Miss Chernobyl, running away while managing to unjam *Fisty*. The sustained blast collapsed the walkway behind him, stones falling on the beach. Frankly, it surprised Ryan that they hadn't woken up the whole neighborhood.

"Don't you ever shut up?!" Ghoul's voice snarled, as the drenched Psycho leaped on the walkway for a second round.

Even with his armor of ice on, he left saltwater behind with every step, and... was that a starfish stuck to his leg?

"Anyway, as I said before you interrupted me, whatever happens..."

Ryan turned to face his foes and extended his arms, doing his best to look fabulous.

"I won't take you seriously."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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5: Mission Accomplished

Bugs Bunny.

The rabbit was Ryan's most beloved character in all of fiction, and he had watched all its cartoons during his endless wandering. The courier always laughed at hunters' failure to catch the wily animal, their rage growing with each missed bullet.

So it must have been very frustrating for these two.

"Stop it!" By now, Ghoul fumed so much that it became difficult to see through the white mist surrounding him. The whole harbor was slowly freezing, while the Psycho threw car-sized blocks of ice at Ryan. "Stop dodging!"

Ryan lazily stopped time, moved out of a projectile's path, then cancelled his power. The Psycho was actually getting worse with his aiming the more angered he grew. Unfortunately, the white mist surrounding *Mr. dem bones* also made it impossible for Ryan to get in close without freezing in place.

He knew he should have invested in a thicker sweater.

"Ghoul, he's a speedster!" Sarin snarled, still standing on a roof to keep the high ground. She was no more successful than her ally at hitting Ryan, who mocked her by activating his time-stop just when her blasts were within an inch of

reaching him. At one point, the courier even took the time to blow her a kiss. “Just freeze him already!”

“I’m not a speedster, I’m Quicksave!” Ryan shouted, before revealing his greatest secret. “I’m immortal, but don’t tell anyone!”

“Soon you’re just going to be blood on the pavement!”

What pavement? By now the two Psychos had destroyed the entire waterfront, turning it into an icy wasteland of snow and craters. Ryan had to keep moving north to find ground to stand on, eventually luring the duo to an empty parking lot.

While Ghoul pursued him on foot, his female companion glided on top of a streetlight, somehow managing to avoid slipping up. There was something wrong with the way she moved, as if she had no weight at all. All Psychos were mutants, so she must have an abnormal physiology beneath the hazmat suit.

“I’m sorry but you make ice cream and blow off air,” Ryan pointed out. “Household products can do it. While I control the lynchpin of all reality. I try not to sound patronizing but...”

Ghoul unleashed a wide burst of white mist with a furious growl, freezing everything in its path.

Ryan simply activated his time-stop and dodged once again. Still, growing bored with the pursuit and now having an opening, he grabbed two of his throwing knives; launching one at Ghoul’s remaining eye, the other at Sarin.

When time resumed, Ghoul lost his remaining eye, and Sarin took a knife to the chest.

“You ain’t making it easy.”

Ryan stopped talking, however, when green gas came out of Sarin’s hazmat suit. The strange substance immediately rusted the streetlight below the Psycho, causing the electrical parts to short-circuit and the metal to slowly bend. Sarin put a hand on the opening, trying to keep the gas inside.

He knew she was full of hot air.

“I’ll kill you...” Ghoul whined, his face now looking like a strawberry sorbet with all the frozen blood flowing from his skull. It was vaguely horrifying, but Ryan had seen worse.
“I’ll kill you...”

“Ghoul, I know the sight of my dashing costume and my long, bloody bat made you fall for me at first sight,” Ryan taunted him. “Trust me, I get that a lot. But I just don’t see you that way.”

“I swear to God, I swear it,” rasped the abominable ice cream, his hands on his face, “If you crack a joke *again*, I—”

“You will give me the cold shoulder?” Ryan chuckled, unable to resist.

Ghoul exploded in a snarl of fury, his body swallowed by white mist. The strange substance seemed to swirl around him, creating layers upon layers of stalagmites.

When it dissipated, Ghoul was gone, replaced with a four meters tall titan of ice and snow. This strange fusion between a snowman and a hedgehog had maces instead of hands, and a thick defense of ice spikes.

“Oh.”

Ryan barely had the time to leap to the side, as the enormous snowman attempted to squash him like a bug. The sheer strength of the elemental construct shattered the concrete and shook the ground. Sarin, meanwhile, was too busy trying to cover the hole in her suit to assist.

How did Ghoul manage to make that body work? Ice didn't work that way, it couldn't even bend! Ryan called cheating!

A rumbling noise echoed across the parking lot, growing louder with each new step. Something heavy was rushing towards the battlefield, to claim part of the glory.

"Quicksave!" Zanbato entered the parking lot, his hands manifesting a sword of crimson light. "The Security is coming!"

"I thought you guys paid them off?" Ryan asked, dodging another strike from Ghoul. He wondered how the Psycho could locate him without his eyes, guessing it probably had something to do with temperature.

"We paid them to ignore a delivery run, not the harbor's destruction!" Zanbato glanced at the two Psychos present, and first cut the streetlight on which Sarin stood. Miss Chernobyl glided to the other end of the parking lot, confirming Ryan's suspicions that she was made of gas.

Zanbato switched target from Sarin to her compatriot, who was closer; moving at great speeds in spite of the heaviness of his armor, he cut through the giant snowman's leg like a turkey, slicing it clean in half. Yet the limb quickly reattached itself to the body, Zanbato having to step back to avoid being frozen by mist. The Augusti mafioso still tried to hack at the giant, proving himself so annoying that Ghoul abandoned his pursuit of Ryan to attack this new foe.

The sound of an aircraft echoed above them, Ryan raising his eyes to watch an attack helicopter fly above the parking lot. He recognized it as a customized Agusta A129 Mangusta, piloted by two security guards.

Ryan waved a pile of bank notes at them, as a sign of friendship.

They responded with a missile.

Ryan stopped time just long enough to move out of the bomb's way, thankful that they didn't use laser weapons; he was fast, but not as much as light. When time resumed, he quickly realized that the Private Security targeted everyone, the missile impacting in the middle of the battlefield.

Zanbato protected his face with his hand and avoided being knocked back, his armor deflecting debris; while Ghoul's snowman form took the projectiles without showing any form of discomfort. Sarin, however, was pushed backward by the blast, quickly getting back on her feet with fury.

"Fuck off!" Hazmat girl moved a hand to cover the hole in her suit, and the other towards the skies. A second later, she fired a blast straight at the helicopter, destroying its tail and sending it on a crash course towards the ground.

Alright, it had gone on long enough. *Playtime's over.*

As Sarin pointed her gauntlet at Ryan, the courier stopped time for the last time.

He glanced at the helicopter, to assess if he had to rescue the guards, only to notice a flying form next to the aircraft. A humanoid figure, nearly impossible to see in the darkness, and only visible due to the smoke blurring their features.

Probably a Genome on Dynamis' payroll, rescuing the guards.

Good. That meant Ryan could focus on the ground.

The time-manipulator moved behind Sarin, avoiding the clouds of toxic fumes hanging in the air from her wound, and moved her hand towards Ghoul.

Time resumed, and the giant snowman took a full, sustained blast of compressed air head-on. Physics being physics, the ice construct exploded in a rain of droplets and shards, a helpless Ghoul hitting the ground face-first. Zanbato quickly cut him in half execution-style, while the helicopter crashed on the frozen beach further west.

Suddenly realizing what happened, Sarin barely had the time to turn her head around and look over her shoulder.

“Blow this.”

And Ryan introduced her to Fisty, face first.

The pisto-gauntlet shattered her mask's glass parts and tossed her backward. Ryan barely had the time to dodge by leaping to the side, as the holes in her mask unleashed a stream of gas; like a balloon, Miss hazmat flew towards the horizon at full speed, unable to control her trajectory. She continued for a while, before finally crashing into the distant supertanker's wreck.

Ryan glanced at Fisty, making a face as the gas rusted the pistons into scrap within seconds. Yeah, sure, he could have ended it a lot sooner by gutting them in the stopped time...

But life wasn't about winning. It was about having fun.

"Is she dead?" Zanbato asked, upon reaching Quicksave.

"I'm not sure," Ryan shrugged, before realizing he couldn't see his favorite undead among the snowman's remains. "Is Ghoul?"

"No, that's his other power. He never dies, even when missing the right organs."

"He's immortal too?" Ryan gasped, shocked.

"He won't enjoy it much. I cut him in more pieces than a birthday cake and tossed the head into the sea." Zanbato glanced at the space where Sarin had blasted the Private Security's helicopter. The machine had crashed into the Mediterranean Sea, the mysterious superhero gone. "Luigi's team has already left, and we should make our escape before more Security guards arrive. Can you give me a lift?"

"Anytime," Ryan replied, whistling. He could already hear his self-driven Plymouth Fury circle around the battlefield to reach them.

"Your car can move by itself?" Zanbato asked, impressed.

"If you really want to know," Ryan confided, "I don't have a driver's license."

In the end, the duo left the harbor in ruins, and almost crossed paths with three Private Security armored minivans.

Before leaving the area, Ryan had given a last glance at the destroyed helicopter, the remains having sunk into the sea. He hoped the guards were okay; they were just doing their job—albeit a bit too zealously—and if they had died, he would consider creating a new loop to save their lives.

"You can leave me at this corner," Zanbato pointed at a railroad station. "My girlfriend will pick me up."

"You have a girlfriend?" Ryan asked. "That's wonderful."

"Yes, I already told..." Zanbato stopped himself, "I get it. I'll introduce the two of you one day, I'm sure you will get along. Same sense of humor."

"Without false modesty, I am inimitable."

"That's for sure!" Zanbato replied with a chuckle, climbing down of the car and stepping on the walkway, two drunk guys passing by them. "Look, about *your* girl... If it's her tech for the submarines, then I'll ask Vulcan for you. We'll solve that mystery in no time."

"I would appreciate it, Zan! Can I call you Zan? Or Zanny?"

"Jamie," the samurai replied, shaking Ryan's hand before leaving. "You can call me Jamie."

Ryan watched him leave with a fine feeling of contentment. What a fine night.

Not only did Ryan find a lead towards Len—*Len*—he also made a new friend! A nice, friendly mobster fellow. Certainly, it locked him on to the *Augusti Path*, but so far so good. A few more missions and they would give him the critical information he needed to find his best friend.

But that would wait after a night of good, gentle sleep. He would have to repair his rusted Fisty tomorrow morning, and dodging attacks all night had exhausted him.

One hour's drive later, Ryan finally reached the door of his hotel room, ready to collapse on the bed.

His hand touched the doorknob, feeling a little pressure fight against his push.

Click.

“Mmm?”

Before Ryan knew what hit him, the floor exploded in gas and fire.

It was May 8th 2020 for the fifth time, so Ryan stopped his Plymouth Fury in the middle of the road.

Of course, quite a few motorists honked him in response, threatening the Genome with bodily harm if he didn’t move. The courier ignored them, meditating on what just happened, before reaching a decision.

“I’m changing hotels,” Ryan promised, driving back to Renesco. “This city isn’t safe at all.”

He wondered if inns were insured against terrorist attacks.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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6: Divergence Point

Not to change a winning day, Ryan redid everything like last time. He arrived at Renesco's place, waited for Ghoul to get in, then smashed the Psycho with his Plymouth from behind.

However, as he opened the trunk to grab his baseball bat and finish the job, the courier felt a pang of guilt. Could he live with such laziness? Beating an old bag of bones the exact same way, over and over again? Couldn't he give this moment a little more dignity and uniqueness?

Mmmm...

For the sake of novelty, Ryan grabbed his shotgun instead. He waltzed toward Ghoul and shot him in the left knee before he could even realize what was going on. The undead bastard almost collapsed, but managed to hang on to the counter.

"Hey, are you alright?" the courier asked his favorite target practice companion. "You don't look alright."

"You shot me!" the Psycho snarled, half-surprised, half-angered. "You shot me in the leg!"

"Do you need to go to the hospital?" Ryan asked with kindness, reloading the shotgun.

"I'm going to—" Ryan shot Ghoul in the *other* knee, making him collapse to the ground screaming. "You bastard!"

“And now you do!”

The courier had the feeling they were going to do this routine *a lot*.

After shooting Ghoul everywhere it mattered—and even places where it didn’t—Ryan paid off Renesco and the Private Security, before diverging from the previous loop.

Having learned his lesson from last time, Ryan chose another hotel, one where he *hopefully* shouldn’t have his room firebombed; a place away from the tourist areas. He drove south, towards the Plebeian district, and he could already see the reason for the name; as soon as he left the strip and tourist hotspots, the architecture changed. Casinos and nightclubs vanished, replaced with three-story apartment buildings clustered together and narrow alleys. Small markets and cafes gave off a tantalizing smell of food.

Eventually, Ryan reached the Arab district, which he recognized by the billboard ads—most written in Arabic and Turkish, although he caught a little Spanish here and there. The locals called it Little Maghreb from what Ryan had heard.

He drove by a perfect replica of the synagogue of Turin—Ryan had visited the original, although he had needed a hazmat suit to survive the trip through the irradiated city—standing next to a mosque. Both buildings were slightly derelict, showing how little Dynamis and other corporations cared about maintaining religious sites.

However, the site that caught his attention was a hill at the south, which seemed to be the city’s highest natural point. An enormous estate stood atop it, roughly the size of the Vatican, and whose architecture was clearly inspired by

antiquity work. It included an oversized, multiple-floor Roman villa, fountains, a private park, and even a smaller replica of the Greek Parthenon. Clearly, whoever lived there had a *huge* god complex.

Why the obsession with marble columns though? Why did nobody ever add obelisks, for diversity?

And strangely, nothing was built around that estate for kilometers, and only one way led to the summit, the hill being surrounded by a fortified fence and security forces. Curious. Ryan had a good idea *who* inhabited those halls, and so decided to stay as far away from it as possible.

Yes, there *were* a few people against whom Ryan didn't dare to test his immortality against, at least not yet. Especially now that he had a lead on Len after so many years.

His hotel was... a lot dirtier than the previous one. The owner had traded security cameras for cockroaches in the walls, and Ryan's bed smelled of *Bliss*, that mushroom drug everyone consumed nowadays. Someone even drew a dick graffiti in the shower, alongside a number to call a prostitute.

Ryan did the sensible thing.

He called, out of curiosity.

"Yeah?" a male voice answered.

Ryan glanced at the graffiti, then ended the call without a word, chuckling to himself. Some things never changed.

The next morning, like in the previous loop, Ryan did science in his underwear. This time, though, he focused more on

reinforcing *Fisty*, to prevent the ice trick that allowed Ghoul to jam it in their last encounter. The courier couldn't have his weapons underperform while beating up an old bone yeller.

He also did Dynanet research about sightings of submarines and bathyspheres in the local gulf but found nothing. He did learn that the old island of Ischia, the one he had seen while driving on the coast, was a toxic ruin since Mechron bombed Italy back to the stone age; unlike other areas, corporations never bothered to renovate it.

The Augusti had to send those crates somewhere, and there must have been a reason why they used Genius-made submarines rather than boats. Maybe it was to send supplies to the island? He couldn't prove it, but Ryan had a good feeling about it.

A knock on his window interrupted his research, like the sight of a familiar winged heroine.

Ryan replayed the same conversation as last time, except on the third floor rather than the tenth. Wyvern seemed a little more nervous than in the last loop, though. Maybe it was the closeness to the mountain estate?

Also, Ryan noticed the locals had emptied the street below his bedroom when Wyvern showed up. They didn't seem to like Il Migliore around here.

"You say the Meta will break out Ghoul today, with the complicity of corrupt Private Security guards?" Wyvern frowned. "How do you know that?"

"You don't ask a magician to reveal his tricks," Ryan protested. "I'm just saying, you should probably escort the creepy undead yourself."

"From what I heard, even if they break him out, he won't run far. The medics said he had more bullets than intact bones in his body." Wyvern marked a short pause, focusing on her earplug. "Looks like you were right. The Meta are ambushing Ghoul's transport convoy as we speak, in broad daylight."

Oh, so *that's* why she left in a hurry before? She clearly hadn't been fast enough last loop, maybe this time would do the trick?

"Before you go save the world and save me a miniboss battle later," Ryan pointed in the direction of the hill, and the estate on it, "what is the name of this beautiful and not at all suspicious Roman-themed park?"

"Officially? Hillside. Unofficially?" Wyvern sighed. "Mount Augustus."

He even plagiarized Mount Olympus but renamed it after himself. It should have been called Mount Narcissus.

"Take care," Wyvern told Ryan after giving him a business card, before flying off without a sound. Ryan watched her vanish at high-speed, wondering if she would make it this time.

Anyway, in spite of that little divergence, he didn't have to worry. He just had to wait for Vulcan's call and everything would be back on track. Since he was close to Augusti territory, no doubt they would contact him again in short order.

The call would come any second now.

...

...

Any second now.

...

...

KABOOM!

The sound of a distant explosion startled Ryan, who opened the window. He noticed a pillar of smoke reaching up to the skies, somewhat in the direction where Wyvern flew.

Shit.

Vulcan didn't call him all day long.

Disturbed, Ryan went to the *Bakuto* casino anyway at night, but the guards refused to let him in when he arrived in costume. Unlike last time, they gently told him to fuck off after noticing his A-bomb.

As if it was a crime to carry a thermonuclear device nowadays!

So Ryan returned but unmasked and in civilian clothes; he even put on a classy red tie. This time, he managed to slip in, the guards mistaking him for a normal client.

"Hey, friendly nameless extra," Ryan asked a card croupier, playing blackjack with a well-dressed group of professional gamblers straight out of *Casino Royale*. "I am looking for Zanbato. Have you seen him?"

"Zanbato?" the croupier frowned. "No, he's not here tonight."

"My plumber friend Luigi then?"

The dealer shrugged his shoulders. "No, I don't think so. What is it about? I can give them a message if I see them."

Damn it. Still, Ryan approached the dealer's ear and whispered into it. "*The orange is in the hen house.*"

"The orange is in the hen house?"

"It's a code, they will understand. Their lives depend on it, so don't screw up." The dealer nodded seriously, promising to deliver the message.

But still, goddamnit! Clearly things had gone off the rails somewhere, but what caused it? Shooting Ghoul? The hotel switch? Warning Wyvern about Ghoul's escape? Whatever it was, it made him fall off the Augusti's radar or changed their priorities, just when he finally found a lead on Len!

Ryan stayed at the casino just in case, playing for hours. Knowing the results of every game, he accumulated quite a nice sum at the roulette and Colosseum bets, although he was very careful never to overplay his hand. Having entire lifetimes' worth of cheating experience, the courier had mastered the art of *looking* like a professional gambler; sacrificing money when needed, discussing overcomplicated probability theories with other players, and faking nerve-wracking tension while waiting for the results. He also played legitimately at poker and blackjack, not even using his time-stop to look at his rivals' hands.

In the end, the main defense against anti-seer methods was banality. Seers were rare and usually obvious, always trying to win it big; while skilled gamblers and talented amateurs were legion. Ryan just had to convince guards he belonged to the latter group, winning high but believable amounts, and it did the work.

Ryan usually enjoyed these tricks, but his heart wasn't in it. Instead, he kept asking himself questions. Should he go to the supply run at the harbor even without being invited? It could get him right back on the *Augusti Path*, but Ryan wasn't sure if it would even happen now.

Also, who killed him in the last loop? The Meta were the obvious suspect, but it could also be an unrelated hit. Since the courier took a job for the Augusti after denying Wyvern, Dynamis could have simply ordered him dead.

No, the easiest solution was to reload and deviate after receiving the Augusti mission, but Ryan needed to die first.

Car crash? Too common already. Traffic had killed him almost as often as enemy Genomes.

Bullet to the head? The last time Ryan tried he woke up six months later, the medics congratulating themselves on their 'miraculous' surgery.

Train tracks? Unoriginal, everybody did that nowadays.

Roman suicide? Thematic and classy, but he would have to find a sword or hemlock.

"Nice play." Ryan glanced at the left of his table, noticing that a stunning woman had taken a seat right next to him. She was an elegant lady with long black hair, a crimson gown, and a beauty spot on the right cheek. She played with a glass full of alcohol, clearly trying to get Ryan's attention. "This is the first time I've seen you around here."

It was strange how everybody wanted to be Ryan's friend when he started making money. Was it his magnetic personality? "Sorry, I'm thinking about something else."

"What could be more important than accumulating a big pile of money?" she asked, flirtatiously playing with her glass.

"I'm trying to find a suicide method that hasn't been done before. Something original and over-the-top."

The question took her aback, but the woman did consider it. "Jumping into Mt. Vesuvius?" she proposed.

Ryan could have sworn he already experienced a similar conversation in a previous loop. "Already done, though with Etna rather than Vesuvius."

"I didn't know," she replied, sipping her cocktail. "Do you want to commit suicide or is this just theoretical?"

Already bored with the conversation and failing to find a suicide method he hadn't already tried, Ryan raised his hand at a waiter. "Can I have an electric fan?"

"A fan, sir?" the waiter asked, confused. Ryan answered by giving him a three hundred euro tip.

One minute later, he had his fan.

While he took most of his winnings for himself, the Genome piled up thousands of euros banknotes in front of the fan, aiming for the center of the casino. The woman at his side probably guessed what crossed his mind, if the flash of recognition in her eyes was of any indication.

Ryan switched on the fan, which sent euro bills flying all over the casino. "To the fastest!" he shouted as loud as he could, a flash of greed in everyone's eyes.

When the Genome exited the *Bakuto*, all the locals were fighting over the bills, the woman included. Even the

bouncers and the staff tried to grab a fistful.

Ignoring the chaos he started, Ryan glanced at Wyvern's business card and the Dynamis logo on its back. Should he check them out?

Mmm... no. Len was his priority—his *only* priority. He was tired of these long years of loneliness, and he wanted to find her at all costs.

The Augusti had provided him hints already. Ryan knew people used her Genius technology, and that people traded such devices in Rust Town. If the Augusti Path was closed to him for this loop, then he should try to figure out where they could have obtained the bathyspheres. If there was a black market for Genius goods, he should check it out.

He could always kill himself afterward.

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7: Rust Town

When the locals said that Rust Town was walled off, they weren't kidding.

As he drove as north as possible, Ryan began to see the fortifications separating the district from the rest of New Rome. They weren't so much *walls* as a mix of tall steel cylinders, wired fences, mounted cameras, and surveillance systems. Trained Genomes occupying watchtowers pushed back clouds of pollution away from the touristic areas and into Rust Town with wind manipulation, so rich people wouldn't breathe the same air as the lower classes. Since they all seemed to produce currents of air, Ryan assumed they used the knockoff elixir marketed as '*Tempest*,' that gave its user minor aerokinesis.

As he drove around the fortress in search of an entrance point, the Genome put on Dynamis Radio, listening to the news.

"—we received confirmation that the explosion in Little Maghreb yesterday was the result of a short duel between our beloved protector Wyvern and the criminal Genome known as Vulcan." Ryan immediately raised the volume.
"Vulcan, formerly known as Urban Guerilla, briefly served as Wyvern's sidekick before joining the criminal syndicate known as the Augusti. Reports indicate Vulcan was forced to flee after causing great collateral—"

Oh, so that was why Vulcan didn't contact him this time. Little Maghreb was probably close to the Augusti's hideout, and he—or she? Ryan didn't remember—decided to ambush Wyvern when the opportunity presented itself. They probably took heavy wounds and Ryan fell off their radar afterward.

Would the courier have to change hotels again? No, better to stay in the first hotel until Wyvern contacted him, and then switch places to avoid the assassination attempt that ended the last loop.

“—the Psycho cryokinetic known as Ghoul attempted to escape containment by the Private Security early yesterday, but was quickly recaptured by Il Migliore,” the radio continued. *“Enrique Manada, manager of the superhero team, stated that ‘as long as Dynamis remains strong, warlords and madmen will never gain a foothold in New Rome.’”*

At least warning Wyvern did make a difference. She probably relayed his tip about the Private Security being compromised to her team, who intervened in time.

Then again, it must have been hard for Ghoul to run away without his legs.

Ryan eventually reached a border checkpoint guarded by three Private Security guards. All of them carried riot gear and laser rifles. Their chief made Ryan a sign to stop, and the Genome did his best to look innocent.

It was pretty hard with the mask and full Quicksave attire, but it was the attitude that counted.

“Halt,” the guard said. “No entry without proper authorization or work permit.”

"I'm just visiting," Ryan said. "I heard they have a zoo."

"It *is* a zoo," the guard grumbled. "Look, citizen, this is the frontier of civilization. Beyond is the untamed urban wilderness, and we're the only people standing between New Rome and the hordes of barbarians who would tear it down."

"Well, when I see you, I do fear for civilization."

"You should," the man replied, missing the obvious sarcasm. "So if you want to pass with proper authorization, you will have to contribute to our community's mutual defense."

"Sure," Ryan replied. "You aren't going to check my car for drugs, weapons, or anything dubious? I swear, I'm clean as the day I was born."

"Depends on how much you contribute to the community."

No wonder that the Augusti and Meta could get in and out so easily. Since the guards weren't even trying to hide their corruption, they probably had very few surprise inspections.

The second he passed the checkpoint, Ryan understood why they called it Rust Town.

First and foremost, the air quality dropped drastically, even worse than the harbor; the smell of rust and chemicals was so pervasive, the courier wondered if someone dumped toxic waste out in the open. Ryan had to raise his car's windows and activate his mask's air filter just to make it bearable.

Almost every house and three-floor apartment buildings had fallen into a state of disrepair, windows were broken, cinder block walls were covered in graffiti, some even crumbling.

The neighborhood was positively claustrophobic, narrow streets forming a labyrinth of alleys almost too small for his car to move in, fire escapes casting them in shadow in spite of the daylight. Streetlights didn't work well, and a thick layer of smog colored the world in sickly yellow. Every piece of metal seemed to rust, probably due to the pollution.

Even Ryan, who had seen it all, felt appalled by the locals' living conditions. Squatters had overtaken everything, dealers openly peddled *Bliss* to homeless people, and the locals avoided Ryan's gaze when he looked at them. They all wore scarfs, face masks, or other protections against the gas, even the children.

At one point, the driver drove past a corpse, left to rot in muddy waters due to an overflowing sewer entrance. A pack of wild dogs waited nearby next to a pile of trash, perhaps waiting for Ryan to leave to feed.

Ryan had made jokes about everything, but he couldn't muster the energy for humor today.

Seeing a dealer who didn't avert his gaze, he lowered his window to ask where he could find Genius-made tech. The local gave the directions for a place called *Paulie's Shop*, although not before trying to sell Ryan a gram of *Bliss* for an outrageous sum. It appeared prices had gone up since the Meta started hitting the local dealers' suppliers.

Ryan didn't have any trouble finding *Paulie's Shop*, mainly because he had garish neon lights on his establishment's sign; although the man could have chosen a wider, dead-end alley for his establishment. The Genome parked his car in front of the door, grabbed his coil gun just in case, and then walked in.

"Here's Johnny!" Ryan shouted, opening the door without knocking.

The shop could be more aptly described as a disorganized garage, with shelves made of accumulated junk. It was a true and poorly-ventilated wilderness of tools; scavenged car parts hung from the ceiling, and bulbs provided as little light as possible.

The man behind the counter was a scrawny, balding little man in his forties, half-French, half-British; Ryan could identify these strange creatures on sight. In response to his unforgettable entrance, the shopkeeper had immediately raised a rocket launcher at his client. Probably scavenged Genius tech from the design.

"You..." A flash of recognition flashed in Paulie's eyes, behind his goggles. "It's you?"

"Yes, me!" Ryan was so happy; he had become so famous, people recognized him on sight! "Are you one of my fans?! I knew I had a few!"

"A fan?" the shopkeeper almost choked, aiming the weapon at Quicksave's face. "You maniac, you destroyed my old workshop in Otranto!"

"I did that?" Ryan asked, confused. "When?"

"Two years ago, you crashed a plane on it, and then you gave me a letter!" Paulie snarled. "You had been hired to deliver my mail, and you said you wanted to make an 'unforgettable entrance'!"

Well, it did sound like something he would do. Ryan observed the man with attention, and he seemed vaguely familiar. But...

...

No.

Nope. Nothing.

"Maybe." Quicksave shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't remember," Paulie asked, astonished.

"Well, you clearly took it more personally than I ever did." When he realized the poor man may have been forced to live in this dump because of him, Ryan instantly regretted his joke. "Sorry. Maybe I can pay you back for the bother?"

The shopkeeper ground his teeth in rage. Apparently, he didn't want Ryan's money. "Get the hell out of my shop before I pull the trigger."

"You know I can stop time, right?"

"It's a Facehugger missile," the man replied. "Once it's locked, the nanomissile keeps pursuing the target until it's dead."

What a way to start a business relationship. Normally, the courier would have taken the hint and left the shopkeeper alone, but he had a mission to fulfill. His coil gun lowered in one hand, Ryan searched in his coat, ignoring Paulie's weapon.

He brought out the plushie.

At the sight of this white, beautiful rabbit plushie, Paulie's face lost all colors. "You know what this is," Ryan said, wagging his ultimate weapon at the shopkeeper. "If you don't lower your weapon, I'm going to press the on button."

“We’re in an enclosed space, and you can’t control it!”

“Neither can you.” Ryan raised his thumb, preparing to activate the switch on his WMD’s back. “I’ll do it.”

“Don’t do it,” Paulie threatened to pull his weapon’s trigger.

“Imma do it!”

The pressure in the room grew, Paulie shaking, until his nerves gave away. “Fuck,” he said, dropping his weapon on the counter. “How could you do that to a plushie? The most adorable thing, and you turned it into... into...”

“It sounded like a good idea at the time!” Quicksave argued, putting the plushie back in his coat for everyone’s safety.
“I’m looking for homemade Genius tech.”

“Ah, I can’t help!” Paulie laughed, happy to be as useless to Ryan as possible. “You couldn’t have picked a worse moment! The Junkyard is closed, nobody sells anything!”

“I’m not looking to buy,” Ryan replied, glancing at the establishment with disappointment. Even the weapon Paulie wielded was shoddy and ready to crumble after firing a shot.
“I’m looking for a very specific technology. Bathyspheres used to make supply runs in the water. Crimson-paint, steampunk influence?”

“Like Len’s tech?”

Paulie jumped back, startled, as Ryan closed the gap between the counter and himself in the blink of an eye.
“Paulie, Paulie, Paulie,” the Genome all but purred. “Do you want to be my friend?”

“No,” the shopkeeper replied bluntly.

"Then tell me everything."

The shopkeeper let out a sigh of disgust. "Black hair, blue eyes, a bit crazy?"

"It's called Marxism-Leninism, but yes," Ryan replied, more and more excited.

"That's the same girl, then. She arrived in Rust Town six months ago, calling herself the Underdiver." Ryan never heard of that nickname. To his disappointment, *Quicksave and the Underdiver* didn't sound well as a comedic duo. Maybe Q&U? The Undersavers? "Just one of the Geniuses trying to do business without Dynamis or Augustus recruiting them, see what I mean? There used to be a big black market here for Genomes like her, who don't have enough resources to be self-sufficient, but wanted to remain independent from big groups."

Ryan nodded, silent, and entirely focused on the shopkeeper. The rapturous attention seemed to disturb Paulie, but it only encouraged him to speak faster.

"Anyway, she had managed to make herself an armor from scavenged stuff. It looked like an Old World JIM diving suit. She kept asking me for parts to maintain it, so we met often."

"Did it have a minigun?" Ryan asked.

Paulie made a strange face. "How do you know that?"

Because he knew her perfectly. "Please continue."

"Anyway, she sold some of her inventions to the Augusti to make end's meet. You must know that she was... very *passionate?*" Ryan nodded knowingly. "She ended up

attacking a chemical plant owned by Dynamis to protest about the working conditions there.”

That was Len alright. Always with that strange, almost cute sense of justice, obsessive desire to protect the weak, and hatred of private ownership. “And then? What happened?”

“What happened? Guess what happened! The Private Security attacked her workshop and caught her. I heard rumors that the Augusti broke her out, but nothing from her afterward. She vanished.”

This confirmed that the Augusti were likely the one true path to Len and should be favored, although... the fact the Private Security captured her means they probably had a file on her.

Still, that was more information he had learned since... since forever. Ryan was in a good mood. An *exceptional* mood. “For this information, Paulie,” he decided on a whim, “I shall grant you a wish.”

“Grant me a wish?” the shopkeeper frowned in disdain. “You think you’re Robin Williams?”

Finally, a man of culture in this dissolute city! “Of course not, I can only grant one wish, not three.”

Paulie prepared to blow him off, before marking a short pause. A thought crossed his mind. “You aren’t kidding? You are serious?”

“Whatever it is, I’ll fulfill it.” No matter how many tries. Quicksave always honored his word.

“Mmm... what do I have to lose, nobody else will do anything about it.” Paulie put his hands on the counter,

joining his fingers. “You know a Psycho gang moved into Rust Town recently? The Meta-Gang?”

“You want me to Tarantino them?”

He nodded in confirmation. “They’ve taken over the Junkyard where most exchanges take place a few days ago, and then things got worse. They get worse every day. The Genomes, they kill ‘em and drain their blood; the normies, they abduct straight off the street. I don’t know what the Psychos do with them, but you don’t see them again.”

Paulie clenched his teeth.

“Even kids have gone missing.”

A chill went down Ryan’s spine, and his heart hardened. As he had told Zanbato, kids were sacred for him. Especially since he got along with them better than adults, and he had had a crappy childhood himself. “Does the Private Security know?”

“They know, they just don’t care. Private Security only protects key infrastructure like the power plant or the water treatment station, which I have to admit, they do zealously. The rest are just frontier guards who couldn’t care less about what happens within the walls.” Paulie sneered in disgust. “They don’t give a shit if a few homeless, junkies, and lowlifes go missing. The Psychos are doing them a favor, cleaning out their glitzy city’s trash.”

“What about Wyvern and Il Migliore?”

“Wyvern gets in a fight with a lone Meta sometimes,” Paulie admitted. “But she’s the only one who cares... and she can’t be everywhere. Until the Meta kill too many workers, assault

tourists, or steal an Elixir shipment, Dynamis won't lift a damn finger—”

“Wait,” Ryan interrupted him. “The Meta have been here for days, and they *haven't* attacked Dynamis' Elixir shipments or Genomes?”

Paulie shook his head.

“That's odd,” the Genome pointed out. “Psychos don't act like that. They usually make a mess of themselves trying to get knockoff Elixirs to feed their addiction, things escalate with locals, and then they go on a rampage. It's always the same pattern.”

He should know, he had lived with one.

And yet these Psychos were awfully restrained by their kind's standards. Come to think of it, from what he had heard the Meta hadn't attacked Dynamis' infrastructures at all; they only tried to drive the Augusti out of Rust Town.

The reason was easy to guess. Dynamis couldn't care less about the area unless its buildings or agents were attacked. If ignored, they wouldn't lift a finger. Ryan had thought the Meta-Gang had come to New Rome to fuel its addiction, but clearly, something else was at work.

Unfortunately for Paulie, Len was Ryan's only priority for now. But he would honor his word, no matter what it took. “I will fulfill your wish in my Perfect Run,” the Genome promised, “I swear.”

“Your Perfect Run? You're jogging?”

“It's the perfect ending,” Ryan explained. It was a concept he had developed over his endless wandering; if he

gathered every piece of information possible about a given place and inhabitants through his loops, then he could create *the* optimal situation. He would then dedicate his last loop to creating the perfect chain of events, which guaranteed the best outcome by his standards.

Then, and *only* then, would Ryan create a new save point and move on.

After learning where to go to reach the Junkyard from its occupant, Ryan left Paulie's shop through the door and prepared to drive straight into the Meta's nest.

But then a bug landed on his Plymouth, flattening it.

Ryan froze, as an enormous, three meters tall monster crashed on his car, crushing the roof, destroying the window, and shattering the engine. The creature looked like a twisted fusion between a human and a mosquito, a monstrous insect with a black exoskeleton and crimson flesh beneath. Its eyes set on Quicksave with hunger, his claws raised.

"I knew," the mosquito rasped, his voice closer to an insect's buzzing than a man's words, "I smelled a rat sneaking i—"

"MY CAR!" Ryan screamed in horror, his sudden wail startling the Psycho.

The courier immediately stopped time, rushing to his Plymouth Fury and checking on its health. Could he save it? *Could he save it?!*

No. The damage was too extensive.

Ryan was overwhelmed with fury, and quickly considered going on a Kill Bill rampage, first against the mosquito, then every Psycho he could find. He would show them the terror of Hell unending! A curse straight out of Tartarus!

But... Ryan couldn't bear to live without his beloved Plymouth.

With a depressed sigh, the courier grabbed a small metal sphere from his coat, and let time resume. "You see this?" he raised the sphere at the Psycho. "You see this?"

"What is this, a ball—"

"Now look at my car, which you destroyed, then back to the ball. It's an A-bomb." *Click.* "Now catch!"

Ryan tossed the bomb at the mosquito, who caught it with his hand due to sharp reflexes. The Psycho looked at the weapon, then back at Ryan, confused and horrified.

"Nobody touches my car," Quicksave said. "Nobody."

As Rust Town exploded in a burst of nuclear fire, vaporizing the two superhumans with a flash of searing light, Ryan felt happy.

Finally, a new method he had never tried before.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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Trades, Koen Hertenberg, Enaz the Great, Alex Pruitt,
Saul Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc
Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.**

8: Past Fragment: Len

2016, Venezia, Italy.

They once called it the city of canals. They said it was the most beautiful city in the world, with tourists coming all the way from China to visit it.

That was before the Wars.

More than a decade after, Venezia had become an open grave, a poisonous marsh whose canals overflowed with toxic plants and dark mud. Some islands had sunk, their supports destroyed by Mechron's drone bombardments. Most houses had fallen into disrepair, invaded by worms and insects, their rooms full of old human bones; meanwhile, the city's outskirts had been taken over by raiders, who used boats to attack coastal communities.

At least, they did until yesterday. Until Ryan's group arrived.

It wasn't the teen's choice though. Len's dad basically dragged them there from the city of Rubano, when he heard the local raiders had Genomes among their number. That maniac could never resist the lure of easy targets, leaving the rest of them to salvage stuff while he went hunting.

The wiser bandits had fled without looking back; the others had perished, their exsanguinated corpses tossed into the waters. Genomes and normies both. Nobody could defeat

Len's dad. Nobody. Except maybe Augustus or Leo Hargraves, but so far they hadn't met.

His face covered by a scarf to protect him from the foul air, Ryan chased away these dark thoughts and glanced at the stone house in front of him. Dusty, half-rotten books were piled up in its courtyard, forming a strange staircase to climb above the walls nearby.

"Riri!" Len called him from within. "Come! I've found a treasure!"

Curious, the sixteen-year old teenager stepped inside the house while whistling. As expected, it was some kind of library, albeit one unlike anything Ryan had ever seen. Piled up books formed a true labyrinth of walls and twisting turns, to the point they could probably crush him dead if they ever collapsed. Unlike other areas of the city, vegetation hadn't taken over, and marauders had clearly ignored the building; nobody respected culture nowadays.

He found Len on a boat. Literally. The owners had moved a gondola inside the library before filling it with books. His best friend lay on her back atop a pile, reading something.

"Heya, Shortie." A tomboyish girl his age, Len was a tiny bit smaller than Ryan and disliked being called out on it; so of course, he teased her mercilessly. "You're reading *Gulliver's Travels*?"

"I'm not short, I'm growing!" Len complained, interrupting her lecture to glare at him with her beautiful blue eyes. Ryan often thought he could see the sea she loved so much in them. Her skin was pale, her raven hair reaching her shoulders. Truly a modern Snow White, although she dressed in brown travel clothes rather than noble gowns.

"Now come over here before I throw a dictionary at your face."

Ryan lay next to his best friend, their shoulders touching, and peeked at the cover. While ancient and yellowed by age, the book seemed relatively well-preserved. "*Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers, écrit par Jules Verne.*"

"*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, written by Jules Verne, French edition," Len translated, her eyes all but shining. She already had two copies of that book, but none in the original language. "You can't imagine how long I've been looking for it. The translations are terrible."

"I thought you couldn't read French, *mais non?*" Ryan mocked her, Len pinching his arm in response. "Ouch."

"You deserve it, Riri," she replied. "*Et j'apprends la français, merci bien beaucoup.*"

"*Le français,*" Ryan corrected her. "And you can remove the *bien*."

She sighed. "Just take a book and shut up. I think they have '*How to win friends and influence people*', which you really need to read."

"I like reading, but not as much as eating," Ryan said. Len had filled her supply bag to the brim with books, and nothing else. "Unless you want to make me eat your *Communist Manifesto?*"

"If you do that, I will eat you, Riri. With a fork." She waved a hand at the library. "This place wouldn't have become a toxic dump, had the communist revolution happened."

"Maybe it would have been a gulag instead," Ryan replied, delighting at teasing her beliefs.

"People messed it up, but the concept is right," Len protested, closing her book and putting it on her chest. "Is it wrong to think everyone should be equal?"

"No, just naive."

"It could still happen," Len insisted with cheerful optimism. "Everything has been rebooted back to zero. The world has changed."

"Yes, but not human nature."

"You're too cynical for your own good, Riri." She closed her book and put it in her travel bag, behind the gondola.
"When do you think Dad will come back?"

Once he ran out of victims. "I don't know."

She looked at him in silence, their eyes locking. They rarely had moments of privacy, where they could breathe without her father looking. Ryan looked at eyes, then at her lips...

Do it, do it, do it.

But he chickened out.

Her face unreadable, Len let out a sigh. Ryan wasn't sure if it was out of relief or disappointment. "Can you help me remove the books from that boat?" she asked. "We could make it a bed."

"You want to sleep there?" Ryan balked at it. The wood was so damaged, it could crumble anytime.

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah. I always wanted to have my own ship. Do you know more than eighty percent of the ocean is unmapped?"

"You want to sleep in the gondola or put it to use?"

"We could find one," she said, daydreaming. "A real ship. Or make one. Sail away like the explorers of old."

"With or without your dad?" Ryan asked the hard question.

Len didn't respond, which was an answer in itself. Without a word, she rose back on her feet and started removing the books with Ryan's help. Once they were done, Len examined the boat's bottom, her eyebrows narrowing. "Uh," she said, thoughtful. "Could it be?"

"What?"

"That type of gondola," Len said, "Do you know what it is?"

"Sorry, I'm not a ship geek like you."

Instead of answering, Len knocked at a spot at the gondola's back end. "You heard that?"

"Nothing?"

"Exactly," Len said triumphantly. "This type of boat often has a hidden compartment. They carried messages, money, or even drugs."

"You would think marauders already found it," Ryan pointed out.

"It's not common knowledge, and you must know where to look to find it. All ship geeks know that!" She could be so smug sometimes. "Also, it's a library."

Yeah, Ryan doubted many locals had visited the library, and considering the dust raised when they removed the book, nobody had touched the gondola in years. Pillagers must have examined the checkout and other obvious spots without looking too much into it.

“Remove that wooden plank,” Len pointed at a spot. “It’s old, it shouldn’t be hard.”

“Hey, why me?” Ryan complained.

“It’s called work division,” she replied with a bright smile. “I think, you work!”

“If it’s work, that means I’m getting paid.”

“I will let you sleep in the gondola,” Len winked at him.

The things he did for her...

In the end, as Len said, the wood was so damaged by time and termites, Ryan had no problem removing the planks with his bare hands. And as she thought, the boat did have a compartment... with one hell of a treasure within.

A hexagonal, metal box, with a helix-shaped lock. The two teens could only hold their breath at this finding.

“No way...” Len’s eyes widened in shock. “Is that what I think it is?”

“I believe so.” One of the mythical Wonderboxes, sent by the Alchemist to the first Genomes. The devices which started the Last Easter tragedy and the Genome Wars that followed. Ryan had no problem removing the lock, having spent years breaking into deserted homes to find supplies.

The metal box opened, revealing a well-preserved letter and three syringes full of swirling liquid. One blue, one violet, and one red. Each bore a swirling, multicolored helix symbol.

Elixirs.

Ryan opened the letter, Len peeking at the content over his shoulder. The paper was handwritten.

“Congratulations, Mr. Rossi.

You have been selected to participate in a grand socio-genetic experiment of my design. You do not know me, but I know you, Mr. Rossi. I believe that you are a fine specimen of the Homo Sapiens species, possessing the necessary skills, intelligence, and genes to lead humanity into the next phase of its biological evolution.

I grant you a miracle.

This box contains three Elixirs, selected at random among a selection of over ten million distributed around the globe. You must have heard about them on the news. Yes, these serums grant a host of health benefits, including a unique power based on the color composition:

Green: Life.

Blue: Information.

Violet: Spacetime.

Red: Energy.

Orange: Matter.

Yellow: Abstract.

White: Meta-power.

You are free to do as you wish with these Elixirs; they are ready for immediate use and testing in the field. I would advise not to drink more than one, but the data gathered should be interesting nonetheless.

Now, I must inform you that you are far from the only person to have received this gift. When you open your eyes next morning, the world you lived in will have ended; instead, you will wake up in a world where mankind's potential is no longer constrained by the petty rules of reality. A world where everything is possible.

I have no idea how this divine experiment will turn out... but I can't wait to see the results.

Thank you for advancing the cause of science.

Best of luck,

The Alchemist."

"He never opened the box," Len said with sorrow.

"Maybe he died before he could," Ryan replied. "He probably hid the box before the bioweapons hit."

"You think the Blue one can make you a Genius?"

"Maybe," Ryan replied. Geniuses were a slang for Genomes, usually Blue ones, with the ability to create advanced technology way ahead of their time.

Mechron, the man who came closest to taking over the world, had been the most famous one. His self-replicating robot army had swept Eurasia until some countries pushed their big red button before they could fall next. Nobody remembered who had fired the first shot, but Mechron responded to the A-bombs with drone bombardments and bioweapons. Central Eurasia had become a nuclear wasteland; southern Europe, a mass grave.

At least this city wasn't irradiated, unlike Turin.

"Which one do you want to take?" Ryan asked his friend.

Len paled. "We can't drink this," she hissed. "Dad will know. He can sense it in the blood."

"Yeah, perhaps, but that may be our only chance to get away from him."

"I'm not abandoning Dad," Len replied with a glare. "He's going to get better, I *know* that."

"Fuck no, he isn't." If anything, he was steadily getting worse. Now that Dynamis and Augustus had put a bounty on his head, he had to fend off hunters semi-regularly. "Before he was just crazy and violent, but now he's violent *and* paranoid. He's never going to heal, and I think deep down, you know I'm right."

Len bit her lower lip, as she always did when stressed and sad. "He's still my dad," she said, with a hint of resignation in the voice. "He will want them all."

"He doesn't have to know," Ryan argued. "Your father will get us all kill—"

"Len!" a shrilling voice echoed from outside. "Len! Where are you?"

Speaking of the devil. Quickly, without thinking, Ryan grabbed an Elixir in each hand and hid them in his back pockets alongside the letter. Realizing his intent, Len almost seized the last potion, but hesitated for too long.

Ryan had the time to hide the Blue and the Violet Elixirs, when Len's dad crawled into the room.

Len's dad was no longer a man. Not since he drank one Elixir too many and underwent a mutation. His flesh, organs, and skin were all gone, leaving only a shapeless mass of blood covering the bones. He had become a faceless, crimson puppet, his body constantly fluctuating; he even moved like a string-less doll, his arms flailing like whips. He left nothing behind, no bloody footprint.

Both teens tensed, unconsciously moving closer to the other.

"Ah, Cesare," the Psycho said upon 'seeing' Ryan. "Good to see you're taking care of your sister."

His name wasn't Cesare, and they weren't related.

But Ryan knew better than to say that out loud. Len's dad was sick. Very, very sick. Especially in the head. Sometimes, he was Len's dad, kind, friendly Freddie, who liked to play board games and watch old movies.

But sometimes, he was just Bloodstream.

And when the Psycho noticed the Wonderbox and the Red Elixir, his body instantly solidified, his fingers turning into

sharp claws. His lingering humanity vanished, overcome by an addiction stronger than anything else.

Like a feral beast pouncing on a mouse, Bloodstream rushed at the box, brutally pushing Len out of the way. Her back hit a book wall, some of them falling behind.

“Len!” Ryan screamed, immediately rushing to her side. Bloodstream ignored him, grabbing the Red Elixir and smashing the syringe. He didn’t bother to inject anything, his body absorbing the content with greedy hunger; his blood fluctuated like a raging sea, before stabilizing.

Thankfully, Len was more stunned than harmed. However, her father frantically searched the box for any other Elixir, before glancing at the teens. “Where’s the rest?!” Bloodstream hissed at the two, now outright screaming. “Where’s the rest?!”

“There’s nothing else!” Ryan protested.

“Liar!” Bloodstream’s hand turned into an axe. “A son shouldn’t lie to his father!”

“Dad, stop!” Len screamed.

As if shaken out of his drug-fueled episode, Bloodstream immediately calmed himself. His hands returned to their normal shape, and he shook his head in confusion. The Elixir would help stabilize his mutations, at least for a while.

“Len... I’m sorry. I’m...” Bloodstream put his hands around his skull as if struggling with a brain freeze. “Sorry...”

“It’s... it’s okay Dad,” Len said, looking away with her arms crossed. “It’s okay.”

Bloodstream looked at his daughter with concern, his hands moving towards her; however, he backed down when Len flinched at his approach. The Psycho remained eerily silent, before glancing at Ryan. "Cesare?"

"Yes, Dad?" Ryan asked, loathing every word.

"Len feels sad," Bloodstream said. "Smile for her."

Ryan forced himself, although his lips couldn't reach his eyes. Thankfully, Len's dad couldn't distinguish a false smile from a real one. He put his bloody hand on the teen's hair, less like a son, and more like a pet.

"You're a good boy, Cesare," Bloodstream said, no blood meshing with Ryan's hair. "You're a good boy."

Len's brother Cesare was long dead. Bloodstream just refused to accept it.

Neither teen pointed it out though. The last time Len's dad had broken out of his delusion, the Psycho had almost strangled Ryan. He would have killed him too, had Len not calmed her father. Bloodstream only really listened to his daughter nowadays.

Sometimes, not even her.

It was always the same pattern: their group would settle down for a while, Len's dad would have a violent episode, and either he wiped out the locals or they chased him off. The trio would have to move on, because when people realized that they couldn't kill Bloodstream, they went after Len and Ryan. Rinse and repeat.

Ryan had lost count of how many places they had crashed over the last few years. One city at a time, they had

eventually wandered all the way from Campania to Venezia. Bloodstream had them constantly on the move, chasing after isolated Genomes whose Elixir he could drain to satisfy his addiction.

“Pack your things, kids,” Bloodstream said. “This place is driving me crazy. We’re going to Aqualand. You will like it, Len? You always liked water.”

“I... yes, Dad. I do.”

“I hope they have ice creams,” Bloodstream said cheerfully, before leaving the room.

Len looked at Ryan, who didn’t think twice. They hugged tightly, and for a second Ryan wondered if he should let her go at all.

He still had the Elixirs in his pocket.

They had to *leave*.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Considering this is a time-loop story, I'm experimenting a bit with interludes. They will usually show flashbacks (either from Quicksave's or other characters' perspective) from before the story's events.

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Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.**

9: The Made Men

It was May 8th 2020 for the fifth time, and Ghoul once again had a car accident.

As he climbed down from his Plymouth Fury after hitting his favored undead maniac, Ryan took the time to look at his beautiful partner. The car he had rebuilt from the husk he had found in the ruins of Florence, all by himself; over the years, Ryan had customized it into a marvel of technology that would make most Geniuses envious. The courier had drifted for years at the driver's seat, survived countless explosions, rode over so many old people! Ah, the memories...

All in all, his Plymouth was the one constant in his life, the thing most important to him after Len. The partner he could never find in any human being since they couldn't remember him from restart to restart.

"I swear, I won't let anyone hurt you again," Ryan whispered to his car while stroking the hood, like a cat. "The bad Psycho is gone."

"Are you talking to your *car*?" Renesco asked from behind the bar counter.

"I'm not the one judging you on your current company!" Ryan replied, opening the car's back. Once again, he decided to do something new and interesting for this

restart. A method to avenge his car's death upon the Meta-Gang once more.

"I know this sounds cliche," Ryan told Ghoul, raising the jumper cables while doing his best German accent. "But we have ways of making you talk!"

After delivering a *shocked* Ghoul to the Private Security, finishing his delivery, and paying everyone off, the courier thought about his next course of action.

Intending to return to the *Augusti Path*—without screwing it up this time—Ryan returned to the first hotel he had booked in the city center instead of the southern district. He met Wyvern, warned her of Ghoul's escape, and received her business card.

This time, Vulcan contacted him as normal.

He went to the Bakuto, met Zanbato, and received his mission. The day afterward, before he left the hotel, he hid a small remote camera in the room. Ryan had already booked a place somewhere else to avoid the assassination attempt, but he also wanted to catch a glimpse of the killer.

This time, Sarin showed up alone at the delivery. It appeared Ghoul remained in custody, and the Meta couldn't spare anyone else as backup. Ryan would have wanted to say it had been a hard, tough fight. That he struggled for his life, and that Sarin proved herself a welcome challenge.

Instead, the battle lasted ten seconds.

He punched her in the face in the stopped time with *Fisty*; gas came out of the Psycho's mask, and she crashed on the supertanker like before. She could dish out a lot of damage, but couldn't take it.

They hadn't even destroyed the Old Harbor this time!

"I'm bored," Quicksave complained, while the Augusti finished putting crates in the bathyspheres. The Private Security hadn't even shown up!

"Good," Zanbato replied calmly. "That means things are running smoothly. I would rather have boring efficiency every day than chaotic excitement."

"That's what she said," Ryan replied, drawing a cell phone out of his pocket. It was an old pre-war Samsung he had tinkered with, enhancing its performance to match newer devices. With it, he could observe through his bedroom's camera from afar.

The camera didn't notice anything strange. According to the *thermal* sensors though, *someone* had flown close to the window, peeked through, and then left. Considering his room was on the tenth floor... definitively a Genome.

Now that he thought of it, he had glimpsed a flying hero during his first battle with Ghoul and Sarin. Could it be the same person?

"Does anybody know a flying invisible man or woman around here?" Ryan asked. "Asking for a friend."

"Anybody with 100k in their account can buy an Invisibility Elixir at Dynamis," Luigi replied, closing the bathyspheres after putting the last crates inside. He typed on his phone and the submarines vanished beneath the waves, carrying their supplies elsewhere. "For flight though..."

"The only fliers in town I know of are Wyvern, Geist, Vulcan, Devilry, Wardrobe, Mosquito, and Sarin," Zanbato said. "Among them, only Geist can turn invisible."

"Does he spy on people at night by peeping through their window?" Ryan asked. What confused him was that the mysterious visitor didn't enter the room nor leave a bomb behind during this iteration. Did they detect the camera from afar and decided to avoid detection?

"No, he's bound to one place outside town and can't leave it at all," the Augusti enforcer replied. "He's a Yellow whose powers activated post-mortem, binding him to his grave."

Ah yes, Yellow Elixirs. The potions granting 'conceptual' powers, from astral projection to bad luck. Ryan liked them, mostly because you never knew what to expect with them. Even by Genomes standards, their abilities were downright *bizarre* with weird limitations.

"Why the question?" Luigi asked, suspicious, Ryan feeling his truth-telling power activate.

"Someone like that blew up my bedroom a few days ago," Ryan replied, which was technically true. The power forced him to be honest, but he could phrase his sentence to mislead. "As if that was original!"

"You certainly make enemies quickly," Luigi noted, frowning. "How do you feel about that?"

Ryan prepared to tell a joke, but he felt an alien force take over his mind and change his words. "Nothing particular," he admitted. "It helps fill the void."

The Augusti present glanced at him strangely. "The void?" Luigi repeated, confused.

"I guess I feel empty, alone, and directionless inside." Ryan shrugged his mind now on autopilot. "Like my brain is a bottomless well I try to fill with dopamine and endorphins.

So the more trouble I have, the greater the rush and the happier I am. Truthfully, boredom is my natural state.”

An awkward silence followed.

“But on the bright side, I look fabulous on the outside!” Quicksave added to lighten the mood, before turning to Luigi, unable not to be truthful, “Can you remove that bullshit filter? It’s uncomfortable and it makes me want to kill you.”

“I have to be sure about something,” Luigi said, unsympathetic. “Are you a snitch or a double agent?”

“No, I’m on my own side only, and I have no cause at all!” Ryan replied, but couldn’t stop himself; his voice changed from happy to apathetic on its own. “To be honest guys, I’m only using you to find my old pal Len because I’m lonely and I don’t feel close to anyone else.”

“Man, you have serious issues,” one of the grunt guards said. “You should see a therapist.”

“I did, but I broke him first!” However, this was getting tiresome, and Ryan’s wits were at an end. He didn’t want to talk about his emotional hang-ups, let alone with strangers who wouldn’t remember anything soon.

“Now, Luigi,” the courier said, tensing like a lynx switching from being playful to threatened. “There is only one place where I don’t want anyone inside, and that’s my mind. If you continue, my knife will find its way to your back and nobody will save you.”

There, he wanted the truth, he had it. Thankfully, the privacy invader took the threat seriously. “Sorry for the

probing,” Luigi apologized, Ryan sensing the effect lifted. “I had to be sure you weren’t pulling a fast one on us.”

The courier simply looked at his face without emotion nor a word, making the truth-teller uncomfortable. Damn it, he hated mind-readers and their cousins. No respect for privacy!

“I guess it’s time to split up and go on our merry way,” Ryan said, turning to Zanbato and eager to gather his thoughts alone. “I give you a lift this time?”

“No,” Zanbato said. “Change of plans. You’re going to my place.”

His place? “Shouldn’t you take me to dinner first?” Ryan mocked.

“Yes, of course, that’s the plan,” Zanbato replied, much to the courier’s surprise. “Do you like pizza? I cook it like no one else.”

Wait, he was serious? “My hotel is—”

“You’re going to stay at my place tonight,” Zanbato insisted, with the same tone as a big brother scolding his younger sibling. “What you need is a friendly, warm environment.”

“But I must catch my secret nemesis!”

“They will wait.”

“Give up, man,” Luigi told Ryan, clearly amused. “Zan is like cream. Sweet and it sticks to you when you get too close.”

“Is it vanilla ice cream?” Ryan asked innocently. “I love vanilla.”

"You should try chocolate," Zanbato suggested. "It's good for depression."

What followed was one of the strangest moments of Ryan's life. Being led at knifepoint to a dinner party was certainly a first.

Well, not literally at knifepoint, but metaphorically so. Zanbato simply stepped into Ryan's Plymouth and refused to exit until the courier agreed to come home with him. Passive-aggressiveness at its finest.

In the end, with the mysterious assassin having backed down for now, Ryan couldn't refuse a free meal.

Zanbato lived in a modern house north of Mount Augustus. The area was definitely higher-income than Little Maghreb nearby; local houses were large, modern, and built on steep hills overseeing the poorer districts below. Class stratification had never been made clearer.

His host's home was a modern, two-floor house with an incredible view of New Rome and an infinity pool built next to the hill's edge. Colored in rich warm brown and white tones, the place seemed both modest and fashionable. Clearly, mafia work paid well.

The garage opened on its own, Ryan parking his car between a Lexus ES and a heavily customized Harley Davidson sportster. Zanbato took the opportunity to remove his power armor, showing no apprehension at revealing his face to Ryan. The courier had to admit, the Japanese counterfeit was quite handsome, with a perfect jawline, buff muscles, and a three-day beard. Ryan would peg him somewhere around his mid-thirties.

“Jamie Cutter.” Zanbato shook Ryan’s hand. “No masks inside though.”

“You want to know my secret identity?” Ryan replied. “I must warn you, many have gone insane from hearing my true name.”

“Ryan Romano,” Jamie chuckled, the courier crossing his arms at his thunder being stolen, “To your credit, that’s pretty much all I know. My bosses couldn’t find much about you.”

“Really?” Ryan complained as he removed his mask, hat, and trench coat, tossing them into the car’s back. “But I’m unforgettable!”

“Not much *before* you went out in costume and started blowing stuff up,” Jamie clarified, opening the garage’s door and inviting his fellow Genome inside his home. The door led to a large living area that could probably fit a two-room apartment inside, including the kitchen, a sofa with a big plasma screen, and stairs to rooms above. Huge picture windows gave a marvelous sight of the city below, and the deco involved a lot of Asian art. A katana hanging on a wall, a Korean flag on the balcony, a statue of the buddha next to the TV...

Two people were already present. A dark-brown woman drank a soda can near the balcony, while an Asian girl sliced tomatoes behind the kitchen counter.

But Ryan didn’t pay them much attention, his gaze focused on something else.

Namely, the enormous rat on the kitchen counter, looking at Ryan with curiosity. The courier waved a hand at it, and the critter raised its tiny forelegs in response. *Aww...*

"Hi, honey." Jamie kissed the girl in the kitchen on the mouth, while she put her knife and dinner aside. Probably his girlfriend. "I brought a new guest."

"Hyun Ki-jung." She nodded politely at Ryan, showing him a friendly smile. As skinny as her boyfriend was muscled, she kept her black hair short, dressed modestly, and wore discreet, yet elegant glasses. Ryan would have considered her pretty if she hadn't suffered from weight loss and sore scars on the skin; the courier immediately identified her as a recovering addict.

"Waza?" Ryan answered.

"Waza?" Ki-jung replied with the right tone.

Ryan gasped in realization, having finally met someone who *understood*.

"Wazaa!" both shouted at the same time. This startled the rat a bit, who tilted his head to the side. The dark-brown haired woman looked at them as if they had gone utterly mad, while Jamie remained simply puzzled.

"It's, it's a very obscure reference," Ki-jung reassured him. "You have to know the private joke to understand."

"To be initiated in this brotherhood is the pinnacle of culture," Ryan said, politely introducing himself to this delicate woman. "Ryan 'Quicksave' Romano. I'm immortal, but don't tell anyone."

"You say that to everyone," Jamie pointed out, lovingly putting his arms around his girlfriend.

"Because nobody remembers!" Ryan glanced around and realized the kitchen's rat had brought his entire family.

Three of his kindred watched a documentary on the tv, another slept on the balcony, and another leaped on Ki-jung's shoulder like a Pikachu. They looked extraordinarily clean though, more pampered pets than pests.

"I control them," Ki-jung told Ryan, petting the kitchen rat from behind his ears. "Somewhat. I telepathically connect with them, which increases their intelligence."

"Blue or Green?" Ryan asked.

"Green," she replied, meaning her power affected biology rather than mere rodent telepathy. "I'm Chitter."

She probably thought Ryan would recognize the name, but he didn't.

Finally having enough of the racket, or perhaps curious, the balcony girl decided to join the kitchen and socialize. Although *rock-disaster* would have been a better name. Ryan had never met someone with more tattoos on their arms and shoulders; she even bore a bird symbol below her right eye, although it was hard to notice due to her stained glasses. The woman dressed like a biker girl, with a white sleeveless shirt, blue pants, black boots, and a cross pendant around her neck. She kept her dark hair in shoulder-long dreadlocks, and unlike Ki-jung, she clearly exercised a lot.

"Who is that, Zan?" she asked bluntly upon eyeing Ryan. "A new hobo you found on the road?"

"Lanka!" Jamie chastised her.

"I prefer the term *murderhobo*," Ryan replied, his pride wounded. "I don't have any home, but I love stealing them."

“Oh, really?” she didn’t sound impressed, trading her soda can for a smoke. She offered everyone one, including Ryan, but nobody took her up on it. “You don’t look like the killer type.”

“My costume is in the garage,” Ryan deadpanned, the woman snorting.

“He beat up Sarin so fast I couldn’t see it,” Jamie said, making Ryan swoon in pride. “Don’t push it, Lanka.”

“Ah, new muscle?” She played with her cigarette. “About time. Can’t ride near Rust Town without those Psychos ambushing me, and half our normies don’t wanna sell *Bliss* there anymore.”

“Can we talk business some other night?” Ki-jung asked, clapping her hand to get everyone’s attention. The rats gathered in a line on the kitchen counter, as if expecting a cheese delivery. “Can you help set the gambling table while we prepare the pizzas?”

“Do you like poker?” Jamie asked. “Entry fee is one hundred.”

“I don’t like poker, but I like winning,” Ryan joked, most smiling in response. Well, everyone except Lanka, who took it as a challenge. “Are you a team? Is this a Cosa Nostra reunion?”

“We are all Made Men and Women, yes, and we work together,” Jamie said, flinching at the Cosa Nostra comment, “We also share this flat for practical purposes. Since a few rooms are available, I wanted to invite you to crash for a few days until our business is done. It won’t cost you anything, and you will like it more than a hotel.”

"Zan owns the place, and he can't help but invite strangers in need," Lanka said, "Like that hobo."

"You will never let me live that down, will you?" Jamie sighed, his girlfriend chuckling. "It was only two weeks until he found a job."

"I appreciate the offer to spy on me, but I prefer my privacy," Ryan replied.

"This is a friendly proposal with no hidden strings," Jamie insisted, and much to the courier's confusion, he sounded genuine. Weird guy. "Although I do think you would have much to gain by joining our big family, personally and professionally."

"I'm just looking for Len," Ryan replied, uninterested. "Black hair, blue eyes, Underdiver?"

"Underdiver?" This time, the name seemed familiar to Jamie. "I've heard that name somewhere."

"The power plant incident earlier this year," Ki-jung said. "That was him."

"Her," Ryan said, much to his hosts' surprise.

"Ah yes, I remember." Jamie nodded. "The Private Security caught her, and Vulcan wanted to break her out for recruitment. I'm not sure if the weapons division followed through with it however."

"You don't work for Vulcan?" Ryan asked, confused.

"Our capo is called Mercury," Ki-jung told Ryan. "His division oversees gambling and logistics, alongside security work on the side, while Vulcan's group controls the weapon trade."

Our bosses cooperate sometimes, but usually, every group does their own thing.”

Gosh, they sounded more like a twisted bureaucracy than a criminal syndicate. “Wait, why did Vulcan send me to you rather than recruit me herself?”

“I’m one of the Augusti’s primary recruiters,” Jamie explained. “The capos trust me to evaluate potential new recruits for a first check.”

“If you’re here rather than in a trash can, that means you passed,” Lanka said, finishing her cigarette and starting a new one.

“I will introduce you to Vulcan tomorrow, even if you don’t want to join,” Jamie promised Ryan. “That should solve your problem neatly. Until then, you’re welcome to live with us. So... what do you say?”

Ryan considered the proposal. Truth be told, a lot of Genomes in the same place should discourage the mysterious assassin from bothering him again, and except Lanka they seemed like nice people in spite of their criminal background. It could be fun.

However, Ryan was leery to join communities, since he died often and they always forgot him afterward. Getting to know people only for them to treat you as a stranger afterward was just painful; only his friendship with Len predated his time-manipulation power.

Mmm... the courier could always bolt away when he felt too attached.

“I say four cheese,” Ryan replied, the others taking it as a yes.

"Alright, ground rules, no *Bliss* allowed under this roof, no cats or pest control, no cocaine after ten," Jamie said, clearly radiating some kind of *dad energy*. "Everybody cleans up their shit, tinkering is in the garage, you warn us the day before if you want to host a party—"

Ryan listened in silence as if he would dutifully follow the rules.

Clearly, Jamie didn't know him well yet.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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10: Heroes & Villains

It had been a while since Ryan drove a group in his Plymouth Fury.

He often transported one or two people, especially when on a drunken bender or working as a getaway driver, but rarely a group like this one. Jamie wore his power armor in the back, while Ki-jung dressed with a green hoodie at his side. Her rats had taken over every corner of the car, hiding behind and beneath the seats.

Unfortunately, Lanka complained all the way at the front. "You cheated, blabbermouth," she accused Ryan. She would have gone to the meeting with her bike too, had Jamie not insisted they all travel in the same vehicle for *team-building*. "I know you did."

"Someone is a sore loser here," Ryan replied, having left yesterday's table a few hundred bucks richer. Also, blabbermouth? He'd had way better nicknames! Like *Lil' Granny Destroyer*.

"I counted cards," Lanka said. "But you changed them. I'm never wrong about that."

"So you accuse him of cheating, by admitting that you cheated yourself?" Jamie asked, unsympathetic.

"Of course I cheated," Ryan admitted openly, much to Jamie and Ki-jung's surprise. "And instead of condemning me, you

should learn from it, my young Padawan. Failure is an experience.”

“Then you must be very experienced by now,” Lanka shrugged. Clearly, she could give as much as she took.

“There is nothing more human than cheating. You know who else accused the human race of cheating? *Mammoths*. They said, ‘hey, these humans they attack us with bows and spears instead of tusks, it’s not fair.’” Ryan looked at the sore loser. “Have you met any mammoths lately, Lanka?”

Jamie sighed at their bickering. “We’ll try tabletop games next time.”

The group parked near Little Maghreb, next to a fortress of stone and steel. The building had been some kind of foundry before the war until Vulcan took it over a few years back. This crimson castle of metal walls, pipes, and reservoirs seemed closer to an old army base to Ryan though; a lot of grunts patrolled the area, wielding shotguns, grenade launchers, and miniguns. He also noticed a few snipers on the roof, watching every corner of the streets around the foundry.

Apparently, it was an open secret that Vulcan’s weapon division operated there, but nobody was stupid enough to attack them. Not even the Private Security and Il Migliore. New Rome truly lived in a Cold War-like era.

It was also quite close to the hotel Ryan had used in a previous loop. No wonder Vulcan attacked Wyvern when she moved so close to their headquarters.

“Also, I want to say I am disappointed in you, ladies,” Ryan told Lanka and Ki-Jung. “Only Zanbato and I have costumes! You don’t even wear masks!”

“Why would we wear masks when the Private Security has files on us?” Ki-jung asked in confusion, leaving her rats in the car to keep an eye on it. “They even know where we live.”

“And there aren’t that many advanced armors to go around,” Lanka replied, although she had the common sense to supplement her outfit with a belt holster. “And what kind of a costume, a cape? Do you know how hard it is not to trip with it?”

“It’s not about practicality, it’s about looking stylish,” Ryan replied, hands on his trenchcoat, “Without a bright and colorful style, what are we? Mere animals! Culture is what elevates—”

“Aha, villains!”

Ryan paused and looked at a strange newcomer.

A person climbed down from a bicycle near the car, dressed like Rambo... except without the gun, and half the muscles. He had painted his face and dyed his hair white, with black spots for the eyes.

It looked ridiculous, truth be told.

The rest of the group seemed to recognize him, but instead of attacking, they all looked embarrassed.

“You have come farther than you should have, but you found your sworn destroyer!” the fool declared, trying desperately to look badass, but coming desperately short. “Prepare to face the wrath of...”

“Oh God, not this again,” Lanka sighed, the rest of the group eerily silent.

“THE PANDA!”

“The what?” Ryan asked, unsure whether to condemn this man’s terrible fashion sense or applaud his efforts. At least *someone* in this city understood the importance of *costumes*! “Is your power only getting laid every ten years?”

“Pandas are picky!” the ridiculous man answered, but something in his tone made Ryan dubious. He didn’t even look Chinese!

“He’s a ‘*vigilante*.’” Somehow, Lanka made the word sound ridiculous, rolling her eyes while she said it. Clearly, she didn’t take him seriously. “He can transform into a panda.”

“... and?” Ryan asked, expecting something else.

“And that’s it.”

“But a very big panda,” Ki-jung added with a chuckle as if to soften the blow.

Man, some Genomes were just unlucky.

“Has the fear of the Panda petrified you, villains?” The hero put his hands on his waist, mistaking the awkward silence for fear.

Did he seriously come all the way here to pick a fight? Ryan could respect that, although he should work on his introduction.

“Just ignore him, and he will go away,” Jamie replied, leaving for the Armory without sparing the poor would-be hero a glance. Ki-jung followed soon afterward, although she gave a pitiful glance at the poor animal. Even the foundry’s

guards seemed to joke about the newcomer, not making any effort to intercept him.

“You will not escape me!”

Frustrated by this lack of respect, the Panda underwent a terrible transformation. Black and white fur grew on his skin, his body gaining mass and muscle. He grew claws and fangs, shedding his pants and jacket like a magnificent butterfly. The man was gone, leaving only... the Panda.

It was a pretty big panda though, even larger than a polar bear. Yet when he let out a scream, Ryan found it cute, rather than terrifying.

With a heavy sigh, Lanka joined her index and middle fingers together to form a ‘gun,’ and fired an orange sphere of energy with it. The projectile flew towards the Panda at an arrow's speed, and hit him in the nose. The poor animal instantly fell to the left side, paralyzed.

Ryan understood now why they called her *Sphere*.

“Alright,” Lanka said, drawing a Beretta 76 from her pocket. “I call dibs on his corpse.”

“You’re going to kill a panda?” Ryan asked, horrified.
“They’re extinct!”

“Yeah, that means we can sell his fur to a collector.” She pointed her gun at the poor beast.

“I’m stopping you right there, Cruella!” Ryan moved in the barrel’s way, unable to stand animal cruelty. “I won’t let you kill the last Panda. You could get the death penalty for this!”

“He’s not a panda, blabbermouth, he’s an idiot! It’s like being already dead, except you lost your mind while alive!”

“I can’t allow you to anger PETA! You don’t know what those guys are capable of!” Or what they *could* do, before the Wars.

“Who the hell is PETA, a Genome?” she asked, confused, before lowering her gun in annoyance. “You know he’s going to come back and get killed by the guards later, blabbermouth? The way I see it, it’s survival of the fittest. At least I will make it quick.”

“I’ll take full responsibility for saving this disciple of style,” Ryan replied, his female companion rolling her eyes and putting her gun back in its holster. “I believe there is still hope for him, my marauding friend.”

She raised an eyebrow. “How do you know that?”

That she was an ex-bandit? “The snake tattoo on your arm, which you tried to cover up beneath other ones,” Ryan replied, having noticed that detail during the poker night. “I already met people with it. Very unkind people.”

“I hope you killed them,” she replied, the guards letting them inside the foundry’s perimeter, “I belonged to a real band of savages back in the day.”

Oh yes he *did*.

Ryan and Lanka walked towards the metal gates, finding Jamie and Ki-jung discussing with another duo. Or rather, a woman was talking, and everyone else listened with occasional nods.

She was obviously a Genome; her skin was deathly pale, unnaturally so, and her long hair bright blue. This mature lady carried herself with an eerie sort of elegance, that of an otherworldly fairy among men. Unlike Ryan's team, she had style aplenty, wearing a black Greek *chiton* dress as her costume, alongside sandals, a shark tooth necklace, and skull-shaped earrings.

Ryan couldn't explain *why*, but he had a bad feeling about her. Mostly because Jamie and Ki-jung seemed stiff as hell when she spoke, and even Lanka tensed at her sight.

The courier also recognized her bodyguard as the woman who tried to flirt with him at the Bakuto, back when he had messed up with the chain of events. Although this time, she had traded her dress for a black uniform and an assault rifle. Since they hadn't met in this restart, she didn't recognize him.

The blue-haired woman and her bodyguard passed by Ryan and Lanka on their way to the parking lot, before stopping abruptly when she noticed the courier. "You," the blue-haired woman said, her voice deep like someone used to being obeyed.

"*Moi?*" Ryan pointed a finger at himself.

"How old are you?" she asked, her sharp grey eyes examining him closely. Somehow, it felt like locking eyes with a hungry crocodile peeking out of the water.

"What a question." Ryan made a mock bow. "I'm immortal, but don't tell anyone."

"No one is immortal," she responded, vaguely amused. "I hope to reach your age one day though."

Then she stopped paying him any mind and walked away with her escort.

"Shit," Lanka whispered. "That's not good."

"Who is she?" Ryan asked, curious.

"Pluto, Augustus' sister, and underboss," Jamie said upon regrouping, clearly worried, "When he sends her, heads fall."

"Isn't Pluto a guy in Roman mythology?" Ryan asked. "I support gender equality, but wouldn't *Plutonia* have been more appropriate?"

"I believe they had a theme naming thing in the family," Lanka replied, relaxing once the underboss was out of sight. "The third member of the sibling trio, Neptune, serves as Augustus' consigliere."

At least they tried to respect the spirit of the names. Ryan appreciated the cultural reference. "What's her power exactly?"

"If she wants you to die," Jamie said, his eyes darkening, "you die."

"As in what, she vaporizes you with lightning—"

"No, you just die," Jamie interrupted Ryan, a hint of fear and wariness in his voice. Perhaps he worried—rightfully—that Quicksave would try to put this power to the test. "There is no warning, no protection, no counter. If she wants you dead, you die. The end."

"Since we still have enemies alive, her power must have limits," Ki-jung said. "But we don't know them."

This only made Ryan even more interested. He would check it one loop. Lanka, however, wanted more information.
“Why was she here?” she asked Jamie.

“Five of our Made Men have died under mysterious circumstances lately,” Ki-jung replied instead.

“The Meta-trash?”

Jamie shook his head. “No, they would have loudly claimed these murders, and they aren’t their style. Poison powerful enough to affect Genomes, explosives, drowning and suffocation... The boss believes this is a new vigilante. Pluto and the Killer Seven hit squad will take care of this, and if they ask for anything, we are to assist them with the task.”

Explosives he said?

“My invisible nemesis struck again,” Ryan said, happy to have solved the mystery.

“Yeah, I thought the same,” Jamie said. “But unless the one responsible knocks at our door itching for a fight, we’re leaving the higher-ups to deal with this. Once the hit squad is after someone, it’s only a matter of time before the matter is solved.”

Ryan guessed it would be rude to say *murdered*.

“Alright, a few rules about how to address Vulcan,” Jamie told Ryan, as they stood before the metal gates. “Don’t make jokes about her height, and for the love of God, *don’t* mention Wyvern unless she mentions her first.”

Ryan nodded dutifully, the doors opening to let them walk inside.

Jamie led them on to a guided tour of the foundry, although it quickly became clear the name didn't fully illustrate the truth. The building housed a whole weapon production operation, from the metal processing to the assembly line. The group walked through searing hot rooms full of furnaces and automated assembly lines; they produced guns, bullets, and rockets. Some of the guards even wore variants of Jamie's own armor, albeit bulkier and far more intimidating.

Eventually, they reached Vulcan's workshop. It was the quintessential Geniuses lair, full of bulky devices, glass bulbs providing light, and strange contraptions centuries ahead of modern times.

It also had a big, *big* robot on standby.

Scratch that, it turned out to be an enormous set of power armor, albeit nearly five meters tall and with the wideness to match. While humanoid, the suit was so bulky it might as well be called a tank with legs. However, considering the number of miniature turbo reactors, and the multi-joint design of the limbs, Ryan guessed the machine could move surprisingly fast in the field. And of course, it had enough weapons to rival a battleship, including a massive rocket launcher on the right arm, cannons, and even beam weaponry.

The courier also noticed multiple eye-shaped cameras dispatched all over the machine, perhaps to allow the user to see in all directions. Finally, the machine was plated with gold, probably to show-off as much as possible.

The builder was waiting for them, drawing plans on a large table. Much like Pluto, in spite of her codename, Vulcan turned out to be a girl.

And to Ryan's surprise, she seemed a little bit younger than him, biologically. Eighteen, nineteen? In any case, she was petite, barely one meter sixty tall, with olive skin, sharp black eyes, and dark hair bound into a bun by a pencil of all things. She dressed rather casually for her station, a mere black shirt, dirtied pants, and unlaced shoes.

But when she looked at him, Ryan could see the fierceness in her gaze.

"I expected someone taller," Ryan told her innocently. "Like Wyvern."

The room grew incredibly tense, Everyone looked at him as if he were insane, except Vulcan, who gave him a murderous glare. Ryan looked away at the giant mech, whistling.

"We'll see who is taller when I blow off your legs, jackass," the capo said with a face that reminded Ryan of Len. She must have had the same height complex. "Because right now, you just stepped on a landmine."

Here comes Napoleon!

"Quicksave, please, a little respect," Jamie coughed, he and the rest of the team nodding at Vulcan. "I'm sorry, chief. He doesn't know what he says."

"Oh no, he does," Vulcan replied angrily, glaring at Ryan. "The bitch is my personal N-word. When someone speaks it, they suffer."

"Do you have *any* survival instinct?" Lanka hissed at Ryan.

"Of course not, I'm immortal. Survival instincts are for people who can die." The courier glanced at the giant

armor, noticing the enormous reactor on the machine's back. "Is that a miniaturized fusion reactor?"

Vulcan's face betrayed some surprise, although she remained clearly furious with him. "I'm surprised you could tell."

"I worked on one once, albeit nothing this advanced," Ryan replied, examining the rest of the suit. "And plasma beams for offense too. Clever, clever."

"Maybe I should give you a live demonstration." As Vulcan spoke these words, the suit moved on its own. The other Genomes took a step back, and Jamie in particular looked ready to summon an energy sword. "Though since you've got a brain, I guess I will only destroy the legs."

Ryan simply kept observing this marvel of technology, even as it pointed its weapons at his lower half.

"Mmm." Vulcan frowned, her anger replaced with astonishment. "You are awfully close to death, and yet neither your heartbeat nor blood pressure changed at all. No abnormal neural activity either. You give absolutely *zero fucks*."

Wait, how could she know that? Did she have a telepathic link to her suit's sensors?

Though he should feel thankful that her anger had left the building, replaced with curiosity. She probably thought he had some ace up his sleeve.

"I heard you carried advanced tech with you, Quicksave," Vulcan said, the others too happy to see her calm down to say anything. "Are you a Genius?"

“Sort of.” He didn’t have enhanced intelligence, but he had spent so many loops tinkering with advanced technology, he might as well be a *de facto* Genius. Ryan looked into his trenchcoat and handed Vulcan the A-bomb.

“What a beautiful, elegant design,” Vulcan whistled, examining it under all its forms. “You made that?”

“Everyone should have a bomb on themselves for dissuasion!” Ryan avoided a straightforward answer, full of excitement in the presence of a fellow bomb-maker. “Bombs save lives!”

“Exactly,” Vulcan replied with the same enthusiasm, unable to restrain her geeky passion for explosions. “You know why the Cold War never went hot? Because everyone had A-bombs! Absolute destructive power is the key to peace!”

“Oh God, there are two of them now,” Ryan heard Lanka whisper to Jamie, who ground his teeth in uneasiness. Still, Ryan could see everyone relax a bit.

“What about Mechron?” Ki-jung asked mirthfully, a thin smile on her lips. “Bombs didn’t help against him.”

“An unforeseen variable, Chitter, like the Alchemist,” Vulcan brushed it off, before waving the A-bomb under Ryan’s nose. “You see this?”

“Uh, yes?”

“If you say Wyvern again, I’ll shove it down your throat. Since you’ve got precious skills, I’ll spare your life, but *only* this time. Don’t push your luck again, unless you want a one-way ticket to Killville.”

Nice place, he had been there a lot of times. “So, you’re not giving me back the bomb?”

“No, that’s your respect tax,” she said before brazenly stealing his device and putting it in her pocket. “If you join my division, I might change my mind. I’ve got a lot of workers, but few real engineers worth their salt. You have an attitude problem, but I’ll tame you.”

Ryan also noticed that her suit kept its weapons pointed at him, even if she sounded friendlier.

“I thought he might do well with Mercury’s.” Jamie cleared up his throat, defending his own division.

“I’m the one who looked him up first, Zanbato,” Vulcan replied. “If Mercury wants to find good men, he should get out of his house once in a while.”

“I’m very happy for the attention, but I’m not the person for long-term employment,” said Ryan. “I’m looking for Len, black hair, blue eyes, Marxist-Leninist.”

“Underdiver,” Vulcan replied, smirking when Ryan gave her his full attention. “But I don’t see how I benefit from introducing you to my subcontractor, especially if you aren’t with us long-term.”

Subcontractor? Finally, he could almost *taste* the reunion! “How much for the privilege?”

Vulcan replied with a laugh, sitting on her workshop table. “You think I’m a crook who works for money?”

“Then I have only my body left to sell.”

Ki-jung couldn't help but chuckle at his joke, before quickly correcting her expression. Vulcan smiled a bit. "I don't know if you're ballsy or just insane," she said. "But as a matter of fact, I have a need for fresh warm bodies to throw at a problem."

"The Meta-gang?" Jamie cleared his throat. "You want us to take them down?"

"My crew will take care of the Meta problem," Vulcan brushed him off. "The big boss gave us the go order. Just protect the shipments, and we'll take care of Rust Town. No. What I have in mind involves fighting the '*law*.'"

"The best kind of mission," Ryan delighted. "Are we going to do tax evasion? There's nothing more excitingly dangerous! Even Al Capone couldn't do it!"

"Nobody pays taxes, blabbermouth," Lanka pointed out.

"The Private Security and Il Migliore have been a bit overeager lately," Vulcan said with a sneer. "Nothing too damaging, but they're testing us. They believe the Meta made our organization weak. We must remind them not to underestimate the Augusti."

"You want us to attack Dynamis' operations?" Jamie asked, Lanka frowning at the 'us.'

Vulcan nodded. "Dynamis is currently filming a new Il Migliore movie. I want you to trash the studio, send them a message."

"Isn't the newest movie under work there..." Jamie trailed off, without finishing his sentence.

“Wyvern’s Flight II,” Vulcan finished a vengeful glint in her eyes.

Yeah, totally business as usual.

“Do you want your personal vendetta crispy,” Ryan asked, “or extra crispy?”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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11: Railroading

“This is stupid!”

“Lanka...” Jamie trailed off at the back of the car. “Calm down.”

Ryan listened to their bickering while peeking through his car’s window. Dynamis’ *Star Studios*—which won a prize for name originality—spanned roughly two and a half square kilometers of surface, located east of New Rome. They had an entire open *park* dedicated to them and roughly seven warehouses. From afar, Ryan noticed the staff moving cardboard cutouts, interns carrying coffee to their superiors, and stuntmen prepping themselves. The studios only had one checkpoint entrance, and few guards; they clearly didn’t expect an attack.

Still, the group had parked outside the studio’s confines, unable to find a path inside without security cameras in the way. Ki-jung napped with her head against her boyfriend’s shoulder, her eyes closed. While the group remained at safe distance from the studios, she had sent her rats to do scouting work.

From what Ryan understood, Chitter’s enhanced rat family acted as relays, allowing her to control a swarm of vermin over a large area. Ryan suspected that instead of true telepathy, which was a Blue power, Chitter physically modified her rats into an extension of her own nervous system. On one hand, it meant destroying her main rats

would cancel her power for a time, but on the other hand, her vermin familiars could act independently without her direct input.

"I mean, why would we risk ourselves fighting *Wyvern*, aka the dragon shapeshifter who can take on the *Boss*, so he," Lanka pointed an accusing finger at Ryan, who made an offended pose, "can earn himself a personal favor?"

"Because Vulcan wants it, and she's one of the Capos," Jamie replied, "and with luck, we won't have to face her. I doubt she has time for actor work."

"What happens if you're wrong? None of us can take her on!"

Thing was, Ryan had a bad feeling too.

He couldn't explain it, but the courier had developed a strong intuition over his various loops. And right now, his sixth sense warned him of danger, of someone watching him. Yet their current location should be a blind spot for the security cameras.

He should install a radar in his car.

A bit distraught, Ryan put on the radio and activated the special feature, hoping to find good old-school music to drown out the noise. "*—in other news, the Roman Republic is still under curfew, after Gaius Julius Caesar's assassination—*"

Again with Caesar? It had been two thousand years! "What news channel is that?" Jamie asked, curious. "I don't recognize the speaker."

“It’s my Chronoradio,” Ryan explained, changing the channel. “It listens to channels across space and time. But for some reason, it usually defaults to the Roman Republic era.”

“You should work on your stories, blabbermouth,” Lanka taunted him. “They didn’t have radios two thousand years ago.”

“In one version of the past, they did.”

“You can’t have multiple versions of the past.”

Ryan looked at her with a deadpan look. It was wasted effort with his mask on, but still. “That’s not how time works,” he said, with the same tone as an adult talking to a petulant child.

“Fuck you, Einstein.”

“Whenever you want,” Ryan replied, before finally finding the *Post-Apocalyptic Blues* channel. Ki-jung chose this moment to wake up.

“So?” Jamie asked her.

“Wyvern isn’t present,” she said, scratching her neck. “Someone’s filling in for her.”

“See, I knew she didn’t do her own stunts,” Jamie told Lanka, vindicated. “She’s probably too busy with fieldwork.”

“There’s no guarantee she won’t fly in after somebody calls the alarm,” she replied, opening the window and lighting a cigarette.

"The bad news, however, is that Wardrobe replaces her for the stunts," Ki-jung continued, "and Atom Cat is there too."

Jamie didn't sound concerned about Wardrobe, but instantly bristled when she mentioned the other Genome. "Wardrobe gains power based on her costume, right?" Ryan asked, trying to stir up his memory.

"If she dresses as a vampire she drinks blood and burns in the sun, if she dresses as Wyvern, then she can fly." Ki-jung nodded. "It's a very weak version of the real thing, so even if she dresses like Augustus you can still hurt her, and the effect lasts only as long as her clothes are relatively intact."

"Yellow Genomes are bullshit," Lanka complained.

"I can understand Wardrobe's presence, but Atom Cat?" Jamie asked his girlfriend.

"He's doing a guest appearance in the movie," she replied, showing concern. "Do we abort?"

"Abort?" Ryan turned his head around. "Why abort? He's that powerful?"

"Atom Cat is... was, one of us," Jamie said.

"He's a spy?" Ryan asked. "Like James Bond?"

"No. It's complicated." Jamie joined his fingers, trying to find the right words. "He's having a teenage rebellion phase, but he'll come back into the fold, eventually. His parents are part of Augustus' inner circle, and we've been explicitly forbidden from endangering him in any way."

"Don't let him touch you, blabbermouth," Lanka said, "or you go boom."

"He can transform anything into a bomb, but only with direct skin contact," Ki-jung added.

"Interesting," Ryan lied, before asking the really important question to Ki-jung. "CGI, special effects, or stop motion?"

"They use CGI."

The courier put his head on the steering wheel, mourning the loss of cinema's golden age.

"So what do we do?" Lanka asked Jamie. "We go in gun blazing, make a ruckus, and then bolt away?"

"No," Jamie replied, turning to his girlfriend. "Here's what we'll do. You flood the studios with rats from afar, make a ruckus, then we immediately drive away."

Ryan immediately understood the obvious flaw in this plan.
"Wait, we don't fight anyone?"

"No."

"Betrayal. Betrayal!" the courier pointed a finger at Jamie.
"You can't do this to me!"

"I won't let you get in a firefight with Atom Cat, Quicksave," Jamie replied. "I'm sorry, but I don't want any trouble on that front."

"You ask too much!" the courier said, his fellow Genome sighing in defeat. "You're killing me, Jamie! You're killing me!"

"You'll live through it." The swordsman shrugged, before turning to Ki-jung. "So?"

"I'm your girl," she said, falling asleep. Ryan turned to Lanka for support, but she simply looked out of the window, finishing her cigarette. He couldn't blame them since they weren't immortal, but damn, it sucked all the fun out of this mission.

As minutes passed, Ryan noticed agitation near the studio. People getting out of the warehouses, screaming.

Then they came crawling.

Hordes of thousands of black and brown rats. They escaped from the warehouses, breaking windows under their sheer weight. There were so many of them, that the rodents had to climb on one another to advance, forming waves and walls of fur.

Ryan almost felt pity for the poor Dynamis trainees, confronted with this terror while they toiled without any hope for a paycheck. Obviously, panic spread all around the area, the staff fleeing in all directions, coffee cups being spilled, guards desperately trying to shoot the rodents...

"My, my..." Ryan whistled. "This city has a rat problem.."

"That should satisfy Vulcan," Jamie chuckled. "Now, let's go home before the Private Security arrives."

The courier couldn't agree more, especially since he still felt uneasy.

Ryan pushed the accelerator pedal, abandoning the vermin-infested studio for the city's broad lanes. As he drove all the way to the group's shared house, he almost hoped for Wyvern to come from the skies, or Atom Cat to track them down on a motorcycle for an epic car chase. Or even the Meta to ambush them.

Instead, they returned home without a problem.

Frankly, New Rome's heroes disappointed the courier. Perhaps Leo Hargraves' Carnival had given Ryan a false image of what superheroes should be, since they were brutally competent, but Dynamis' corporate champions didn't impress him much.

"You're sulking, blabbermouth?" Lanka asked him, finishing her smoke and throwing it out of the window. Ryan stopped time, caught the smoke, and put it in an ashtray in the glove compartment.

"It's just, I expected a road bump of some kind," Ryan replied when time resumed. His gut may have been mistaken. "This is boring."

"See the bright side, you will finally see your girlfriend again," Jamie tried to comfort him.

"What's she like?" Ki-jung asked.

"I will present her to you," Ryan said, much to her delight. He had to admit, he started to like this group. He wouldn't get too attached nor make the effort to know them better since they could forget him anytime, but for professional criminals, they were quite nice to hang out with.

Parking the car in front of the house, Ryan let the others climb down but didn't follow yet. "I'll just listen to the radio for a bit," he replied. "Can you call Vulcan?"

"Sure," Jamie promised, "Also, it's movie night. *Robocop* or *Robocop 2?*"

Ryan raised two fingers since he liked movies with stop motion; even if he had seen both films countless times

already. He was busy trying to find the *Jazz Sixties* channel on his chronoradio when Ki-jung reached the house's door, exchanging pleasantries with Lanka.

Except Ki-jung suddenly stopped, as she was within an inch of the door handle. Ryan lowered his car window. "What's up?"

"I can't sense the rats I left at home," the rodent master replied, bothered.

"They scampered off?" Jamie asked.

His girlfriend shook her head. "I explicitly told them to stay and watch the place."

Now, Ryan wasn't the only one with a bad feeling. Lanka drew her gun, moving first with a frown on her face. Ki-jung took a step back, while her female friend put a hand on the door handle, the other ready to shoot through it.

Click.

Ryan instantly stopped time when he heard that oh-so-familiar sound, but it was already too late.

When the world turned purple, his power freezing everything in place, the house had already transformed into a giant burst of flames and debris; the inferno swallowed both Lanka and Ki-jung whole and incinerated them instantly. The blast had somehow caused all his car's reinforced windows to explode into sharp shards and triggered its alarm.

Ignoring the glass shards grazing his skin, Ryan emerged from his car and rushed at Jamie's side, making a futile attempt to rescue him.

When time resumed, he received a mouthful of dust, ashes, and stones for his trouble, the entire house having been vaporized. Jamie, thanks to his armor, was more shocked than hurt physically.

Emotionally though...

“KI-JUNG!”

The swordsman rushed to his girlfriend’s side, but even with her Genome durability, the blast had killed the young woman instantly. Her flesh had been seared so much, her eyes had fried and one could see the bones.

“Damn,” Ryan said upon observing the corpses, before glancing around to look for the responsible. No one in sight, although he couldn’t distinguish things clearly through the smoke. “I didn’t expect that at home.”

“Ki-jung...” Jamie muttered while holding his girlfriend in his arms, his horrified eyes then wandering to Lanka’s body. He then turned to Ryan, panic overtaking him. “We have to go to the hospital!”

“It’s useless,” Ryan replied, having studied medicine enough to know they lacked either the tools or the time to make a difference, “They’re dead. You can’t do anything.”

For the first time since he met him, Jamie looked at Ryan with a new emotion: pure, undiluted *fury*. “That’s all you have to say?” he asked venomously. “They’re dead?”

Thing was, Ryan had seen so many people die, that he had grown numb to it. He cared on an intellectual level, but since he could still rewind time and avert this attack, the destruction carried no emotional weight. The courier liked both girls and would make sure they survived next time, but

he didn't see the point of being sad now; he would rather gather as much information as possible to make sure he prevailed in the future.

Ryan would have loved to say he had become a creature of logic... but apathy would have been a better word.

Still, Jamie's incensed, distraught expression saddened the courier enough to make an effort; after all, the swordsman had tried to help him with his own lingering sadness. "It's okay, I can bring them back," Ryan promised. "I can—"

The courier noticed movement at the edge of his vision and turned around.

The glass shards from his car flew at him like thrown knives.

Worse, Jamie's armor suddenly seemed to suffer from a short circuit, a surge of lightning electrocuting him. The swordsman Genome let out a scream of pain, as the sheer voltage fried his flesh and forced him to release Ki-jung's corpse.

Shit, the killer was still nearby!

Ryan stopped time to dodge the knives. He looked around to locate for the source of the attack, but no one was in sight. Was the attacker invisible again?

He never had the time to confirm it, no pun intended.

The moment time resumed, the courier felt a sharp pain in his neck. His vision turned upside down, his entire body below the throat going numb as his ear hit the grass. Glass shards swirled above him like a tornado, shredding Jamie alive before he could recover from his own armor's incapacitation.

...

Was that Ryan's headless body at his side?

The beheaded courier could only widen his eyes, before all the glass shards fell on his skull like a rain of swords.

Ryan woke up at his Plymouth's driver wheel, back to the beginning.

Instead of moving directly to Renesco's place, the Genome parked his car near the city's entrance, staying still as he gathered his thoughts.

"Twice!" he snarled out loud. He had been had *twice* when he was so close to finding happiness!

Okay, now, that settled it.

Someone was after him. Someone bold enough to attack while he had a whole group of Genomes at his back.

But *who*? Ryan was flattered to have a secret archenemy, but he didn't see anyone with the means and motives except the Meta. Or did the assassin target him on principle due to joining the Augusti?

Was it a lone wolf? This person seemed like a professional, and you would need a mighty bomb to cause an explosion that powerful. Ryan dying right after he stopped time implied that the killer had figured out his cooldown period, and Chitter's rodents had been killed to prevent them from warning their master. That must have involved a lot of information gathering, perhaps even a whole crew.

The way it happened... the one responsible could clearly control glass. Since they could fry the technological components of Jamie's armor, perhaps even a silica kinetic. It could also explain the presumed invisibility as an optical illusion, or some kind of mirror suit.

The attack had been brutal, unexpected, and lasted less than five minutes. The killer was no inexperienced would-be hero like the Panda, but a cold-blooded professional.

The courier considered what to do next. Thing was, even if he succeeded on the mission Vulcan gave him and avoided the ambush at the house, continuing without dealing with the assassin might lead them directly to Len.

Although it infuriated him, Ryan decided to put his main quest on hold until he had dealt with that roadblock. That mysterious killer had already murdered him *twice* without ever showing up directly and clearly couldn't care less about collateral damage. Worse, if the killer wasn't a lone wolf but an agent of someone else, then killing them would only win Ryan a reprieve.

The meaning of life was finding happiness. Ryan didn't feel happy without Len. Intentionally or not, this killer kept them apart, and so had to go. The end.

He didn't want Jamie and his friends to die either. The courier took no pleasure in the suffering of others, notwithstanding assholes like Ghoul. His Perfect Run would involve everyone he liked being happy, and Jamie's group was now part of that VIP category.

He wouldn't let them die.

Ryan considered the matter with cold logic, to see how he could solve the problem in this new loop. So far, the killer

had only attacked the Augusti or the courier himself, but that may be because Ryan worked with the criminal syndicate. Excluding the lone wolf hypothesis, only two organizations had the Genomes, motives, and resources to attack them: the Meta, and Dynamis.

If it was the Meta, well, Ryan had already promised to wipe them out, so it would be killing two birds with one stone. But his gut told him he had missed a detail, and he quickly remembered what.

The harbor.

Ryan remembered a flyer rescuing members of the Private Security when he had fought Ghoul and Sarin there. He thought he couldn't see them clearly due to the darkness, but maybe it was because they were invisible, their presence only revealed by the smoke. Since the figure hadn't helped the Meta but did rescue Dynamis' employees, Ryan excluded the former as the guilty party.

This left only a lone vigilante... or an agent of Dynamis.

Time to take up Wyvern on her offer.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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**Saul Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc
Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.**

12: Corporate Heroes

Il Migliore's HQ, the Optimates Tower, was the most luxurious place Ryan had ever seen.

Most of Dynamis' properties were located northeast of the city, on the far opposite of Rust Town. Unlike its neighbor though, this district catered to the supreme elite of New Rome. Il Migliore's tower was a seventy-floor-tall building, half penthouse skyscraper, half luxury hotel. The lower portion was bulkier than the top, housing gardens, pool balconies, and even helipad areas, while the upper floors belonged to offices. The building clearly took cues after the Art Deco movement, with its mix of luxurious, shiny splendor and modern geometric design.

Ryan himself had a meeting on floor sixty-three, sitting in an expansively decorated waiting room. A thirty-something secretary worked behind a desk on her computer, while another familiar face waited in another chair, near an office's closed doors.

Through the room's window, Ryan could see the actual Dynamis HQ nearby, a reinforced glass spire that oversaw the entire city; even the Il Migliore building couldn't hold a candle to it in size, lacking at least twenty floors compared to its big brother. How fitting that the company's fortress overlooked both New Rome and its superheroes' base.

On a closer look though, Dynamis' HQ reminded Ryan of those futuristic arcology designs, buildings meant to be

entirely self-sufficient. He noticed a few greenhouses and gardens on some of the floors, even water reservoirs; however, past a certain point, something in the glass' composition prevented the Genome from seeing through it. How suspicious.

Unlike downtown, both buildings were protected by the elite units of the Private Security; people in white armor with laser cannons implanted in the right arm and state of the art weaponry. Unlike their lesser cousins, they were a true military force, well-trained, and ferociously loyal to Dynamis' interests.

He had heard that they didn't even accept bribes!

"Excuse me." Having been restless for an hour, Ryan turned to the other person waiting for an appointment. "Are you... the Panda?"

The poor manbear looked up at him with hope. Compared to the previous loop, the would-be hero seemed less bombastic and more subdued. "You know me?"

"Of course I know you! You're the Panda! The very last of them!" Ryan said, pumping his fist for added effect. "When I see you riding your bicycle of justice, I always get goosebumps!"

"Thanks!" the hero replied, suddenly a lot more cheerful. He must be glad to have at least one 'fan' in the world. "I'm really trying to live up to my panda legacy, and make them trendy again."

"But what is a solo hero doing here, in this bastion of corporate superheroism?"

"The Panda... the Panda struggles on his own," he admitted.
"I'm really trying to make a name as a solo hero, but it's hard. None of the villains even want to fight me in public, because I'm simply too powerful for them."

"I'm sure you are," Ryan replied with heavy sarcasm, which the Panda completely missed.

"It's so frustrating!" he said. "I can't make it to the news without some big awesome duel, you know? Really, with great power comes great isolation."

He sounded like he believed it too.

"Mr. Romano?" Ryan's head perked up, as the secretary called his name. "Mr. Manada will receive you."

Finally! "Good luck with the interview," the Panda told Ryan, as the courier moved towards the office's doors. "What's your name?"

"Quicksave!" Ryan replied with a thumb up. "I'm immortal, but don't tell anyone!"

"I won't!"

The secretary let Ryan through the doors and then closed them behind. The courier waltzed inside an office as big as a house, but whose space was mostly occupied by flowers. Geraniums, roses bushes, chrysanths, muguet, dozens of various species of plants were on display. The office even included a miniature Japanese pond, with golden carp swimming in the waters.

A tall, slender man waited for the courier behind a mahogany desk positioned to give the occupant a spectacular view of New Rome through a full window. If he

wasn't the supreme authority of a superhero team, Ryan would have mistaken his host for a supervillain. The man wore an expensive tuxedo suit with a black rose on the left side, carried white gloves, and hid his face behind some kind of stylized white helmet reminding Ryan of the pre-war Daft Punk electronic band.

The courier could only applaud his fashion style.

"I am Enrique Manada, the Chief Brand Officer at Dynamis and Head Manager of the Il Migliore program." The man shook Ryan's hand, his voice pleasant to hear yet firm. He smelled like roses, probably perfume. "You may also call me Blackthorn."

"I don't see any thorns on your cost—" Ryan gasped, as he noticed the matter making up the suit. "Wait, is that cashmere?"

"You have a sharp eye," Enrique mused, showing Ryan a wooden chair and inviting him to sit down. "We have our own production program at Dynamis since we cannot import it from Asia. The production cost is horrendous, but you cannot put a price on elegance."

While sitting, Ryan barely paid attention to the man, his eyes fixed on his clothes. He wanted a suit like that too!

"We have no shortage of volunteers wishing to join our superhero teams," Enrique said, joining his fingers. "But few make it to my office. I believe in personal recommendations, Mr. Romano. If Wyvern hadn't vouched for you, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Ryan briefly wondered who had recommended the Panda of all people, deeming the mystery as important as tracking down his assassin.

"She seems to have a good feeling about you, especially after you forewarned her about our latest prisoner. Which makes me wonder how you knew about Ghoul's escape attempt."

"Just a gut feeling," Ryan replied innocently.

"I don't believe you," Enrique replied, going straight for the jugular. "We have been having trouble with the Private Security lately, and several members tasked with escorting Ghoul actively tried to help him run away. If you know of any security breach, I would be thankful for sharing the information."

Well, Ryan had come looking for information too, so it was all good. The fact the Meta had inside men among the Private Security bothered him though. It didn't surprise him that they would bribe locals to look the other way, but this gang seemed a lot more organized than most Psycho warbands.

He would look into it.

"In any case, I must thank you for coming here. I am certain our competition made you an offer, knowing Vulcan's rivalry with Wyvern, and your trust in us won't go unrewarded." Enrique observed Ryan closely. "Why do you wish to join Il Migliore?"

"Ever since I was young, I always wanted to become an ad."

"An ad?"

"Like Mr. Clean and Felix the Cat. A recognizable icon of consumerism, with my face plastered on every cereal box."

"Uh uh," Enrique replied, seemingly seriously.

“To transcend the human condition and become a packaged product. That has always been my dream.”

“Uh uh,” Enrique nodded, “and the real reason?”

Ryan shrugged. “Greed?”

“Your psychological profile tells me otherwise.”

They even had a psychological profile? Poor boys, Ryan wondered how many people had gone mad compiling it. “Alright, alright, I thought it would be fun to try being a superhero, and I promised someone that I would kick the Meta out of the city as a personal favor. Business and pleasure.”

“The Meta-gang is a problem,” Enrique conceded, “although not as much as the Augusti. Who is this person you owe a favor to?”

“Some guy in Rust Town named Paulie. He probably won’t even remember me though.”

“I’m certain there is an interesting story behind this,” the corporate mastermind mused. “I will put my cards on the table, Mr. Romano. I feel conflicted about your case. You have an incredible power, with a very high development potential according to our research team. Your skills with weapons are impressive, as the security check-up can attest to. I didn’t even know one could fit so many miniaturized weapons in a kid’s plushie, even if I don’t see the point.”

“They will never see it coming,” Ryan explained.

“Which brings me to the matter at hand,” Enrique presented Ryan with a small pile of paper. “The sixteen pages long

index of collateral damage complaints associated with your name, from people all over Italy.”

Something bothered Ryan greatly. “*Only sixteen pages?*”

“You expected more, perhaps?”

“Hell yes I did,” Ryan replied, “I guess I’m too good at silencing witnesses.”

The corporate Genome remained completely unfazed. “Plus eighteen demographic then,” he said. “Loose cannons have no place at Dynamis. If we sign a work contract together, foolhardy behavior will not be tolerated.”

“Hey, I always fulfill commands to the letter,” Ryan defended himself, wounded in his honor, “It’s not my fault if everyone leaves the methods open for interpretation!”

“I will not. However, I need more guarantees. While no one ever accused you of betraying a contract, you have a mercenary past and a suspicious link to a certain criminal Genius.”

He offered Ryan a photo, and the courier’s heart skipped a beat.

That was her, in a mugshot. She had aged a few years and had a black eye in the picture, but it was her, holding a paper with a number while glaring at the photographer.

“Len ‘*Underdive*’ Sabino.” Ryan could sense Blackthorn’s eyes examine his face, looking for any sign of weakness. “Daughter of Freddie Sabino, alias *Bloodstream*. An extremely dangerous Psycho who almost rivaled Big Adam and Augustus in infamy, until his demise four years ago against Leo Hargraves’ Carnival. Many witnesses said he

traveled alongside his daughter and an unidentified teenage boy, whose body was never recovered.”

“Alright, let’s cut the bullshit, greenhand,” Ryan said, completely serious and putting the photo in his coat. “Where is she?”

“In a place out of your reach, for now. I’ve had my eyes on her for a time. Her arrest was my brother, the vice-president’s, doing, and a missed opportunity for recruitment. He believes in harsh measures, I believe in rehabilitation. The public loves redemption stories.”

“If I behave, you will lead me to Len, while hoping that my presence will make her join your group.” Definitively an evil mastermind.

“Ah, now we are getting somewhere,” Enrique replied. “It will be much better for us if you told me the truth, Mr. Romano. How much is she worth to you?”

“Everything.”

“Perfect. Here’s my offer then: you sign a five-year contract with Il Migliore, help us clean New Rome of the filth that infests it, promote Dynamis’ brand, and most importantly, you behave. In exchange, we offer you a clean slate, generous accommodations, and the opportunity to reunite with Miss Sabino.”

He handed Ryan a contract far, far heavier than the collateral damage complaints, but the courier didn’t even pay it any attention. That deal sounded a lot like Vulcan’s, minus the personal vendetta bit. “What do you want out of this, greenhand?”

"Most people think my family is only interested in profit," Enrique said, "but what we really want, is to rebuild Italian society into a prosperous nation. A dream that unfortunately, cannot come to pass while groups like the Meta, the Augusti, and marauders run rampant."

"A proud nation under copyright, eh?"

"We also wish to democratize superpowers by reverse-engineering and mass-producing Elixirs," Enrique replied, ignoring the jab. "As per your contract, you will be subjected to a full DNA-based test; this will ensure the Private Security's drones can track you should you default on your contractual obligations. You will also be asked to participate in our Elixir research development program. We have few Violet Genomes like you under our employ."

He should have known they wouldn't want him just for his pretty face. "You won't succeed in replicating my power."

"We have made great progress on replicating powers, even created fully functional knock-off Elixirs."

"You won't be able to reproduce *my* power," Ryan repeated himself. "I've tried, more times than you can count."

"Good, then you can share your findings with the research division," Enrique dismissed his words. "As for hero work, we divide the Il Migliore franchise into two very different branches: the Pro-League, for established icons like Wyvern; and the Little League, for juniors and less-known superheroes. Obviously, you will start with our secondary division."

Ryan listened as Enrique explained to him the rules inside the organization—mostly corporate blabbering—before grabbing the contract and skimming it. While the possibility

to meet Len was tempting as always, the courier mostly wanted to identify the assassin during this loop. Access to Dynamis' buildings and databases would help a great deal. If the company could introduce him to Len quickly, then all was good; if they delayed too long, he would simply take the information and return to the Augusti path.

Something caught his attention. "Only thirty percent royalties on merchandising?" Ryan asked. "That's theft."

"We will also change your name," Enrique said, "Quicksave is not punchy enough for our marketing department, and video games are a very niche market nowadays. How about *Timelord*? PR says it will catch on quickly, especially with teenagers."

A soulless name developed to please hordes of monsters.

Why did Ryan feel like he had made a deal with Satan?

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)





MAXIME J. DURAND

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**Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc Claude
Louis Durand, Drekin.**

13: Batman & Robin

Hell existed, and it was a corporate seminar.

Ryan had thought his first day on the job as a Little League member would involve superhero training, maybe a routine patrol with Wyvern. Something practical. Instead, the courier received an assignment to a boring, weeks-long corporate internship.

He simply had to look at the day's planning to wish for a restart. Coffee breakfast, first meeting—with half an hour delay because of the aforementioned coffee break—then lunch, then second meeting, then the REAL lunch, then the second coffee break, third meeting, afternoon lunch, coffee break, then corporate videos. All before six in the afternoon, after which Ryan could either leave or participate in '*afterhour drink networking.*'

So far these meetings consisted of seminars about brand management, marketing guys brainstorming his 'new and improved' branding, lawyer interviews where they discussed auxiliary rights, and now an education video about Dynamis' company culture.

In short, no superhero work at all.

Ryan wasn't the only 'recruit' there, but much to his surprise, most of them seemed to enjoy these boring, mindless activities. They were more eager to discuss their image and royalties than actual fieldwork.

This place drained the courier of his soul. He could *feel* it.

With a bored sigh, Ryan reached the room where he was supposed to watch the new corporate video, putting his hand on a door scanner. Dynamis had extracted a drop of his blood soon after he signed their contract, which allowed the company to somehow track and identify him.

“Bio-signature: Timelord.”

Ryan groaned at the generic name while the door opened. Couldn't they have picked something more unique like Clockomancer, or Clockblocker?

The courier walked into a darkened, informal conference room wide enough to welcome dozens upon dozens of people, with Mesoamerican drawings on creamy walls. Dynamis favored an informal, comfortable style, replacing plastic chairs with cotton armchairs and sofas.

The Little League new recruits were gathered in front of a giant screen alongside the PR staff, exchanging pleasantries while consuming Dynamis-made energy drinks; most seemed aged between fifteen and their mid-twenties, wearing colorful costumes designed by the marketing department. From what Ryan heard, they were currently discussing the latest fashion trends, who dated who among Il Migliore's Pro-League, and how they got introduced to Enrique Manada in the first place.

The Panda wasn't among these brats. Which was an injustice of the highest order, since he would have fit in perfectly.

Ryan noticed a lone wolf at the back, who preferred to examine photos and paper reports on a luxurious sofa than looking at the screen. This man wore a white cat-shaped

mask covering the upper part of his face, showcasing his smooth pale skin, blue eyes, and combed blonde hair; a true adonis. All in all, he seemed around eighteen, wearing a pink and white sleeveless gymnast suit.

The D-shaped symbol flashed on the screen, alongside colorful music. The image of an elderly Latino man with graying hair, a macho mustache, and a rather large belly appeared at the forefront, with a picture of New Rome in the background. He reminded Ryan of an older picture of Pablo Escobar, down to the casual outfit and friendly smile hiding the teeth beneath.

"Hi, I'm Hector Manada, CEO and founder of Dynamis. As a new employee, I welcome you, into the D-family. You have been chosen because of your skills and character, to become part of something greater. For we at Dynamis and its subsidiaries, we are more than a corporate conglomerate. Thirty-three years ago, from the moment I established this company, our guiding principle has always been the same... what should the world look like?"

Ryan knew a lot about Dynamis' official history, mostly because they advertised it constantly. A twenty-six years old Hector Manada created the pharmaceutical company in Spain long before the Genome Wars, expanding its domains to shipping, warehouses, agriculture, food, biotech, manufacturing, oil, retail... and pretty much everything else.

Ironically, they had just transferred their HQ to Italy to get closer to their burgeoning shipping activities the year before Mechron bombed everyone. This stroke of luck saved most of their leadership when the old world collapsed, and since Dynamis had a finger in every pie all over Western Europe before the Genome Wars, it had the resources needed to thrive once the dust settled.

Since Spain had suffered a lot more than Italy from Genomes depredations, Dynamis had transferred most of its remaining infrastructure away from their homeland, founding New Rome as their personal stronghold. Through their mergers with other corporations and subsidiaries, they controlled Corsica, Sardinia, Mallorca, the south of Spain, western Italy, the oil fields of Libya, and currently contested Sicily to local Genome warlords.

In short, Dynamis' board was well on their way to become the face of post-Genome Europe... if Augustus didn't beat them to it.

Ryan decided to move at the back alongside the lone wolf, since it was the closest to the door; he intended to leave as soon as the video ended. Sitting at the back, he tried to listen to the video for ten seconds, before getting bored and checking stuff on his phone.

"Is there wifi here?" Ryan asked his neighbor. "I see a '*Dynamite*' wifi but it's password protected."

"You see the wifi-box here?" Blondie pointed at a device in a corner of the room. "The password is written—"

Ryan stopped time before he could finish his sentence. Moving as quickly as a snake, he searched inside his coat for a mini-tracker, quickly opened the wireless box's back, swiftly put the tracker inside, and then closed the device.

"—on the back," the man finished, Ryan having returned to his original spot with nobody noticing. "It's incredibly long and case sensitive though. Took me five tries to get it right."

The courier feigned a groan of laziness, his eyes still on his phone. The tracker had already activated, sending him information.

Ryan had placed similar devices all over the floor during the day, which should grant him a way inside Dynamis' systems. The courier needed a quick scan for vulnerabilities which he could exploit in future loops to get inside, and didn't particularly care if he was identified afterward.

If anything, Ryan considered committing suicide and find a way to skip this internship phase entirely. He was a creature of fun, and the staff here seemed determined to drain him of every drop of life.

Putting his phone back in his pocket and having consumed enough Dynamis content for a lifetime, Ryan didn't pay attention to the video. Instead, his curious eyes wandered to his neighbor, who seemed to share his disinterest.

As it turned out, Blondie was busy looking at photos of the Meta-Gang.

Ryan immediately recognizing pictures of Sarin and Ghoul, alongside that of a large, horrifically obese bald man with menswear straight out of the fifties. His scarred face and prominent teeth reminded Ryan of a hippo.

Blondie noticed Ryan's curiosity and felt the urge to give details. "Adam, the Meta's big bad boss."

"I could tell from the paunch," Ryan replied, approaching to get a better look at the photos.

"He's somewhere in the city, but nobody knows his exact location," Blondie mumbled, his voice rising with frustration. The recruits closest to them looked over their shoulders, before focusing back on the video. "Too much counter-surveillance, no electronic trail, and he contacts his men, not the other way around. The only people who might know are his lieutenants: Psyshock, Acid Rain, Frank the Mad..."

Ryan decided to make the Meta one of his main priorities for this restart. These Psychos were *far* too organized and well-behaved. Four years ago, Adam could barely keep his junkies in check, and never without a healthy dose of family-unfriendly violence.

"My, they have grown very large over the years," the courier mused, as he examined the file closely. According to Dynamis' information, the Meta-Gang now included around fifty members. "I still remember when they could barely fill a minibus."

This caught Blondie's interest. "You met the Meta before?"

"Four years ago," Ryan replied. "It was just Adam, Psyshock, and a few hanger-ons back then. They didn't differ much from a normal Psycho pack, except the fondness for ultraviolence and medieval execution methods."

"Anything you can tell me about them?" Blondie whispered, making it hard for Ryan to listen to the video's sound. "Their tactics, their organization, their weaknesses?"

"If you want the full story, my feline friend, Psyshock tried to convince a member of my old group to join them. It didn't go well, and it ended in a bloodbath." Typical Psychos. "Oh, and Psyshock is a sadistic creep who can hijack your nervous system with his wires if he catches you."

Telepaths were some of the few Genomes with the ability to do Ryan lasting damage, by tampering with his memories or destroying his personality. He avoided them like the plague whenever he could.

Psyshock though, the courier might seek out and beat up on principle.

"He needs physical contact?" Blondie asked, scribbling the information on a paper sheet. "Good to know. Does he need to *maintain* physical contact too?"

"Yep, but the disconnection is incredibly painful for the victim," Ryan explained while putting his legs on the sofa, taking as much space as humanly possible. "So my feline friend, are you planning a mutant mice hunt?"

"I wish," he grumbled, his eyes wandering to the video. "I asked Enrique if I could follow Pro-League members on patrols, and instead I must guest star in their new movie. He said it would introduce me to the public better than any action in the field."

"Since when do you need authorization to start trouble?" Ryan asked mirthfully. "What's the point of being a hero if you can't legally sublimate your violent urges and receive acclaim for it?"

It seemed to amuse him.

"Hey, by the way, I haven't introduced myself," Ryan shook his hand. "I'm Quicksave. I'm immortal, but don't tell anyone."

"Atom Cat," he replied. "I can blow stuff up on touch."

"Oh, the mafia boy?"

The handshake turned into an iron-grip. "How do you know that?" he hissed. "Are you a spy? Enrique told you? That bastard, I should never have listened-"

"Hey!"

The video paused, and everyone looked at the duo with angry gazes; while Ryan remained unfazed, Atom Cat bristled a bit. Nothing like a shared embarrassment to start a new friendship!

A marketing guy in a suit and tie looked at the duo, letting the awkward silence set in. “Are you not interested,” he began, the frozen face of Hector Manada behind him, “in the company where you will work for the next five years?”

“I am interested, sir,” Atom Cat lied through his teeth. “It won’t happen again, sir.”

“Absolutely not,” Ryan replied bluntly, “but please continue, we’ll be as quiet and dutiful as unpaid interns.”

The marketing guy glared at the courier, imitated by the other recruits. It was kindergarten all over again. “If you make another comment like that, Timelord, I will ask you to politely leave the room without a word.”

The new name hurt, physically.

Wait, they could leave early?

When the marketing guy received no answer, he put back the video on. Atom Cat waited for everyone to lose interest in them, before whispering into Ryan’s ear. “If you don’t answer, I’m blowing you up. Same if I let go of your hand unwillingly.”

“Can you keep a secret?” Ryan looked around as if they were being spied on, and then approached Atom Cat’s ear to whisper back into it. “I come back from the future. I used a DeLorean.”

"Your references are quite outdated," Atom Cat replied. His grip grew tighter, and the courier felt his skin heat up.
"What do you know?"

"That we are close enough to kiss," Ryan replied, his free hand shifting to grab a weapon. "That your parents are Augusti Capos, that you joined the other team out of teenage rebellion, and that you should rethink having children."

Atom Cat looked down, noticing the hidden knife very close to his manly parts. Thankfully, nobody had noticed, their eyes focusing on the screen. "My power will be faster," he replied.

"And I'm very good at neutering cats, Kitty."

"At least a spy would have been subtler," Atom Cat mused, his eyes squinting behind the mask. "So you don't know who my parents are? Their actual identity?"

The courier rolled his shoulders.

Atom Cat looked at the other recruits, and spoke only when certain they didn't listen, with a voice so low the courier could barely hear it, "They're Mars and Venus."

Ryan gasped in shock. "You're Cupid? But where are the wings and bow?"

Atom Cat marked a short pause. "Not the mythological gods, you idiot," he said, finally releasing Ryan's hand. "It takes some kind of elitist narcissism to name yourself after deities. As if you stood above normal people, like mice and men."

"I heard there was a Genome who tried to use the name Little Jesus once," the courier replied, putting back the knife up his sleeve, "He didn't last long."

"Augustus fried him alive," Atom Cat replied, relaxing a bit. "You're not an Augusti? No, you wouldn't have risked a DNA scan otherwise. They've been sending people asking me to come back into the fold a lot lately."

"And why did you leave it in the first place?" Ryan asked, crossing his legs and faking interest in the video when the marketing guy looked at him. Now it showed Hector with children before a school sponsored by Dynamis, the poor kids struggling to smile at the camera.

"If you knew half the things they do, you'd understand," Atom Cat replied angrily. "Their *Bliss* drug kills thousands each year, their weapons slay more, and that's what makes it to the news. The kidnappings, the murders, the racketeering, and the prostitution... After a while, I just couldn't take it anymore. I thought I could make a difference at Il Migliore."

"Did you?"

"Not yet," he grumbled. "The Manada and Augustus have been at each other's throat for years, so I thought they had plans to take him down, but apparently, Dynamis' motto is '*'don't rock the boat.'*'"

"Enrique seemed quite motivated when I met him," Ryan pointed out.

"He and his brother Alphonse yes, but their father..." Atom Cat glared at Hector's image. "'*Don't rock the boat.*'"

Ryan tried his best to watch the video for thirty more seconds and quickly realized he would go mad if this continued. "Okay," he said, crawling on the sofa closer to the door, "I'm out."

"Where are you going?" Atom Cat asked, curious.

"To Rust Town, to beat up the Meta."

The would-be superhero appraised Ryan's words for a long, long minute. "You want to go to their new territory and... what, pick a fight with the first Psycho you meet?"

"You make it sound so complicated."

"Dynamis will cut your salary if you do that," Atom Cat replied weakly. "Maybe even fire you."

Ryan considered the statement thoughtfully, remembered that he had more money stashed away than he would earn at Il Migliore, then shrugged it off. He was confident he would learn more about Dynamis' activities by hacking them than by following a week-long seminar.

"Your nickname is Quicksave," Atom Cat mumbled the name, finally remembering where he had heard it. "Wait, didn't you beat up Ghoul with a golf club?"

"I had to buy one just for that occasion, and I almost didn't make it in time. Still, I improved my short game by quite a lot." Ryan rose up from the sofa, looking casual and ignoring the marketing guy glaring at him. "Now, are you coming or not?"

Atom Cat looked at Ryan, then at the video, and noticed it still had fifty-seven minutes left before its conclusion. The young hero immediately rose up from the sofa, gathered the

photos and reports, before following the courier towards the door.

“Timelord, Atom Cat, the video is not over yet,” the marketing guy said, trying to sound firm and failing utterly.

“I’m escorting him out of the building to make sure he never returns, sir,” Atom Cat promised. Apparently, in spite of his spiel, getting rid of the courier made the marketing guy a lot happier.

“Teacher’s pet,” Ryan accused Atom Cat, as he closed the door behind them.

“You have a car?” the young superhero asked. “I can only drive a motorcycle.”

“I have the best of them, but before we go,” Ryan cleared his throat, “do you know where they make cashmere suits?”

“Floor twenty of the Dynamis HQ, right next to this building,” Atom Cat replied, clearly well-informed. “Why the question?”

“Because I *will* get a cashmere suit, even if I have to fight for it.”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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14: Field Work

No matter how many times he would visit it, Ryan would never get used to Rust Town. The whole place reeked of misery and despair.

Atom Cat seemed to share his sentiment, as both drove through the slums with the Plymouth's windows closed and the air cleaner on. "It's even worse than I thought," he said, looking at a streetlight hanging by its cable, threatening to fall on the road at any moment. "Way worse."

"You never went mice hunting here?"

"No, my family lives in the wealthy Patrician district. I lived a very sheltered life truth be told, even during the wars."

"So a house cat then." If so, Ryan's threat of neutering him must have hit a bit too close to home.

"I guess I went stray," his sidekick mused.

"I do wonder why this place is such a dump compared to the rest of the city though," Ryan said. It reminded him of the bad old days when he scoured ruins for supplies, with Bloodstream breathing down his neck.

"It belonged to the region's original inhabitants," Atom Cat explained, "those who lived in the Gulf of Naples and escaped its bombing. They managed to survive, in spite of the poisons and plagues, but when Dynamis took over the region, the company forcefully relocated them to make

room for its own people. I guess the homeless and the diseased didn't fit into their picture of a shining capital city. There *are* plans to renovate the area, but they haven't materialized yet."

He shook his head in disappointment, the sound of a cell phone's alarm interrupting the discussion. Atom Cat looked at his mobile, but didn't take the call.

Ryan glanced at the screen, seeing Atom Cat had missed fifteen calls from a certain '*Fortuna*' and seven from one '*Narcinia*.' "My sisters," the superhero said before the courier could ask questions. "I keep in touch with them, but they want me back and don't take no for an answer."

"That means they love you," Ryan replied without any hint of sarcasm. He could sympathize with people wishing to reunite with their family. The courier did wonder what made Atom Cat consider Dynamis to be a better option over the Augusti though.

Ryan suddenly wondered if Len, like Atom Cat, wouldn't want to meet him, but immediately brushed off these thoughts. Of course she would rejoice when they met again, after so many years! It was just his anxiety talking!

"I love them too, but as long as they keep supporting the Bliss business I—"

Another person called Atom Cat, who stared at the name on the screen for several seconds, his gaze undecipherable.

'Livia.'

Instead of ignoring the call like the others, Atom Cat outright turned down his phone, sighed, and messed with the radio

to change his mind. When he finally settled on a channel, Ryan glared at his sidekick. "Hip hop, really?"

"You don't like it, brotha?"

"No, I don't!" Ryan changed the channel back to the *Daft Biopunk* chronoradio. The music switched into a combination of electronic, synth, and alien rhythms.

"Nice sound," Atom Cat commented, as they passed through narrow streets. "Where are we going?"

"The Meta took over the junkyard area as their base," Ryan said. "It's located at Rust Town's center."

"I'm stopping you right here, I'm all for ambushing a lone Psycho, maybe two, but attacking their home turf with only the two of us is suicide."

If Ryan had been alone, he would have tried anyway, but he wasn't going to lead his sidekick to certain death. "Thing is, children have been missing in the area, according to my information. I've located an orphanage south of the junkyard, and I thought we should check it out."

Atom Cat instantly tensed. "*Children?*"

"You're surprised?" Ryan asked. The courier would love to say he was, but he had come to expect the worst when Psychos were involved.

"I'm surprised it didn't get reported," the superhero replied, the Plymouth passing near the city's water reservoir. Unlike the rest of the neighborhood, Dynamis heavily protected the area, armored soldiers protecting its confines. "Then again, nobody cares about this place."

Ryan did.

Eventually, the duo made their way to an isolated building surrounded by a dusty wasteland. The paint on the cinder block walls had vanished, peeled by time, and half the windows were broken. A large fenced area extended left of the building, housing dozens, if not hundreds of stray cats and dogs. The distressed noises they made and the smell they produced immediately overwhelmed the duo, as they parked the car nearby and stepped out of it.

"That's not an orphanage," Atom Cat said with horror, while Ryan grabbed his Fisty gauntlets and put them on. The air here was less polluted than the rest of Rust Town, but not by much. "It's an animal shelter."

"It's both," Ryan realized, glancing at the animals with sympathy. The sheer aura of trapped desperation they gave off made him feel sick inside.

They found two children between ten and twelve at the orphanage's entrance, playing with a dirty golden retriever near the open doors. One was a black boy with acid burn scars on half his cheek, the other a skinny brunette in a pink dress unfit for her size.

"Hey, fellas!" Ryan waved a hand at them.

The little girl instantly raised a crappy revolver at his head, having hidden it beneath her dress, while the boy clung to the dog. "Back off, druggie," she told Ryan. "Or I'm blowing your head off."

Aw, that was so cute!

Ryan froze time, grabbed the gun, and replaced it with a rock pebble. When time resumed, he had put the gun inside

his coat, much to the girl's surprise. "B—but?"

"Hey, I'm Quicksave," Ryan said, raising his thumb like in a commercial. "I'm immortal, but don't tell anyone; and this is my trusty sidekick, Hello Kitty."

"Don't push it, *Quickie*," Atom Cat replied, the nickname making Ryan feel dirty inside. "We aren't here to hurt anyone. Can we talk to the staff?"

"There's no staff," the boy said, still afraid. The dog nuzzled his face to reassure him, and didn't make any hostile move towards the Genomes.

"Grandpa took care of us, but he's gone now," the little girl replied while glaring at Ryan. "A druggie shanked him in an alley months ago."

She said it so casually, it sounded almost normal.

"Wait, there's no adult?" The more he heard, the more Atom Cat grew agitated. "But, how do you survive?"

"We can take care of ourselves," the girl said with a proud face. "We scavenge stuff up and take the trash."

"Mama sends up food and money every week—" The little girl kicked the boy in the leg before he could finish his sentence. "Ouch, Sarah!"

"Mama?" Atom Cat asked. The little girl kept her mouth closed, the other boy imitating her. "Sarah, that's your name?"

"Give me back my gun." She ignored Atom Cat and instead kept glaring at Ryan. "Give it back!"

"I can't in good conscience return such a crappy revolver," Ryan replied, having a reputation to uphold. "Let me buy you a real gun, like a Desert Eagle. *Then* you can credibly threaten people."

"Quicksave!" Atom Cat chided him, before trying to build a rapport with the kids. "Who is this mama, your caretaker? Can we talk to her?"

"No," Sarah replied stubbornly. "She's busy."

"Busy doing what?"

"*Busy*," Sarah replied, crossing her arms. "What do you want?"

As Atom Cat tried to argue with the kids that they only wanted to protect them, Ryan sensed tension in the air. The pets grew agitated, barking and meowing.

They could sense predators nearby.

A rusty, black minibus approached the orphanage, parking five meters away from the entrance. Other kids appeared at the windows, attracted by the pets' racket.

Three 'men' stepped out of the car, although they barely counted as such. Ryan instantly recognized one of them as the mosquito monster that wrecked his Plymouth in a previous loop. The second was a scrawny, bald man dressed like a plumber; disfiguring tumors grew out of his flesh and bloodshot eyes. He carried a rusty pipe wrench, and his smile showed rows of rotten fangs.

As for the third...

Ryan instantly recognized the tall and slender figure, in spite of his heavy black overcoat, hat, scarf, and sunglasses. The way he walked, like a shambling doll mimicking a man, the aura of quiet menace he gave off...

Psyshock, Adam's second-in-command.

The three Psychos glanced at the group with menacing stares, Atom Cat instantly moving to shield the kids; so did the golden retriever, who barked at the newcomers with surprising ferocity. Psyshock himself focused entirely on Ryan.

"My, isn't it little Cesare?" he said with a robotic, digital voice. "How you have grown."

Ryan flinched.

"Surprised? Once I have connected to a nervous system, I can recognize its unique brainwave pattern anywhere. Like a lost signal, calling home to Daddy." His heavy sunglasses glittered under the twilight. "I thought the Carnival killed your father?"

"He wasn't my father, and yes they did," the courier said, cold and focused. He had last crossed path with that creep four years ago, before he drank his Elixir. Even if Ryan now had superpowers and could defend himself, Psyshock's mere presence made him feel uneasy. "How are the scars he gave you, Lightbulb?"

"They healed," Psyshock replied, his digital voice turned threatening. Mosquito readied his claw-like hands, itching for a fight. "If you survived, I assume little Len did too. Good. I never got over missing the opportunity to extract her Genius brain."

"What, kids aren't enough for you?" Ryan taunted him.

"I have no interest in this meat, but we require a unique service from these goblins. I'm afraid nothing short of pygmies will do the trick. Don't worry, we'll take good care of them; even feed them."

"Adam is very fond of children," Mosquito cackled, the other Psycho letting out a bestial grunt.

"That too," Psyshock mused with cruel amusement. "Kids, gather your friends, and get into the car quietly."

"Behind me," Ryan said. "He's got *candies*."

"Yeah, the kids aren't getting anywhere near you," Atom Cat said, turning to Sarah. "Do you have a basement?" She nodded slowly. "Go hide there, and don't come out until we say so."

The noise of a plane echoed above the neighborhood, while the children and their dog fled inside the orphanage.

"I would check your math if I were you," Psyshock said while trailing the children with his gaze; it made him look like a deadly wolf observing helpless fawns, much to Ryan's disgust. Wires shifted behind the Psycho's scarf and sunglasses, and electricity came out of his gloves. "You're outnumbered, and outmatched."

Why weren't they attacking? Because they were worried they might kill the kids in the crossfire if they acted too early? They shouldn't be thinking that far ahead, the sight of Genomes being reason enough to try and drink the heroes' Elixir-laced blood. These Psychos were too stable, too careful, as if...

"You're well-fed," Ryan realized. "You have a supply of Elixir."

Psyshock appraised him for a few seconds, before barking orders. "Mongrel, Mosquito, capture little Cesare and kill the spare."

"I hoped you'd say that," Mosquito said, Mongrel hissing at Atom Cat like an animal. "I guess Adam can't be mad at us for eating a few strays."

Both groups glared at one another, but Ryan couldn't focus, the sound of the plane growing stronger and stronger...

Closer.

Ryan barely had the time to raise his eyes, as it landed right in the middle of the Mexican standoff.

The crash blew dust in all directions, Atom Cat taking a leap back on reflex and the Psychos retreating behind their minibus for protection. Only Ryan remained still, unfazed, as an enormous, gold-plated robot stood right in front of him.

"Quicksave," Vulcan's voice echoed from hidden loudspeakers, the suit's camera eyes focusing on the courier. "You have denied my invitation."

Ryan put his hands in his pockets and whistled, his mask protecting him from the dust. Atom Cat quickly got back on his feet, his eyes widening upon recognizing the newcomer. Vulcan's camera eyes briefly glanced at the hero, but quickly focused back on Ryan with murderous rage.

"By going to that dragon whore without even considering my offer, you have done more than scorn me. You have

insulted me, and for that, you will *die*.” She towered above Ryan, a cannon pointed at his head. “Any last words?”

Ryan gave serious thought to the question and then answered.

“You’re so short, your mother has to use a microscope to see you.”

Vulcan remained completely still, the towering armor casting the courier in its oppressive shadow.

“Oh, oh, I got a better one!” Ryan snapped his fingers.
“You’re so short that your feet always dangle when you sit on a chair!”

The silence grew even tenser, broken by strange noises. Ryan recognized them as guns and missiles being loaded. Psyshock and his cronies recovered from the surprise attack, moving to encircle everyone and flank Atom Cat from the sides.

Tough crowd here. “How about this one? You’re almost tall enough for Wyvern to take you seriously!”

Vulcan let out a snarl and opened fire.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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15: Good Karma

Ryan had been shot at more times than he could count.

Unlike Psychos or special cases like Augustus, all of the courier's abilities, from his save point to the time stop, derived from a single unifying power. It was only through training and experimentation that Ryan discovered its multiple applications. In particular, it took him *years* of looping to realize he had an enhanced sense of timing.

The more he experienced a situation, the better Ryan became at predicting and reacting to it. If someone used a martial arts move once, he would subtly anticipate it next time anybody else tried it; the courier could predict when one would toss a smoke bomb to the ground, and catch it before being consciously aware of it. This made learning physical skills almost trivial.

It wasn't all-powerful, since there were situations when even the fastest reflexes couldn't make a difference—like getting beheaded by an invisible blade or hit by a laser as fast as light. Lacking any superspeed, Ryan couldn't truly 'dodge' bullets or artillery.

But he *could* predict someone's line of fire before they pressed the trigger. His body would then subtly shift, projectiles would miss, and give people the illusion that he could dodge even bullets. Combined with the time stop, the courier seemed impossible to hit from the point of view of outsiders.

So when Vulcan attacked him with her cannon arm, Ryan paused time for a split second and dodged out of the line of fire. A dense shell blasted the orphanage's wall behind them, collapsing cinder blocks and opening a path towards what seemed to be a kitchen. The trapped pets behind the fence panicked, some frenzied cats managing to escape by climbing.

"Vulcan, it's an orphanage!" Atom Cat shouted, but before he could rush to Ryan's help, the Meta-Gang flanked him. The hero avoided a deadly punch from Mosquito and a small fireball from Mongrel; Atom Cat's movements were chaotic, showcasing his lack of formal training, but his natural agility made up for it.

To her credit, Vulcan froze for a split second, vaguely ashamed. Instead of assaulting Ryan with heavy artillery and risk destroying the shelter, she switched to hand-to-hand combat. Mini-turbo reactors activated on the mechanical suit's back in short bursts, causing the five-meter tall metal monster to move at the speed of a racing car.

Showing extreme agility honed over countless loops, Ryan backflipped to dodge a giant fist to the face, and then a stomp. "I have to hand it to you," the courier began, before switching the meaning of his sentence, "because you can't reach it!"

Vulcan's attacks grew more frenzied, and when she no longer had the orphanage in her line of fire, she switched to heavy weaponry. Her mech's shoulders opened to reveal minigun turrets, firing hundreds of pellets at Ryan. The courier used a mix of time stop and timing to avoid the attacks, trying to circle the machine and find a hatch for the cockpit.

Psyshock, meanwhile, threw away his overcoat, hat, and sunglasses, revealing his true self to the world. He had long shed his flesh, replaced with thousands of black wires which he usually shaped into a facsimile of a humanoid form. The only organ that survived his mutation was his skull, which left his bio-mechanical brain exposed. His neon eyes reminded Ryan of two bright torchlights.

Psyshock reshaped his wires to form eight elongated arms, turning himself into a horrific mockery of a spider. While Vulcan occupied Ryan and Atom Cat fought his cronies, the Psycho leaped over the area in a single bound, going straight for the orphanage.

Realizing this, Ryan decided to dump Vulcan and pursue Psyshock, but the Genius didn't let him. Her hand lunged at the courier, big enough to crush him whole, while her miniguns provided suppressing fire.

In spite of her fearsome armor, Ryan could tell that Vulcan didn't have much direct combat experience. Her movements were clumsy, and while her weapons aimed true, there was no foresight involved, no human cunning or improvisation; she probably outsourced control to a basic AI. Her armor was also clearly a prototype designed to fight a big and aerial target, instead of an agile and stylish gentleman.

In short, Vulcan had brought a Wyvern-buster to a Quicksave fight.

Vulcan could have won if she had carpet-bombed the area from above, but instead, she chose to announce her presence and make the battle close and personal. Ryan could sense a desire to prove herself in a fight, perhaps to outshine Wyvern.

Girl's got *issues*.

Stopping time for ten seconds, Ryan moved to the armor's left, dodging her hand and bullets. Then, he carefully punched the elbow joint with Fisty, aiming to maximize pressure damage. When time resumed, the recoil applied in full, and the mech's arm shattered at the elbow point. The forearm fell to the ground, electrical jolts coming out of the damaged parts.

As he guessed when he first observed it at the Armory, much like medieval armor, Vulcan paid for her suit's enhanced mobility with weakness in the joints.

"What's this?" Ryan mused. "A *short-circuit*?"

"You aren't funny, Romano!" Vulcan complained through her armor's loudspeakers, clearly jealous of his peerless wit.
"You think you are, but you aren't!"

"Come on, don't be small-minded." As she retaliated with another volley of bullets, Ryan froze time and rushed to the orphanage, Psyshock having vanished through the hole Vulcan made in the wall.

Meanwhile, Atom Cat fared little better. Mosquito had taken flight like the insect he was, diving down to try and impale the hero with his stinger. While Atom Cat could easily dodge, Mongrel limited his movements. The strange Psycho flickering in and out of existence, propelling himself with short bursts of wind while attempting to hit the hero with his hand tool. Sometimes, he threw a fireball here and there, small fires starting all over the wasteland park.

Fireballs, limited invisibility, air conditioning... Ryan recognized these powers as those from knock-off Elixirs sold by Dynamis. Mongrel must have drunk a cocktail of them.

Since the powers gained were but a shadow of those of true Elixirs, his body managed to handle more than two at the cost of his mental faculties.

Still, even if forced on the defensive, Atom Cat fought hard to regain the initiative in this two-on-one fight. He attempted to punch Mongrel, his hands shining with crimson energy, but in spite of his bestial snarls, the Psycho remained careful not to give his foe any opening.

When time resumed, Ryan had managed to reach the orphanage, only to backtrack when a dozen wires came out of the hole and threatened to catch him in a net.

Psyshock emerged from the hole, having grabbed four kids with his tentacle arms; Sarah, her friend, and two twin girls no older than eight. His cold alien eyes glanced at Ryan with disdain while one of his wires was making its way inside one of the twins' nose, traces of blood and fur all over his body.

Without thinking twice, Ryan grabbed three throwing knives, intending to target Psyshock's head.

In response, the Psycho moved Sarah in the way of Ryan's line of fire, the girl screaming in fear.

Ryan froze in shock, which Psyshock immediately exploited to send a tentacle at him. Suffering from his time stop's cooldown, the courier couldn't freeze the clock as the arm hit him with the speed of a harpoon. He managed to grab it with his hands as he was tossed to his back, the wires trying to reach his skull.

"Quicksave!" Atom Cat shouted, but Mosquito exploited the opportunity to tackle him from the side, throwing the hero through the pen's fence. Dogs and cats immediately poured through, fleeing in all directions.

"Shush, it's easier if you don't struggle, Cesare," Psyshock whispered to Ryan, both through his mouth and that of the child he had connected to; needles appeared at the end of his wires, for an intracranial hijacking. "Just go limp and let me in. We'll be one."

Yeah, if the danger of his intrusive telepathy—no matter its physical limitations—hadn't caused Ryan to feel murderous animosity towards Psyshock, the child abuse did it.

Apparently, Vulcan thought the same. Showing basic human decency, she stopped paying attention to Ryan and instead raised her armor's last functional hand at Psyshock. "Drop the kids, mutant," she warned. "I won't ask twice."

"Out of my way, woman," Psyshock replied dismissively, positioning his hostages to protect himself from Vulcan's weaponry. Meanwhile, Mongrel moved towards the pen to finish off Atom Cat while Mosquito flew in circles above them. Some dogs who had remained behind instead of fleeing barked angrily at the Genomes present, but were too afraid to attack.

In response, Vulcan's fingers opened to reveal holes and unleashed plasma streams at Psyshock. The Genius was very careful not to hit the kids, instead, cutting through wires with laser precision. The damaged parts fell off the ground like beheaded snakes, quickly rusting away into organic dust.

Exploiting Psyshock's distraction, Ryan stopped time, cut the wires closest to him with his knives, and then rushed towards the children. With a swift swing, he severed the wires holding the twins and caught them while time resumed.

The wire invading the hostage's nose kept moving on its own once severed from the whole but quickly fell to the ground. Psychock answered by sending his wires in all directions, targeting both Ryan and Vulcan with a rain of tentacles. The courier fled while carrying the twins in his arms, while the Augusti simply powered through the attack, her thick armor deflecting everything.

Meanwhile, while Atom Cat recovered from his last blow, the shelter's remaining dogs found the courage to try and bite Mongrel when he approached. With a bestial snarl, the Psycho raised both hands, channeling a fireball through the right and a swirling vortex of wind with the left. The combination created a torrent of flames which consumed the pets whole. The poor dogs screamed in pain as the improvised flamethrower incinerated them alive, Mongrel's hisses transforming into maniacal laughter.

Atom Cat rushed at Mongrel while he was distracted, and this time managed to grab his head with his hand. The Psycho's body turned red, his colors muted by a crimson hue, and then exploded.

Scratch that, Mongrel was vaporized. His flesh weakly detonated, with barely enough strength to blow air, yet the blast annihilated him without leaving a trace. Clothes, skin, even the tool he carried; they all turned to dust.

Clearly, when cornered, Atom Cat had no problem killing.

This made Mosquito dive back at him, with murder on his mind. The young superhero froze, as if an idea crossed his mind, before grabbing a pebble on the ground and throwing it at Mosquito. The rock turned red, charged with Atom Cat's power.

The Psycho protected himself with his arms, the pebble detonating on impact and propelling him against his own minibus. The car's alarm activated, and combined with the noise from the battle, Ryan could barely hear himself.

Atom Cat could modulate the strength of his explosions and even delay them. Nice.

Ryan himself managed to dodge both Psyshock's attacks and dragged the twins to a safe spot, one child despondent, and the other crying in fear. "It's okay, you're safe," Ryan tried to console them, brushing their black hair with his hands, "Heroes are here."

His good deed for the day done, the courier immediately returned to the fray. Psyshock had used all his wires to restrain Vulcan, trying to keep the mecha anchored to the ground while desperately trying to find a way inside the pilot cockpit. He looked like a giant squid, trying to restrain a whale.

Like before, that despicable bastard used his captives as human shields, preventing the Augusti from using her weapons in close quarters.

Enraged, Ryan charged at Psyshock, tossing knives at his skull. Wires deflected them, but this caught the criminal's attention. "A teleportation power?" the Psycho hissed at Ryan. "You have become a Violet?"

"Normally, I would quip back, but in your case, you will go out the way of the rhinoceros," Ryan said with dead seriousness, *Fisty* raised. "Painfully."

Before Psyshock could react, Ryan stopped the clock again, leaped, and punched the Psycho through the skull in the

frozen time. His fist gored through the Psycho's metal bones and brain both like a donut.

Ryan liked to play with his enemies, but he knew better than to give any telepath a chance to fight back. Especially someone as loathsome as Psyshock.

When time resumed, Psyshock's mutant body collapsed to the ground in a mess of wires and brain matter, dragging Sarah and the other kid down with him. Ryan quickly caught Sarah with his hands, while Vulcan grabbed the other.

"You know, Shortie, if you weren't trying to murder me, I would call you halfway heroic," Ryan said, putting Sarah on the ground while Vulcan did the same with her charge.

"Little girl, can you take your friend and move away? The big bot is waiting for you to go to shoot me."

Little Sarah nodded profusely, quickly grabbing her fellow kid's hand and running away to safety. Vulcan remained silent, watching the children get out of the way with grim vigilance. Ryan couldn't tell if it was regret, longing, or something else, but she seemed strangely subdued.

Then, when certain the children were far away, Vulcan attempted to fire plasma beams at Ryan's face without a word.

Expecting the attack, Ryan quickly stopped time and threw knives at her cameras, blinding Vulcan before she could open fire. Atom Cat, meanwhile, attempted to punch Mosquito and blow him up alongside the minibus, but the insect flew away when he moved too close.

An enormous shadow flew over the battlefield, followed by a mighty roar.

Everyone present froze, from the tiniest animal to Vulcan herself, as a gigantic flying form came into sight.

An enormous, sixty-foot long white-scaled lizard, with an elongated neck, dragonfly wings, and golden eyes. Her claws could cut through steel, her tail ended in a flail, and a suit with Dynamis and Il Migliore's logos covered her chest.

Wyvern.

Once she had finished showing off, the dragon landed right on Vulcan, stomping her mech underfoot with such force, it created a mini-crater below. If Ryan hadn't damaged her cameras, the Augusti might have been able to fly away, but now Wyvern kept her pinned to the ground under her enormous weight.

Mosquito immediately attempted to fly away. The dragon, quicker, raised her hand.

SQUASH!

Wyvern slapped Mosquito from above, the same way a human did with a fly. The hit flattened the insectoid like a smear on the ground, his limbs and wings broken, green blood flowing out of open wounds.

Then, without skipping a beat, Wyvern slammed Vulcan's mech to the ground, smashing the miniguns. The Augusti attempted to activate her mini-turbo reactors to fly away, but couldn't escape the dragon's iron grip.

"Don't damage the reactor, Wyvy!" Ryan shouted at her, knowing the danger. "Extract the cockpit! The cockpit!"

Seemingly having heard him, Wyvern's assault turned almost surgical in its execution, the dragon carefully

extracting the human within with her claws without damaging the rest of the suit. Before the disheveled Augusti could react, Wyvern tossed her to the ground and Atom Cat moved to restrain her.

The intervention had lasted mere seconds. Ryan checked the mech, but thankfully, Vulcan had the foresight to install fail-safes in her armor's fusion reactor. The city wouldn't die an atomic death... this time.

Instead of inspiring fear, Wyvern's victory caused great joy in the kids, who let out shouts of jubilation after a short silence. Only the child whom Psyshock had connected to remained despondent, her twin trying to wake her up. Ryan immediately rushed to their side to give medical help.

Thankfully, he had spent enough loops studying medicine and biology to give her a check-up. While intrusive, Psyshock's orifice invasion usually didn't damage the subject's key areas of the brain; the poor child suffered from a mild concussion but would survive.

"Is she okay?" Sarah asked Ryan, the euphoria replaced with worry, as the orphans surrounded them.

"Yes," he said, using his trench coat to remove the blood from his patient's nose. "But she will need rest."

"They killed the doogies," one of the children said, looking in horror at the animals burning remains and the destroyed fence.

Wyvern observed the scene for a moment, from the hole in the orphanage to Psyshock's rusting remains. "Quicksave, we are going to have a long, long conversation," she said, her powerful voice more that of a roaring T-rex than a human. "You too, Atom Cat! What were you two thinking,

going into hostile territory without authorization nor backup?! You could have died!"

"They were trying to kidnap children!" Atom Cat defended himself.

"Then you should have called me for reinforcements," Wyvern replied with a firm tone. "You were lucky I trailed Vulcan to make sure she didn't cause a mess."

Speaking of Vulcan, she raged as Atom Cat kept her face against the ground, unable to escape his grip. Wyvern transformed back into a human, her suit adapting to her new size while she looked at the Augusti with a mix of vindication and pity. "You can only blame yourself for this, Jasmine."

"Fuck you, Laura," the Augusti Genius replied, bitter and angry. "Fuck you."

"Does somebody have a rope?" Atom Cat asked, getting sick of restraining Vulcan with his mere hands.

"I have handcuffs and a blindfold in my car," Ryan said, Wyvern raising an eyebrow at him. "I dated weird people."

The superheroine glanced at both Ryan and Atom Cat, hands on her waist. "You're both grounded."

"Yes, dragon mom," Ryan groaned, before turning towards Mosquito, agonizing in a puddle made of his own blood. "He's still alive."

"Barely," Wyvern replied warily.

"Why did you kidnap the kids, asshole?" Atom Cat snarled at the Psycho.

“Suck my sting...” Mosquito hissed.

“Answer the question, and we will give you medical care,” Wyvern said firmly. While she was angry at her charges for acting on their lonesome, she had no pity to spare for the Psycho. “In your current condition, even with your enhanced metabolism, you will bleed out within minutes.”

Mosquito remained silent for a few seconds, probably weighing the odds of risking his boss killing him for snitching, versus dying right now. Survival instinct being a powerful force, he decided to speak. “It’s... the place... the shafts are too small for adults... and these crazy robots, they shoot Genomes on sight...”

“Robots?” Wyvern repeated.

“What place?” Ryan probed him, curious.

“A bunker Adam wants to access... below the Junkyard... don’t know what...” Mosquito hissed in agony. “Please, the pain... it’s atrocious...”

“I’ve dialed the medics when I saw the kids,” Wyvern said, touching her earpiece. “They should arrive soon.”

And with these words, Ryan handcuffed Vulcan, having helped save an orphanage. He hoped his karma meter would go up after that!

Other kids emerged from the orphanage, the battle over, and immediately rushed to Wyvern’s side, pestering her with autographs. Others moved to help their wounded member, Ryan hearing the name ‘Giulia’ being thrown around a lot.

"Hey Kitty, if you can create explosive projectiles, why don't you carry throwing knives?" Ryan asked Atom Cat, that detail having bothered him. "It would be much more practical than grabbing improvised projectiles."

"I didn't realize I could use my power this way," Atom Cat admitted, a bit sheepish, "I knew I could delay the detonation by a few seconds, but I never thought I could combine that with projectiles to attack at range. It's only in the thick of action that it clicked for me."

"Well, you're still green."

"And you're..." he trailed off, trying to find a good quip, "*Violet.*"

"Wow, I will let you stew for one hour until you find a decent comeback." Truthfully, Kitty should be proud to have done so well on raw talent alone.

Ryan himself looked at his cell phone, to see if the battle had made it to the news; instead, he received a notification from his devices inside Il Migliore's HQ.

Backdoor detected.

Huh.

Ryan wasn't the only one spying Dynamis through its computer systems. He set out to track down the IP to investigate, in case it was the assassin's doing.

"Hey kids, I know the perfect way to cheer you up," Ryan proposed, raising his phone. "Who wants a group photo with *Wyvern*?"

“Me!” “Me!” “ME!” The kids all raised their hands, much to Wyvern’s embarrassment and Atom Cat’s amusement. Even grumpy little Sarah seemed a bit enthusiastic.

They spent minutes waiting for the Private Security doing funny selfies, Vulcan glaring at them and Mosquito bleeding to death in the background.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Hi guys, The Perfect Run is now on trending, but not on the first page.

So if you haven't given the Perfect Run a rating yet, I would appreciate if you did it now. The more ratings the story gets, the longer it will stay on trending and the more visibility it will gain.

So... funny call to action!





Give him your stars
He deserves them!

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16: Secret Enemies

Ryan hated hospital rooms. Even if useful for sanitization purposes, the constant whiteness made him feel sick and isolated.

Hours had gone by since the orphanage battle, its occupants evacuated by Dynamis and moved to one of the company's hospitals. Psyshock's victim had been put in an artificial slumber, laying on a warm bed with a respirator and brain scanning devices near her. Wyvern stood near the window, clearly struggling against the urge to sleep.

"Will she be okay?" Ryan asked Wyvern, both having stood watch over the girl for a while. "I know from experience you can recover from Psyshock's 'brain connection,' but I have yet to see someone sedated afterward."

"Medics said her brainwave patterns are highly abnormal," Wyvern told him. "They will keep her in observation for a few days until they are certain she won't suffer from sequelae."

This worried Ryan a bit, making him wonder if Psyshock had refined his powers since the last time they met. At least the vile Psycho was dead for this loop, allowing the courier to relax.

Enrique 'Blackthorn' Manada chose that moment to enter the room, carrying a bright, exquisite bouquet in his arms.

"Well, well, I believe congratulations are in order," the corporate mastermind said, putting the flowers next to the window. "A bit heavy-handed for my taste, but I expected collateral damage from your part, Romano."

"What will happen to the children?" Wyvern asked, sounding quite familiar with her manager.

"We will take care of them," Enrique said. "They will be hosted in a secure facility far away from Rust Town, and many people voiced their intention to adopt some of them. Let it not be said that Dynamis is not family-friendly."

Of course they would try to exploit the situation for a publicity stunt. "Well, I'm sure everyone cared about them before I posted these photos on the Dynanet," Ryan mused.

"Speaking of photos, Romano, I am highly disappointed in you," Enrique scolded him. "I remember telling you that your name was *Timelord* now, yet you introduce yourself in your pictures as '*Quicksave and his cat.*' Now the damage is done, and it might be even too late to correct that mistake."

"Wait, that's what bothers you?" Ryan asked, surprised.
"You're not mad about our little adventure?"

"Why would I?" Enrique asked, also genuinely surprised.
"You and Atom Cat saved an orphanage while dealing a savage blow to this city's criminal underbelly. You did good."

"Yeah, but I skipped the training, and you said you didn't like loose cannons."

"I don't, but I believe you are under a misconception. You are free to do as you wish, as long as you accept the consequences. If your actions, no matter how irresponsible,

lead to a victory, then obviously it was done with Dynamis' full approval; if you fuck up, then you did it on your own."

"So, if I succeed," Ryan summarized, to make sure he had heard it straight. "You take the credit, and if I fail, I take the blame?"

"No, no," Enrique reassured him. "If you succeed we *share* the credit, and if you fail, you take the blame."

A distinction without a difference. "I admire your pragmatism, sir. You are a genius, sir."

"Enough with the fake servility, Romano, I get enough of that from the trainees." He then joined his hands in a calculating mastermind pose. "Now, the bitter part."

"Oh, I know that expression," Ryan mused, who had seen it over and over again. "You are going to crush all our hopes and dreams with the dullest tone possible."

"You catch on quickly, Romano," Enrique replied dryly. "Vulcan is to be released."

Wyvern's eyes widened in fury, the first time Ryan had seen her lose her cool. "After she tried to murder two of our own? No! No way!"

"Wyvern, I understand how you feel but—"

"If she gets away with a slap on her back, I quit."

As the silence stretched on, Ryan noticed the rose on Enrique's cashmere suit started growing thorns, shifting as if ready to jump from its holder and attack. Even the flowers near the bedroom's windows seemed to gain a life of their own, their petals swirling.

“Believe me,” Blackthorn said, his voice calm but betraying an undercurrent of anger, “I fully share your frustration. However, I do not have the luxury to act on it, and neither do you. The order comes straight from the CEO.”

“Hector himself? But why?” Wyvern asked, all but choking. “She’s the only one who knows how to make advanced armors! If she’s taken out, their entire operation takes a blow!”

“My father doesn’t want to spark retaliation from Augustus.” Enrique sighed. “We are in a period of detente with him. Don Hector believes another direct conflict would cost us more than sweeping this incident under the rug, especially after Atom Cat’s poaching. If Vulcan remains in custody, Mars and Venus may convince their master to get down from his mountain.”

“What happened today wasn’t detente at all,” Wyvern pointed out. “Can’t you talk your father out of this?”

“I tried,” Enrique replied with a sigh. “I even called Alphonse for support, but it didn’t change anything. It would have been a different story if someone on our team had died, but since both your teammates and Vulcan survived, she will be allowed to leave with a warning. If she or another Capo tries anything like that again though, then it’s war.”

Wyvern closed her eyes, breathing heavily. “This can’t continue, Enrique.”

“Be patient, Wyvern,” Enrique said. “The time to clean this city will come.”

“You’ve been saying that for two years,” she pointed out.

"And I may say that for two more years if it prevents another Malta."

"Huh? What happened in Malta?" Ryan asked. He heard rumors, but nothing detailed.

"It sank," Enrique replied dryly, checking his watch under his sleeve. "I must go. Wyvern, Quicksave."

At least he stopped using that name. Once Blackthorn left and the flowers turned inanimate again, Ryan glanced at Wyvern. The superheroine's face had turned distraught, her eyes glancing through the window with disappointment.

"Wyvern, tell me," Ryan coughed, "The armors used by the Private Security elite... it's Vulcan's work, right?" She nodded slowly. "I heard you two were *close*."

"We were." The superheroine frowned a bit. "Why are you insisting on the close part?"

"Her obsession with you seems... I dunno... a bit too passionate."

Wyvern looked at him with an incredulous face, then a thought seemed to cross her mind. "No," she said after some hesitation. "It's..."

She let out a sigh, clearly not eager to speak about it. Ryan waited, knowing she would speak if not pressured. "She was my partner once," Wyvern finally admitted, "Even before I joined Il Migliore."

"Your sidekick?"

"My partner," Wyvern insisted. "She was the brains, I was the brawn. However, since I was the only one in the field,

the media and citizens attributed most of our success to me. Eventually, she tried to rebrand herself as a solo hero, but since she was a Genius, and the backbone of its high-tech military, Dynamis didn't want her out of a lab. She was too precious to risk in a direct confrontation, but she didn't see it that way. She felt sidelined and disrespected."

Huh, so she stewed in her resentment, and eventually, Augustus approached her with a promise of a cushy Capo rank and total autonomy if she switched sides. "And you never noticed? I guess you weren't that close then."

"She never told me anything before she exploded, how was I supposed to know?" Wyvern replied with annoyance. "I trusted her."

The bedroom's door opened, a feline walking inside without making a sound. "Wyvern," Atom Cat nodded politely, double-checking the door's lock before turning towards Ryan, "Quicksave, you said the Meta had a supply of elixirs? What made you think that?"

"I can tell when Psychos suffer from withdrawal." He had a long experience managing someone like Bloodstream. "None of them were, and they haven't behaved like normal Psychos for weeks. It seemed to be the likeliest explanation."

"Mosquito died while in medical care."

Ryan immediately caught on, though Wyvern didn't connect the dots. "What are you suggesting?" she asked, confused.

"The reptilians," Ryan explained. "The reptilians struck again. They're everywhere."

Wyvern stared at him without a word.

She knew he was onto her!

"Can you be serious a minute?" Atom Cat replied, completely missing the joke. "Don't you find it strange?"

"He could have died of natural causes," Wyvern said, not really bothered by the fact she might be responsible. "I hit him hard."

"Maybe, but if Quicksave's theory is correct, then the Meta must have gotten their extra Elixirs from *someone*."

Wyvern crossed her arms, thoughtful. "It is true that Private Security members tried to help Ghoul escape confinement," she conceded. "But what you are suggesting is a very serious accusation."

"Someone inside Dynamis is clearly helping the Meta," Atom Cat declared boldly. "Supplying them with knockoff Elixirs, information, and support while covering their tracks. That's the only explanation."

"I don't know, Felix," Wyvern said. "I don't—"

"Wait, your name is Felix?" Ryan cut off Wyvern, glancing at his sidekick. "And your superhero name is Atom *Cat*?"

"I don't see the problem," he lied. Ryan didn't say anything, even if the jokes wrote themselves. That would be too easy.

Wyvern waited a second for him to calm down, before finishing her sentence. "I don't doubt that some divisions of Dynamis are corrupt and that the Meta could pay off Private Security grunts to provide information and support. The Augusti do it too, and that has been a problem for years. However, *Elixirs* are something else. For anyone to secure a steady supply, they would need cooperation from top

executives or key people, all heavily scrutinized. Even the Augusti need to buy the knockoffs through corrupt intermediaries to avoid detection.”

“They could be making their own,” Ryan suggested the obvious.

“Even the Augusti haven’t managed that feat yet,” Wyvern dismissed it. “I’m more worried about that bunker Mosquito told us about, honestly. I always wondered why the Meta-Gang never attacked Dynamis establishments, or tried to expand. Even their attacks on the Augusti were only an attempt to keep them out of Rust Town.”

It said everything about Psychos that attacking an orphanage was considered restrained on their part. “So all they want is that bunker?” Atom Cat asked. “They’re trying not to draw attention to themselves while they unearth it?”

“And if Adam wants it, it can’t be good.”

“Well, my good friends, the path ahead is clear,” Ryan said. “We go to the Junkyard and see for ourselves.”

Much to his consternation, neither seemed keen on the idea. “If they want this bunker so much, they probably have all their heavy hitters stationed in the Junkyard,” Wyvern pointed out. “Frank the Mad is physically stronger than me, Acid Rain possesses a devastating capacity for destruction, and Adam himself is as cunning as he is powerful. We also received reports that they recruited lone wolf Psychos like the Land, and with Psyshock’s demise, they will expect an attack. We will need numbers, recon, and an attack plan.”

“But can it be done?” Atom Cat asked. “Or will we let them go to avoid ‘escalating tensions’?”

Clearly, Enrique had given him the talk on his way out. Unlike the Augusti though, Wyvern seemed optimistic on that front. “The Meta aren’t Augustus,” she said. “Especially after that stunt, the public will want us to take action against th-”

She stopped talking, touching her earplug.

“What’s up?” Ryan asked. “Another late night commercial?”

“It’s the harbor,” Wyvern said grimly. “There has been a massacre.”

As dawn started to appear beyond the horizon and he fought off drowsiness, Ryan realized that he should have anticipated something like that.

He had ‘seen’ the assassin at the harbor, and the bathysphere shipment was scheduled long before the courier himself entered the picture. Of course Zambato would maintain it even without Ryan’s presence, and with Ghoul’s arrest, the Meta sent Sarin to attack the meeting alone.

It must have seemed like a golden opportunity to score a few easy kills.

“Quicksave and his cat,” Felix the Atom Cat muttered on the front passenger seat, as Ryan parked near the security chord Dynamis established around the harbor. “I should sue you.”

Ryan looked straight into his eyes. “Your name is Felix, Cat.”

“It means lucky!” Atom Cat protested. “You’re never going to let me live it down, are you?”

“No, never.”

“Then I will call you *Quickie* from now on.”

“I’ll be blunt,” Ryan sighed. “That makes it sound like you have a thing for me.”

“Oh my, no!” Atom Cat replied, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “I don’t wish that on anyone, you’re horrible! You wouldn’t be able to handle half of me anyway!”

“Believe me, Kitty, if I took you, the experience would be so intense, that you would never be able to enjoy a girl ever again. I invented positions so powerful, the authorities had to make them illegal.”

When they arrived at the spot where Ryan had first met with Luigi and his goons, the duo only found corpses and Private Security members taking pictures of the crime scene. Sarin had left a few holes in the dock, indicating that she hadn’t gone quietly; her empty hazmat suit had already been recovered, drained of its contents. Ryan wondered if she had somehow survived.

The Augusti’s remains left nothing to interpretation.

Luigi and his unpowered goons had been torn to shreds by sharp blades, their corpses tossed into the ocean. Their blood colored the water red. Zanbato’s armor had short-circuited like during the last loop, shocking him to death; considering the hole in his chest, Sarin had exploited the opportunity to land a direct shot at his vitals, killing him instantly. The samurai laid on his back, a fallen warrior.

“The Punisher struck again,” Ryan muttered to himself, feeling slight guilt upon seeing Jamie’s remains. He liked the

guy, and the fact he couldn't save him during this loop made him feel a bit down.

The courier knew he could bring the swordsman back and he had seen people die so often he had grown numb to it, but still.

After a shocked silence, Atom Cat seemed devastated, immediately rushing to Zanbato's side. "Fuck, it's Jamie!"

Huh? "You knew him?"

"Yeah, we were pals before I left the family." Atom Cat examined the corpse with hollow eyes. "Shit... shit!"

Ryan said nothing, unsure how to react. His last attempt to comfort someone had gone horribly wrong.

"I knew this day would come, I knew it. But he has a girl at home, man. Shit." Atom Cat shook his head, clearly distraught and confused. "Quickie, do you mind giving me a ride?"

"You want to see his girlfriend?" Ryan guessed.

"Yeah, I believe an old friend should deliver the news. Even if I burned that bridge, Jamie deserved that much."

Ryan turned to his sidekick, remembering how he himself died at Jamie's house in the previous loop. "That's not a good idea."

Atom Cat looked ready to protest, but to his credit, he considered the courier's words rationally. "You think they will target her next?"

Yes. This disaster confirmed that the assassin wasn't after Ryan specifically, but the Genomes associated with the Augusti. The courier felt a little wounded at not having a secret nemesis, though it didn't explain how that mysterious vigilante figured out his cooldown limit.

Outside of Dynamis, who could be mad enough to take on an organization as powerful as Augustus' and know Ryan enough to figure out his time—

Then it clicked.

"Oh," Ryan spoke out loud. "No way!"

"What?"

"I think I know who did this," Ryan replied, opening his cell phone, "Which is both awesome and terrifying." On one hand, that meant another route to unlock, but on the other hand... yeesh, the boss fights would be *terrible*.

Atom Cat cracked his knuckles. "So what do we do?"

Ryan showed him his cell phone and the location where he had tracked the hacker's IP address. "We catch the lion in its own den of course."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Looks at the front page with tears in his eyes.

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17: The Hidden Route

“It can’t be them.”

Ryan searched inside his car’s trunk, finally putting his hands on his secret weapons: his coil gun, and a bag of flour. “What do you know of Leo Hargraves’ Carnival, my feline friend?”

“That they’re wandering heroes fighting marauders, warlords, dangerous Genomes, and Psychos,” Atom Cat replied, his back against the car. “They help communities pro bono, then move on. They’re modern knight errant, not assassins.”

“That’s true,” Ryan conceded. Which was partly why he respected them as a group, even after the problems they caused him. “But they’re also pragmatic knights. When they fight, they don’t pull their punches. They hit hard and fast, and unlike most Genomes, they actually use small unit tactics.”

“You speak as if you fought them.”

“I did.” And they gave him his fair share of resets, especially in his early loops. “I was present when they killed Bloodstream four years ago and got caught in the crossfire. Now, usually, I love being in the middle of interesting things, but that day cost me something dear to me.”

“Something, or someone?”

Sharp cat.

It had been the day Ryan had drunk his Elixir, which he did to survive that disaster in the first place. He couldn't fully control his save point back then, and he ended up trapped in a suboptimal route.

One which separated him from Len.

As the thought crossed his mind, Ryan glanced at the Mediterranean Sea, the rising dawn refracting on its waters. As it turned out, the assassin had established their base in a ship graveyard between Rust Town and the old harbor. The supertanker he had seen on the shores was only the first of an army.

Metal husks of tankers, boats, and even aircrafts were lined up on a sandy shore, rusted by saltwater. Barnacles had made their home on the belly of ships and airbus planes alike, with small alleys between each steel corpse. The IP signal came from an isolated garage nearby, a metal hangar partly built inside a cruise ship. Probably some kind of chop shop, scavenging the husks and selling back parts.

Rainy, toxic clouds appeared north, though strangely, they moved against the wind and towards the harbor. Was it the doing of Dynamis, blowing the pollution away from Rust Town?

Atom Cat crossed his arms, remembering something. "Dad once told me that he fought their original line-up years ago, before he and Mom adopted Narcinia. Augustus was still establishing his powerbase back then. He killed half of the Carnival's members and drove off the rest."

Well, they had returned to finish the job. Better late than never.

“But I never heard anything about a glass manipulator.”

“They have a lot of turnover, so this may be a new recruit,” Ryan replied. Considering the invisibility and the fact they often killed through bombs or mundane means, such a Genome could credibly fly under the radar. Especially if all witnesses end up dead. “I can’t move the car closer or carry anything with screens. I’m pretty sure they can detect and control glass over a vast radius.”

“How vast?”

“I don’t know,” Ryan replied, tossing his cell phone to the backseat, alongside all electronic devices. He only kept the nuclear bomb and the rabbit plushie. “They may even know we are here already.”

“Alright, then I will stay near the car, and if you don’t send a sign within half an hour, I will call Wyvern for help,” Atom Cat decided. “What about your mask’s goggles?”

“Silly, they aren’t made of glass!” Ryan replied. “They’re alien stuff!”

“Right, and that... is that flour?” Atom Cat frowned at Ryan’s toys. “Do you want to bake them a cake?”

“They will never see it coming.”

Atom Cat smiled thinly. “I know you won’t listen, but please don’t do anything stupid.”

“Don’t worry, I have more lives than your nine ones,” Ryan replied, packing his stuff and moving to the garage.

Though, he would be lying if the situation didn’t make him uneasy. The Carnival’s members were powerful Genomes,

and that assassin had killed him twice already. A wrong move might result in another reset, and their previous history made him tense up.

As he reached the locked door, Ryan realized now would be the perfect time for a stealth mission. But he was pretty sure it was useless, and he never had the patience for them.

Instead, he shot the lock with his coil gun, the electromagnetic projectile going straight through the steel. “No country for old men!” he shouted, entering the garage weapon raised.

Unlike the movie, no one welcomed him with a shotgun past the door. In fact, the garage didn’t hold any car, engine, or ship parts.

Instead, it housed several computer servers.

Dozens of them in total, clearly jury-rigged and linked to an autonomous electric generator. Two air conditioners worked to cool them down while wires went through a hole in the ground, probably linking the system to Dynamis’ underground cables. A massive desk with a single chair stood in the middle, surrounded by screens.

Also, Ryan noticed that he could see the ship graveyard through the windows easily enough, yet he had seen none of these servers from the outside. There was definitely an optical trick at work.

Yeah, this wasn’t a recent development. They must have spent weeks, if not months, setting up this safe house.

Ryan approached the computer, currently displaying a boring screensaver on five different screens. It seemed he

had busted the operation while the mysterious assassin had gotten away.

Or so they wanted him to think.

Without warning, the courier froze time, opened the bag of flour, and rotated on himself. He sprayed the white powder in every direction, on the screens, windows, servers, and the corners.

A humanoid torso appeared right behind him, standing in a corner with a partially visible sword raised.

Here you are.

The flour had hit some kind of invisible armor, so Ryan took the time to draw '*kill me, I'm a perv*' on the chest. As time resumed, the figure froze as they found itself with a coil gun pointed to their head. "Caught you, Invisiboy!" Ryan couldn't help but gloat, "Or is it Invisigirl? I can never tell."

"I will move faster than your finger on the trigger," Invisiboy replied, his voice muffled by his strange suit.

"Are we playing Lucky Luke? I can draw faster than my shadow... faster than time even!"

"I don't think you actually stop time, Cesare Sabino, you only give the illusion of it," he replied, absolutely calm. "Or is it Ryan Romano now?"

"Ryan," the courier replied. He tried to identify the voice, but the suit muffled it too much. "I don't think we met though, Mr. Carnival."

The figure let out a sigh of frustration at being identified. "We did. Though you didn't know I existed back then."

"Ah, I wondered if you were a new recruit or an invisible ace," Ryan mused. That explained a lot of his organization's success if the Carnival had a hidden operative of his caliber. "What should I call you, then?"

Realizing that a fight wouldn't break out unless he started it, the mysterious Genome became fully visible. His entire body was coated in bright blue glass, from head to toe; the substance prevented Ryan from seeing anything. The armor was completely shapeless, the face round like a featureless doll. It made the vigilante look rather eerie.

Ryan realized that this man mimicked invisibility by somehow bending the light around his armor, perhaps using the same process used in lenticular technologies. The courier could barely fathom the sheer control needed to pull that off, although that trick didn't protect him from smoke or rain.

This was some *powerful* Orange Genome.

"You may call me the Shroud." The glass man tilted his head to the side. "And if you haven't shot me in your 'frozen time,' I assume you want to tal—"

Ryan threw the flour bag at his face.

Invisiboy stood in silence, the paper bag falling off his helmet and onto the ground; his face now looked like that of a clown with all the powder.

"That was highly immature," the assassin said, dusting the flour off his helmet.

Well, he killed Ryan twice; the courier had earned the right to be petty. "Don't blame me if I keep my weapon drawn," the time-manipulator said since his current host's sword

remained ever threatening. “You’ve been assassinating a lot of people lately, and killing you is still on the table.”

“You and Il Migliore have nothing to fear from us,” the man replied, crossing his arms. “Our current targets are the Augusti and the Meta.”

“Oh, then I assume you must have hacked into Dynamis by accident.”

“Only to root out the infiltrators in your company’s midst,” the Genome scoffed. “To be honest, I’m surprised you even managed to track me down. I was very careful not to leave a trace.”

Ryan wasn’t in the mood to enlighten him, especially after he killed the courier twice. “Why did you kill Zanbato and his fellows at the docks?”

“Is that anger in your voice? Your concern surprises me.” The glass Genome walked towards the screens, ignoring the gun pointed at his head, and sat on the chair. “As far as I know, the two of you haven’t even interacted.”

“Maybe I did. And maybe so far, I didn’t see anything that justified killing him. Heck, he’s pretty low in the hierarchy as far as I know.”

The man joined his hands, the posture reminding Ryan of Enrique Manada. “Do you know what they were shipping at the docks?”

“Candies?”

“Chemicals destined to the Augusti’s fortress-lab on Ischia island, which produces their *Bliss*,” Shroud corrected him. “The drug is then shipped through boats and submarines to

local distributors all over Italy, Spain, France, Turkey, Libya... a drug which is *incredibly* addictive and that Augustus uses to subvert communities, even as they struggle to recover from the Wars."

"Your point?"

"No matter their friendly neighborhood gangster publicity, the Augusti do far more harm than good," the Genome declared. "And even if he killed no one personally, by protecting this shipment, Zanbato indirectly supported an organization causing almost twenty-thousand deaths each year, with three thousand in New Rome alone."

"So if I understand right," Ryan coughed, "You will reduce violence by committing more violence?"

On some level, the vigilante seemed to recognize the hypocrisy involved, because he hung back in his chair, thoughtful. Ryan couldn't see his body language with the armor on, but he seemed conflicted.

"I don't like it," he admitted. "I really, really don't. I would prefer to talk it out, or put criminals in jail. No matter what people say, you never get used to killing. Even my teammates within the Carnival frown on what I'm doing."

Ryan wondered if the whole Carnival had infiltrated the city, or if this Shroud was just the vanguard, preparing the ground for his teammates. The Genome suspected he wasn't the only operative in New Rome; he couldn't have done so much damage alone. "I smell a *but*."

"But the situation has degraded to a point that things will only get worse if we do nothing. The Augusti's Capos can attempt to murder someone in broad daylight and walk out with a pat on the back. There is no government to keep

them in jail, and Dynamis is too afraid of Augustus to truly take action.”

He had a point, but there was a glaring flaw in his argument. “Well, good luck trying to kill the invincible man then. It’s not like everyone has tried for years without any progress.”

“Augustus may call himself a god, but he is still only a man, and an aging one at that. He cannot peddle his drug in the street or exact tribute alone. He needs infrastructures, soldiers, and money to exert his influence; take away his subjects, and a king is simply a man wearing a crown. We may not be able to defeat Augustus, but we can destroy the Augusti.”

“Why now though?” Ryan asked, his gut telling him something was missing. “Things have been somewhat peaceful and Augustus sits on his ass. Why act now?”

The glass man said nothing for a few seconds, clearly considering whether or not to divulge any information. Eventually, he did. “You must have seen it already,” Shroud pointed out. “There is a war brewing between this city’s factions. A disaster that may spark a new round of Genome Wars and further devastation, if it is not prevented.”

“Ah, so you’re pursuing your Perfect Run too?”

“A perfect run?” Much to Ryan’s delight, Shroud seemed to understand the reference. “You could say that, but there is no perfect ending, Quicksave. Only the best for a certain group of people.”

How could it be that the only person who understood video game slang was the guy who had him *killed*? There was no justice in this world. “And if there is a non-murderous alternative to bring down the Augusti?”

"Do you have one?" Shroud asked, sounding a little hopeful.
"Because I'm drawing a blank here."

"Not this time," Ryan replied. "But I will find it, I promise."

Shroud observed him in silence for a few seconds. To his credit, he seemed open to the idea. "Well, in the unlikely case you do find a way to cripple the Augusti's operations without killing anyone, then... yes, I will take it."

Good. At least he wasn't some Punisher immune to diplomacy attempts. Ryan could already see the perfect path to Len, and how to defuse the situation.

"Otherwise, I will ask you not to reveal the existence of this place or my presence in New Rome," the vigilante explained. "We have nothing against you or Il Migliore; in fact, I would be happy to cooperate towards making New Rome a better place, once your team is purged of its saboteurs. Though, if you switch sides to the Augusti or the Meta, expect us to come to blows. You are simply too powerful a Genome not to be taken out early."

Ryan remained silent for a moment, as everything became clear. "I don't know whether I should feel flattered or furious."

"You considered joining them?" The Genome sounded only curious, but something in his tone betrayed an undercurrent of tension.

"Naaaaah!" Ryan lied. Well, he would never join the *Meta*, but still. "But I wonder why you are okay with hitting the Augusti and not Dynamis."

"In spite of their faults, Dynamis does try to rebuild a somewhat functional society," Shroud grudgingly admitted.

“The company has systemic corruption issues, as Rust Town can attest, but it is a stabilizing force in Europe and it can be reformed once Hector Manada retires. I can’t say the same for the Augusti, and let’s not talk about the Meta.”

The vigilante observed Ryan closely. “Thank you, by the way.”

“For what, your whiteness?”

The Genome seemed vaguely amused by the jab, but remained focused on the matter at hand. “For saving that orphanage. I was only informed of the attack after it was already over, and I wouldn’t have made it in time. I didn’t expect you to turn your powers to a positive end, but I’m glad you did. Frankly, I worried you might follow in Bloodstream’s footsteps, or hunt us down in revenge.”

“He was sick and his death was only mercy,” Ryan replied. “It’s separating me from Len that I can never forget.”

The glass man said absolutely nothing, a tense silence stretching between them.

Ryan pressed the gun against that man’s helmet. “You know where she is.”

“I do.” To his credit, the Genome sounded incredibly calm and confident for someone with a weapon pointed at them. “I mapped every faction in this city before starting the operation. Although in her case, the problem isn’t knowing her location, but reaching it.”

“Where is she?”

The Genome didn’t answer directly, pondering his words. “She never contacted you, in all these years.”

"She couldn't," Ryan replied. "She didn't know I survived, because of you guys."

"You were never subtle in your stunts, nor shy about spreading your true name. I don't believe for a second that she never heard of you in four years."

The courier's finger twitched, nearly pulling the trigger.
"What are you implying?"

"The obvious. That she never contacted you because she didn't want to. And I think deep down, you understand that this is the only logical explanation."

Ryan glared behind his mask. "You know nothing."

He considered what to do with this information. The Carnival was clearly operating in New Rome as a fourth faction; they were the hidden route. However, his focus was finding Len, and he already saw a path towards her. The assassin was the biggest hurdle towards reaching her, and now, he knew the perfect way to defuse the situation.

He could see it already. The Perfect Run towards Len.

"You were followed."

Ryan blinked at Shroud, drawn out of his reverie. "*Plait-i?*"

"You were followed." Shroud glanced at the window, a rain downpour hitting it from outside. Sick, yellow-green water corroding the glass on touch, and which attacked even the metal walls.

No. Not water.

Acid.

Impossible, he had been careful when driving or using his phone. Unless...

“The DNA tracker,” Ryan realized.

He knew he should have read the fine print!

An explosion echoed outside, telling Ryan that Atom Cat was currently fighting for his life. Without a word, Shroud turned invisible, all the flour on his armor falling to the side of his desk; he must have altered the glass layers to shrug it off.

Ryan raised his weapon and prepared to rush through the door when he heard a loud noise from above him. Something was on the roof, crawling towards his location.

Without warning, a wire tentacle broke through the garage's ceiling and aimed for Ryan's head.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Yep, you can expect alternate versions of some of my Earth-based characters in this setting. Maybe an alternate Kia or Victor somewhen.

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18: Acid Rain

Ryan dived towards the servers, dodging flailing wires while the glass windows shattered around him. Outside, someone had opened fire on the garage, bullets piercing through the walls and damaging the computers inside.

“If it’s the paparazzi,” the courier complained, raising his coil gun at the ceiling, “here’s my autograph!”

He opened fire, projectiles going through the roof while glass shards formed flying walls to cover the holes in the ceiling. However, the acid rain quickly corroded them, the liquid falling on a server and starting an electrical fire.

A monstrous mass of wires stood on the roof, its malevolent eyes glaring at the courier through one of the remaining openings.

Ryan blinked. “Aren’t you braindead, Psypsy?”

“I told you,” Psyshock replied, an undercurrent of anger in his robotic voice as he raised his wire tentacles. From above, he looked like an alien metal squid. “I heal.”

“Oh good, that means I get to kill you twice.”

Ryan always saw the bright side of everything.

The courier wondered who helped the Psycho with his plastic surgery though. The skull’s shape had changed slightly, turning slimmer. Either the telepath had improper

regeneration, or he had a different powerset than the courier thought.

Also, his body had been recovered by Dynamis for study. How did he escape quickly enough to launch this ambush? Something didn't add up at all.

Syshock moved his head out of sight before Ryan froze time, making it difficult for the courier to aim at the mutant's only vital area. It didn't help that the Psycho's backup kept firing bullets from outside, providing suppressing fire. The invisible jackass created glass walls the best he could to keep the rain and the Psycho out, but the silica didn't last long.

Deciding he would rather risk the acid rain than Syshock brain-jacking him, the courier shot a few projectiles at the ceiling, dodged the frozen bullets, then rushed outside.

Toxic clouds had overtaken the skies as far as he could see, unleashing an acid downpour on the ship graveyard and corroding the metal husks. A large part of the area had gone up in smoke, probably Atom Cat's doing; Ryan hoped that the kitty could hold his own against whatever allies Syshock had brought with him.

Two mechanical hounds were the source of the gunfire, one standing atop an airbus husk, the other on the ground. They had the shape of dogs, except with a glass visor for eyes, a machine gun mounted on their back, and ammo compartments on the belly. Dynamis probably used these drones to support the Private Security, and Ryan wondered if the Meta had somehow hacked into them.

When time resumed, the courier sensed the acid rain drip on his clothes, eating at his hat and mask. Ryan's clothes provided him little protection from the acid and had already

started to dissolve; since he didn't know of any natural acid with these properties, the courier guessed it was a unique chemical composition, probably from an Orange Genome. A few minutes without cover, and he would look like a hunk of cheese.

Psyshock, standing atop the garage, attempted to pursue him, only to be forced back to dodge a glass spear aimed at his brain. A flying figure emerged from the workshop, attacking the Psycho with floating shards.

The Shroud occupied Psyshock, although the acid rain prevented him from using his invisibility. The poison corroded the vigilante's glass armor, making him visible to everyone. Yet, he could still control the glass and silica from his machines, summoning an entire storm of sharp projectiles to keep the Psycho busy. Psyshock seemed immune to the acid rain, and moved at high speeds to dodge glass spears and blades.

Meanwhile, the drones' machine guns opened fire on Ryan, who retaliated by targeting the one on the ship's husk and pressing his coil gun's trigger. The projectile, faster and more powerful than normal bullets, went through the robo-hound's face and came out of its ass, blowing a hole in its circuitry.

The other leaped around, firing at will. Ryan whistled, his car rushing out of the smoke, and towards his location; the acid rain had consumed its windows and damaged the paint, much to the courier's horror.

Still, the machine hound couldn't dodge both Ryan's shots and the vehicle. The Plymouth hit it like a deer on the road, smashing the drone into pieces.

"Cat!" Ryan shouted, rushing towards his car to take cover from the rain. "Cat!"

A chill went down his spine, as one of the raindrops suddenly transformed into a grenade right above his car.

Ryan barely had the time to backtrack before his wonderful Plymouth exploded in a burst of flames and iron parts. "My car!" the courier shouted in horror. "Not again!"

"Caught you, thief!"

A woman appeared in front of the courier, unaffected by the toxic rain. Her skin was bleached white, her golden hair cut short, and her eyes a bloodshot shade of crimson. She wore a sleeveless white shirt and tight shorts; Ryan might have called her attractive, if not for the crazy violent glint in her eyes.

Oh, and she also carried a bloody butcher knife in her right hand. Let's not forget that part.

"Acid Rain, I suppose?" Ryan asked before activating his time stop. As he did so, the same feeling of tension ran through his spine.

When he entered the frozen time, everything was tainted by a Violet hue, but the woman had vanished. Did she manage to teleport away?

Pain raced through his body, as the acid waters managed to eat away his clothes and reach the skin beneath. While furious about his car's destruction, the courier decided to retreat into the shadow of a ship husk, to get protection from the downpour.

The second time resumed, once again, a wave of tension went down his spine as—

Ryan let out a cough of pain, as a butcher's knife found its way to his hand, cutting his fingers and causing him to drop his coil gun on the ground. Blood flowing through his right hand, although having experienced worse, he could still focus.

"You can see it, too..." Acid Rain chuckled, blocking his path towards the husk. "The purple world."

...

Uh oh.

"That place between two moments and two angles, paradise!" she cackled, holding her head with both hands as if overtaken by rapturous desire. "It's so wonderful! My brain shines with its beauty!"

"Okay lady, I'm done here," Ryan said, looking inside his trench coat for the atom bomb. He barely had the time to bring it out of storage when the nimble killer teleported right in front of the courier, kicking the bomb away with a swift attack. She immediately vanished before the courier could return the favor.

Before she reappeared and fled, Ryan sensed... he could not quite describe it, a gut feeling. The same feeling as when his own power activated.

Not only could she summon acid rains, that Psycho could also switch places with raindrops, giving her an impressive teleportation range. A Violet Genome coupled with an Orange. One who drew her power from the same source as Ryan's.

Their powers interfered with one another, enough that each could sense the other's activation.

The problem was, while the courier only needed a thought to activate his time-stop, it took a fraction of a second to take effect. If she could sense its activation, Acid Rain had a very short window to react before the temporal anomaly manifested.

And not only were her reflexes superhuman, but her power also took action faster than his own. Ryan guessed it made sense. His time-stop affected the entire observable universe, while her teleportation only switched two objects in a short radius.

Ryan had found a counter.

“Geez, this city has a huge balance problem!” he complained, before taking cover under a husk’s shadow. He should have expected the Meta to send a heavy hitter after him considering all the headaches he gave them in this restart, but damn, that girl hit hard! “Cat! Cat, where are you?!”

He couldn’t hear anything with the downpour, nor see much. Even the battle between Shroud and Psyshock had turned into a distant background echo.

“I got him first,” Acid Rain laughed, reappearing atop an airbus’ remains with a machine gun. She had a clear line of sight towards Ryan. “Gutted him like a fish, chin to ass!”

She opened fire at Ryan, forcing the courier to duck. He attempted to target her with a well-placed thrown knife to the face, but she teleported away before the weapon could connect.

"Send me there!" the madwoman snarled upon reappearing on the ground near Ryan's own location, daggers in both hands, her eyes lost in feverish madness, "Send me there, you thief! You think you can keep it all for yourself, you miserable little punk? You think you can take this beautiful world from me?! You selfish brat, you're violating my rights!"

Ryan stopped time for a second, the woman vanishing before the effect halted the clock. He immediately stopped the effect within two seconds, deciding to stick to short bursts as a defense.

The woman reappeared, aiming for his chest, but this time he anticipated her. While she managed to put a dagger in his stomach, Ryan grazed her left shoulder with his own knife, barely missing the neck. Showing extreme nimbleness rivaling his own, she backflipped to safety, standing beneath the rain while the courier remained safely below the rusting husk.

Ryan examined the wound, realizing he couldn't remove the blade without bleeding out. The situation wasn't good; he only had one hand left, and he took more damage than she did. To add insult to injury, the acid droplets seemed to avoid hitting her body, leaving her impeccably dressed even in the middle of a downpour.

"Aw..." Acid Rain licked her own wound, her face one of blissful happiness. "Aw, it's so warm... so warm..."

She...

She enjoyed getting hurt.

"My compliments to the chef," Ryan deadpanned dryly.
"May I suggest some fava beans with your drink?"

Instead of quipping back, the madwoman let out a maniacal laugh. “I’ll hurt you for this!” she snarled, her expression a mix of anger and pleasure. “Oh yes, you will squeal! I’ll knife you until you squeal, you little piggy!”

She immediately disappeared from Ryan’s sight as he activated his time stop, perhaps returning to a safe house to grab weapons. The courier didn’t mind dying now, since his perfect run towards Len would require an Augusti loop, but he would rather perish with dignity rather than die to this... this discount Joker!

Ryan searched inside his trench coat and brought out the plushie. It felt so tiny in his hand, and yet so dangerous.

“I want you to know this,” the courier said as time resumed, trying to flip the hidden switch on the plushie’s back. “You forced me to do this. You *forced* me to do th—”

Another mental signal followed, and a grenade appeared right in front of him.

Two words came to mind.

“Meep meep—”

Ryan’s vision turned white, his hearing went deaf, and his back hit the ground. He felt the plushie slip through his fingers, far away from him.

When he regained his sense of sight, and his ears started to make sense of words again, he laid helpless on his back, half his body burned, the rest bleeding out. Acid Rain towered over him, like an angel of death.

“I’m going to knife you to death,” she said with an angry face. “And then I’m going to get inside your bowels. I’m sure

you keep the map to the purple world there. Yes, you thief, I know that. Your intestines will look so tender and beautiful."

This woman had serious issues.

Ryan sighed and tried to come up with famous last words when Acid Rain glanced away from him and towards the shore. "Who are you?" she hissed. "Another thief? How many of you—"

A stream of pressurized water targeted the Psycho, who teleported away long before it could hit her.

Ryan frowned in confusion, as he heard heavy footsteps on the ground, powerful enough to overshadow the noise from the downpour. Something big had emerged from the sea and moved on to the shore.

Although Ryan's vision was starting to blur, he could see it approach. A towering figure of bronze alloys, carrying some kind of flamethrower device. The figure looked like a mix between a diver suit and advanced armor, smaller than Vulcan's, yet as thick as a tank and painted crimson. Its helmet's single opening projected light like a lighthouse, illuminating Ryan as it glanced down at him.

His eyes widened behind his mask, as he recognized the design.

"Len?"

The iron giant didn't answer, but although the courier couldn't see the person within due to the lighthouse visor, he immediately recognized her posture. The way she moved and carried her weapon, the slight concern when the titan observed him...

It was her. She was out of jail and free and alive and well! Ryan's heart beamed with happiness.

Maybe she had *always* been there, watching him from afar.

"Mine!" Acid Rain snarled, teleporting so quickly she seemed to be in a dozen places at once. "Mine mine mine! I am filled with disdain! Disdain and fury!"

"Len, don't!" Ryan pleaded as the bronze giant raised her weapon, realizing the danger. "Get away!"

Too late.

When Acid Rain ended her teleportation onslaught, she had replaced multiple raindrops with grenades. A rain of bombs fell upon the duo, with enough explosives to wipe out an entire city block.

Ryan activated his time stop in a hurry, trying to drag Len away or remove the bombs. But his body collapsed under the strain of his injuries, his face hitting the bloody sand.

"Len!"

Time resumed, and this loop ended in a cataclysmic blast.

It was May 8th, 2020 for... the seventh time? The eighth?

Ryan had lost count, though like always, he opened the day by ramming his car into Ghoul's back.

"You guys," Ryan sighed, climbing down from his car as Renesco's bar erupted into chaos. "You guys are real assholes, you know that? I hope you do."

And since they insisted on making his life difficult, the courier would return the favor tenfold this time around.

"I'm calling Security!" Renesco complained behind the bar counter, while the bar's customers watched on. Ghoul was trying to get back on his feet, dizzied by the blow.

Calm and hopeful after seeing Len again, Ryan grabbed the *Fisty Brothers* and put the gloves on. "But I am an optimist, and since this should be my perfect run, I think we can let bygones be bygones," he said, as he playfully approached Ghoul. "Start anew, play tennis, even become friends! Do you want to be my friend Ghoul?"

"Who the hell are yo—"

Ryan sucker-punched him in the stomach, the Psycho falling to his knees with a groan.

"I think we will do it the anime way." Ryan grabbed Ghoul's head with the Fisty Brothers and brought it closer to his own. The Psycho's eyes widened in confusion. "I beat you up, you will develop Stockholm Syndrome, and then you will become my Robin! Quicksave and the Ghoul Wonder! We're going to have merchandise, comics, television shows, sitcoms. and pointless derivatives! Everything that makes life worth living! We'll be together forever!"

The people in the bars looked at Ryan as if he were insane.

"We'll have our faces on every fast-food! McDonald, KFC, Burger King! We'll get happy meals, Ghoul! Free happy meals!"

Ghoul just stared at him with straight up terror in his eyes.

"It's a whole new franchise!"

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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19: The Right Road

What a bright day. As Ryan drove towards the ship graveyard and Shroud's warehouse, he felt utterly happy with himself. The courier had the intuition that everything would turn out well for him this time around.

"I feel like you're my lucky charm, my friend," Ryan told Ghoul. "Like a rabbit's foot, or a four-leaf clover. I should have kept you ages ago."

The Psycho's bodiless skull glared at him, hung on the rear mirror by a rope.

Surprisingly, it had cost Ryan less money to convince the Private Security to keep the Psycho for himself than imprisoning it. He guessed it cost more to feed a prisoner than to just ignore a vigilante.

Like all loops so far, Wyvern visited him, although she sounded a bit less enthusiastic this time, for some ghoulish reason. She had also insisted he deliver Ghoul for safekeeping, as a sign of trust—and for his own 'safety.' Vulcan followed with her own recruitment pitch, putting him firmly on the Augusti Path.

So far so good.

Ryan stopped in front of the warehouse, grabbed Ghoul with Fisty, and then stepped out of the car. "I will kill you," Ghoul snarled. "I will kill you, I swea—"

He never finished his sentence, as Ryan started juggling the skull while whistling. He looked through the warehouse's window, seeing neither the servers nor the friendly neighborhood assassin. If he didn't have absolute trust in his power, the courier might have mistook the events of the previous loop for a feverish dream.

Instead of breaking in this time, Ryan knocked on the door, Ghoul's nauseous skull under his arm.

"Hey, can you let me in, I have a car window problem?!" Ryan shouted. "*Shroudy repair, Shroudy replace?*"

He waited a full minute before the door finally opened, revealing a glass man and servers on the other side. "How did you know?" the Carnival member asked, glancing around as if expecting a hidden camera.

"Oh, I'm alone, my Carnival friend!" Ryan said, before showing him the skull. "Except Ghoul Wonder here, but it's a package deal. Like Dresden and Bob, or Laurel and Hardy."

"Get in." Ryan walked inside, the Shroud closing the door behind them.

The Genome remained fully visible this time, perhaps believing the courier didn't know about that trick. He sat in his chair, the screens of his many computers showing a map of New Rome with multiple locations marked. Most seemed to be Augusti fronts, like the Bakuto and Renesco's place. A cup of camomile tea waited near the keyboard.

"Quicksave, how did you know?" Shroud asked him again, skipping the pleasantries and being all business.

"You don't ask a magician to reveal his tricks," Ryan replied, glancing at the cup. "Like this one: tea."

He shook Ghoul's head in front of the teacup until the skull let out a puff of white mist. The liquid turned cold, ice cubes appearing on the surface.

"Iced tea."

"True genius," Shroud replied with heavy sarcasm, although he didn't touch the beverage.

"He also works with fridges, and it's eco-friendly."

"I will rape you, you maniac!" Ghoul snarled. "I will kill you, and then I will rape your corpse while it's still warm!"

"You deserve the pain, asshole," the glass manipulator replied, completely unsympathetic to the Psycho's plight.
"You killed at least seventeen people, according to my files."

"Only seventeen?" The Psycho laughed, before bragging. "I killed hundreds! Hundreds!"

He sounded really proud of it too. You would think Ghoul would know better than brag about his body count while in his current position, but *nope*. Shroud observed the Psycho with cold disdain, before turning to Ryan. "What do you want me to do with him?"

"Why, interrogate him of course!" Ryan said, caressing the back of Ghoul's skull. "Isn't that right, Skellington? You'll tell us everything about this big bunker your big bad boss wants so much?"

"A bunker?" Shroud asked, instantly interested.

"BLEEP you, Quicksave! BLEEP you!"

"Shut up slave," Ryan replied, before slapping Ghoul.

“Y-you slapped me!” the talking skull complained. “You slapped—”

And Ryan slapped him again, the Psycho glaring at him with fury and humiliation. “Everything you can do to me, Adam can do worse.”

“Oh, really?” Accepting the challenge, Shroud separated a glass shard from his armor, shaping it into a thin needle. The object floated right in front of the Psycho’s skull, lining itself with his left eye. “If you don’t tell me everything, that needle will work its way into your eye, and then the brain. Slowly, painfully. Then I will work on the other.”

“I have survived decapitation, *bitch*,” Ghoul replied, unimpressed. He stared at the weapon as it came closer and closer, without faltering.

Ryan sighed, putting his hand on Shroud’s shoulder. “What?” the glass manipulator asked, stopping his needle as it reached the cornea, “You believe he doesn’t deserve it?”

“I know you want to play Jack Bauer, but that’s not how you torture a Psycho,” Ryan replied, searching inside his trench coat while putting the undead’s skull on a corner of the desk.

Ghoul’s eyes changed from confident to mesmerized, as the courier revealed a green potion, put inside a perfume-like receptacle. Dynamis’ logo was plastered on it, alongside the concoction’s name.

“The *Hercules* knockoff Elixir, made in Dynamis,” Ryan advertised the product, dangling it in front of Ghoul. The skull tried to take it with his teeth, but obviously, he couldn’t do it without legs. “You like it? I bought it this morning. It

grants superhuman strength and stamina, and I heard it feels like drinking a liquid orgasm.”

“Give it to me!” Ghoul snarled, his junkie addiction taking over. “Give it to me dammit!”

“Uh uh, it’s contraindicated for quadriplegics,” Ryan taunted him. “I guess I will have to flush it down the toilet.”

“Y-you monster!” The Psycho sounded genuinely horrified. “You won’t dare, do you know how much they cost?”

“What do they cost?” The courier exploded into maniacal laughter, chilling Ghoul to the bone. It made him laugh even more, with Glass Man looking at the scene in disturbed silence. “Life isn’t about *money!* It’s about having *fun!*”

“You have to stop him!” Ghoul snarled at Shroud. “You, glass man! You have to stop him! He’s mad! Mad enough to do it!”

“I don’t think I can restrain him unless you give me information,” Shroud replied, removing his needle and switching to good cop mode. “I barely have any control as it is.”

Ryan opened the bottle, letting Ghoul smell its sweet perfume, before tilting it sideways. Some of the product fell on the ground, the undead letting out a snarl of horror.

“Stop, stop!” Ghoul quickly caved in. “There’s a place below the Junkyard! A place!”

“A place?” Shroud asked, unimpressed, while Ryan kept slowly spilling the product. “That’s not enough!”

"A bunker, below the trash tower!" Ghoul said, his desperate eyes on the Elixir. "It's full of robots and laser turrets, they shoot at Genomes on sight! We came to New Rome for it!"

This time, Ryan stopped spilling the knockoff on the ground, having kept half of the bottle. Ghoul let out a breath of deep relief, which was odd since he had no lungs.

"What's in the bunker?" Shroud asked, his tone dangerous.

"Adam won't tell us," Ghoul replied, sounding truthful. "He only told a few. He doesn't want word to get out."

"So, you throw yourself at a fortified place without knowing what's inside?" Shroud deadpanned, although he sounded more and more interested as he listened. "Forgive me if I find that sketchy."

"Adam knows best," Ghoul replied. "He always does. And he's obsessed with it. He says it's, how does he say it... the future, yes! The future! The automated defenses sense Genomes and we lost a few people to them, so Adam decided to send normies in! Even dogs!"

"Another question then," Ryan said. "How about the sweet supply of Elixir you Psychos are high on?"

"I don't know, alright!" Ghoul snarled, Shroud listening like a hawk stalking a dove. "Psyshock handles it for Adam. They distribute knockoff Elixirs regularly, so long as we play by the rules. If we disobey or we look into it, we're cut from the supply."

"It would be impossible to generate a supply of genuine Elixirs, considering their rarity," Shroud mused, his arms crossed. "Do they come from Dynamis? If they are knockoffs, I would assume so."

"Are you deaf? I already told you, I don't know! I don't give a BLEEP where that sweet nectar comes from, so long as it flows!"

Ryan turned towards the glass man, very proud of himself.
"See?"

"That's worrying, I will grant you that," Shroud admitted. "I will look into it. Can I keep Ghoul for further interrogation?"

"Sure, I have the rest of the body in *cold storage* in my trunk." Ryan chuckled at his own joke, doubly so when Ghoul sent him a death glare. "Though I would like it if you kept me updated on your progress. I promised someone I would get the Meta out of Rust Town, and I will follow through."

Shroud tilted his head to the side but didn't ask for details. Ghoul, meanwhile, grew even more agitated. "Give it to me now! I told you everything!"

Ryan looked at this skull, and into his tiny, adorable eyes.
"No arms, no Elixir."

The undead let out a snarl of pain and anger, which warmed the courier's heart with twisted schadenfreude. "Hopes are like breakfast eggs," he told Shroud, as he put the knockoff on the other side of the desk, too far for Ghoul to reach.
"You can't start the day without crushing them."

Instead of responding, the glass man detached a part of his glass armor, reshaping it into a jar to imprison Ghoul's skull inside. "Why are you giving me this information? What do you want in return?"

Ryan put his hands behind his back and leaned towards Shroud, until their heads were within inches of one another.

“Where is Len?”

The glass man didn’t answer the question immediately. His brain seemed to have frozen in place, failing to compute Ryan’s words. “That makes no sense,” Shroud finally spoke up, shaking his head. “That question, that whole situation, makes no sense.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Saint Gobain? I believe it should be clear enough.”

“It is clear, but you shouldn’t...” He seemed to reach a eureka moment. “Is your power truly stopping time?”

Ryan said nothing.

“I always wondered why you called yourself Quicksave,” Shroud said. “You seem extraordinarily lucky as if you always know how things would turn out. As if the world itself would bend to your whims. You’re clearly insane, yet somehow, you always get away with all the messes you leave in your wake. You knew where I was without me leaving any hints, that the Psycho’s intel would interest me, and that I had the information you needed. It can’t be a coincidence, therefore it isn’t.”

“Oh?” Ryan looked at Shroud with curiosity. “Please, do go on.”

“You’re not actually stopping time,” Shroud argued. “Instead, I think you peek into various alternate realities, then select one that favors you and overwrites the current one. Advanced reality manipulation. The transition just *looks* like a time-stop to outsiders.”

Ryan listened to his rambling with great patience. He had to admit, it was a plausible theory, especially as far as Violet

Genomes went. Though Shroud made the error of believing Ryan had only one visible power, instead of one power having multiple applications. The courier decided to be careful in his next loops, to make sure the glass manipulator never guessed his ability's true nature.

"So, am I right?" the vigilante asked.

"Who knows," the courier replied with a shrug. "But if you're right, certainly you should listen to my wise words. Also, bet on the T-Rex tonight, and '*the orange is in the hen house*'."

"The orange is in the hen house?" Shroud asked, confused.

"If you remember these words, then you're safe."

This confused the Genome greatly, much to Ryan's amusement. While he mentally pondered on the matter, the glass Genome turned toward his keyboard and started typing. A map of the west and the Tyrrhenian Sea appeared on the screen, and Shroud put his finger on a spot, in a maritime area roughly equidistant from New Rome, Sardinia, and Sicily. "She's there."

"The Vavilov basin?" Ryan mused, his heart skipping a beat.

"The deepest part of the Tyrrhenian Basin," the glass Genome confirmed. "The Underdiver, as she calls herself now, has an undersea base somewhere in the area, three kilometers deep below the surface."

Ryan gasped, as he connected the dots. "An undersea communist utopia."

"You think this is a new Kremlin?" Shroud turned his head, quite surprised.

“She’s Marxist-Leninist,” Ryan replied, completely giddy. Finally, he had reached his goal. “How do I get in?”

“I don’t know,” the glass man replied, disappointing the courier. “Even with diver equipment, the place is full of mutant fish and other hazards. I didn’t look too much into it, since besides supplying and repairing their shipping submarines, she isn’t involved in the Augusti organization.”

“Wow, you actually told me everything.”

Shroud froze. “Yes, and?”

And if Ryan had known it would be so easy, instead of having to attack a movie studio or follow a seminar, he would have done that ages ago! “I hope you aren’t planning anything harmful with that information,” the courier said, changing the subject, “Because if you intend to do anything to her, then we’ll have a problem.”

“My only targets are the Augusti and Meta,” Shroud replied. “Although I suspect you already know that part. If I targeted every private contractor in the city, half of New Rome would be wiped out, and she finances an orphanage in Rust Town. She ships them food and money every week. I won’t attack someone trying to turn their life around.”

Ryan froze, as a few things fell into place. “The Meta-Gang intends to attack that place soon.”

Shroud immediately tensed. “Why?”

“You heard dem bones, they need normies to get inside the bunker. Apparently, some places are too big for adults to crawl into.”

"So you can peek into alternate timelines," Shroud took this as a confirmation of his theory, although he clenched his fists. "You are a pseudo-precog, and you help me because this is the optimal scenario."

"Don't get too cocky, Windshield."

"I will take care of the orphanage," he said with firm dedication. "As for reaching your friend, I cannot help much. The only person who remains in contact with her is Vulcan since they have a technology trade going on. I can look into it if you want."

"I don't think that will be necessary, but thank you," Finally, the moment of truth. "You see, I have received an offer from both Wyvern and Vulcan to join their respective organizations."

"Continue."

"I want you to stop your explosive assassination spree of the Augusti."

"And why would I do that?" Shroud asked, his tone turning from cautiously friendly to cold.

"Because if I infiltrate the Augusti on your behalf, I don't want to get blown-up by accident."

The vigilante remained silent for a few seconds as he processed Ryan's words, then he laughed. "You know that they have a truth-teller?"

"Luigi's my problem," Ryan replied, the vigilante a bit surprised that he knew the name. "What you want is to cripple the Augusti organization, correct?"

"Not cripple," Shroud replied. "Destroy it utterly."

"Which can be done without killing anyone," Ryan argued.
"Most of their revenue comes from Bliss."

"Not all of it," Shroud replied. "They have a finger in every pie. Prostitution, gambling, weapon trafficking, booze... but Bliss is the cornerstone of their business and money-maker, yes. It's half their revenues."

"And correct me if I'm wrong, all the Bliss come from their island superlab."

"Yes," Shroud confirmed. "I don't know why, but they can only produce the drug there. Maybe they need a specific Genome or environmental conditions. I haven't been able to get in, or even close. Security is too tight."

"Well then, that's it," Ryan said, putting his hands on his hips in a Superman pose. "I'll destroy this lab for you, and cripple their business!"

Glass man remained skeptical though. "Assuming you succeed, which... may be plausible... you want me to do what, ignore the criminal syndicate killing people every day in the meantime?"

"You don't attack the Augusti, especially Zanbato, Chitter, or Sphere." He might have included Luigi in the group, but Ryan didn't like him and the truth-teller could cause problems down the line. "And obviously you won't go after me."

"Crippling their Bliss supply won't be enough to destroy the organization," Shroud replied. "It will weaken them, certainly, but we want to destroy Augustus' empire permanently."

"Yes, but if an assassin targets them, then the Augusti will be on edge and increase security around the lab," Ryan pointed out. "If they get no early warning, and focus entirely on the Meta..."

The courier let the sentence hang, while Shroud joined his hands to ponder the offer. Frankly, he had everything to gain with this arrangement. The Augusti and Meta-Gang would kill each other without him having to risk discovery, and he would have an agent inside Augustus' group supplying him with information. With his own access to Dynamis' servers, the vigilante could secretly infiltrate every organization in the city, fix the whole board.

"Three weeks," said the vigilante. "You have three weeks to destroy that lab. Afterward, the matter will be out of my hands and I can't promise anything."

"And in whose hands will it be then?"

Shroud remained silent as a tombstone. Perhaps he wanted to gauge the limits of Ryan's abilities, or he didn't trust him yet.

Well, hopefully, Ryan would have met with Len then, and it wouldn't be his problem anymore. He didn't care if Augustus and the Carnival fought one another, so long as he completed his own Perfect Run. He might even make another loop, just to bypass saying anything compromising to the glass manipulator.

"Don't bother coming back here, I will contact you," Shroud said. "I will keep you informed of the Meta investigation, and you will return me the favor as far as the Augusti are concerned. If you tell anyone I exist, I will learn of it, and the deal is off."

"Deal." Ryan presented his hand, Shroud shaking it. "Don't take it personally when I say I hope we don't meet again."

"We both know this ain't happening." The glass manipulator dismissed him without a word, returning to his screens and files.

Ryan turned away, reached the door, and opened it.

"Quicksave?" Shroud called him from behind.

Ryan stopped on the threshold.

"I wish you luck, for everything. You're doing good in the world. Don't forget that."

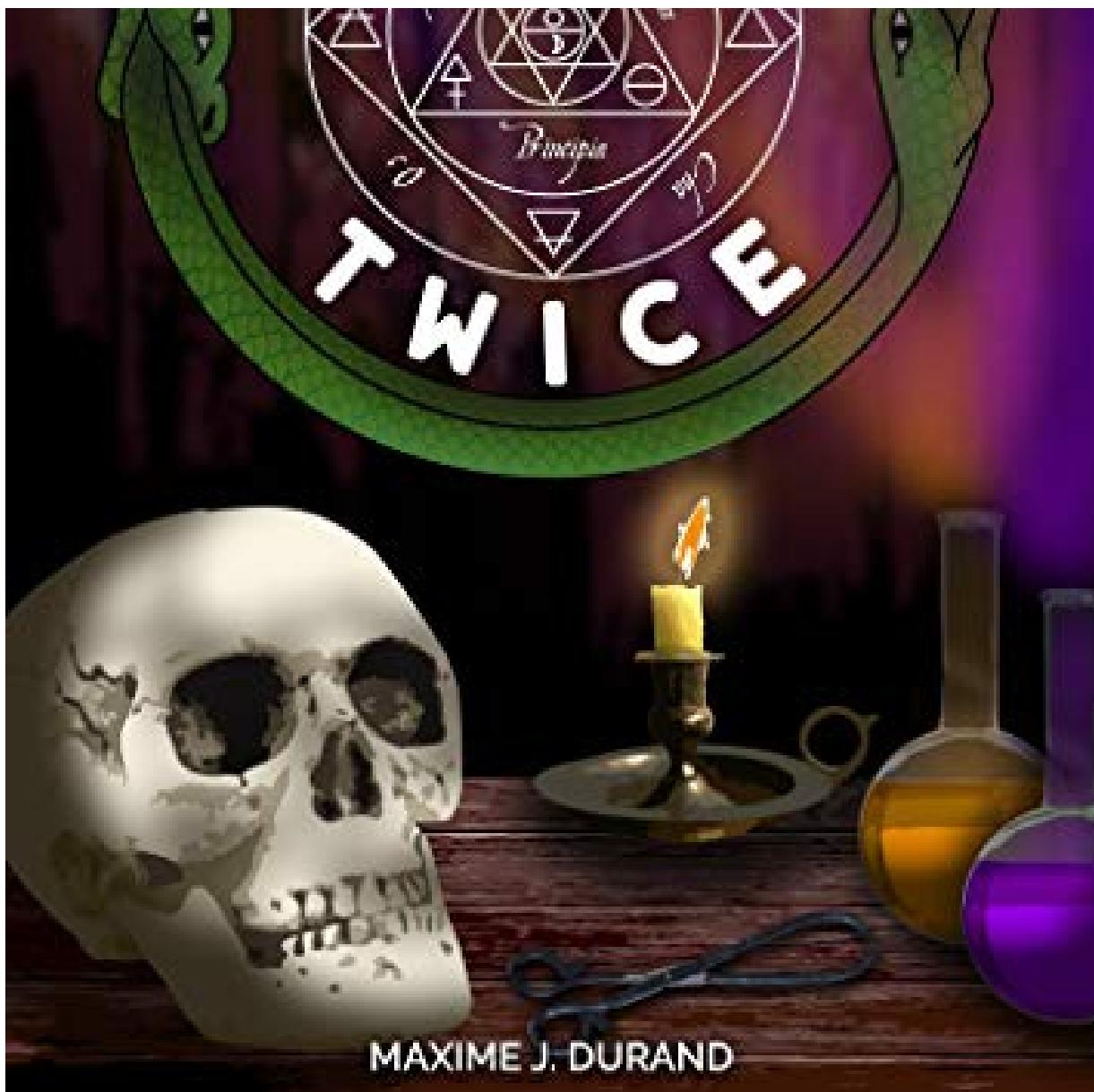
Ryan waved his hand at him without turning back, closing the door behind. He glanced at the sea beyond the ship graveyard, where Len waited for him.

Finally, the perfect path was clear.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Hi guys, a bit unrelated to the Perfect Run, but if some of you come here from NDT... well, the kindle is finally out.





If you wish to support NDT, I would appreciate [any new review on Amazon](#). It will help the story be recommended to a new audience. An audiobook will eventually follow, once Vainqueur Vol. II is out.

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20: Past Fragment: Under the Sea

- *Four years ago.*

Len Sabino woke up on a mattress, the room cold, and chill. Water leaked from the wood ceiling, rain hitting the window. Thunder echoed in the distance, the storm getting closer. In spite of the noise, Ryan was soundly asleep next to her, snoring almost as loud as the lightning.

“Hey, Riri, you’re sleeping?” she whispered, but the boy didn’t offer any response. Ryan was kind of cute when he slept, and completely in denial about the snoring.

Len remembered the day she and her dad had found him, amidst the rubble of a village destroyed by marauders. He had hidden in the basement, while his whole community had perished, their livestock taken. If she hadn’t scavenged his house looking for supplies, Len may never have met Ryan.

They stuck together for years afterward, never far from the other. They survived the Wars, Dad’s rampages, marauders, and Genomes. Always together, even sharing the same bed. They were siblings in all but name... though she wished they could become more, even if she was too shy to say it out loud. She never had a boyfriend, didn’t understand how these things worked.

If only he would make the first move.

Len glanced around the room. It used to be some kind of hunting lodge near the Alps, a silent house of wood on a steep hillside. The locals must have abandoned it a few years ago, either chased away by marauders or moving towards the rebuilding cities for protection. Everybody spoke about New Rome, whenever she managed to talk to someone outside her family without Dad interfering.

When Ryan wouldn't wake up, Len left the bed in her pajamas and searched the room. Her companion had left his pants on a chair, and while it wasn't nice, the girl looked into his pockets.

The Blue Elixir seemed to shine, as lightning fell right outside the bedroom.

It had been weeks since they left Venice, and so far Dad hadn't noticed the potions. He had left the kids alone three days ago, to salvage stuff nearby. She hoped he wouldn't kill anyone this time.

Len knew her father would come back. Ryan wished he didn't. He feared Dad, *hated* him.

Len understood. Dad was... difficult. He was already drinking a bit too much after Mom left them for her other family, but he always did his best to raise Len and her brother. When Cesare died during the bombing, something broke inside Dad and never came back. The Elixirs had just been the last straw that broke the camel's back, making him take out his pain on others.

But in spite of everything, he was still her father.

Len observed the potion with a mix of fear and hope. She knew how Dad might react once she drank it, but... Blue Elixirs made people smarter. Geniuses. Mechron drank one, and he invented killer robots and orbital lasers.

If it gave her a smart power, maybe she could create a cure for Dad. Make him normal again. Turn their group into a real family, instead of... of whatever they were right now.

Len hesitated, briefly glanced at Ryan, then moved into another room of the lodge. The garage at the back.

The place was complete chaos, a storage area where the previous inhabitants put everything they got their hands on. Books, car parts, tools, lamps... even an old fridge and washing machine long out of use.

It had a workshop, however, perhaps used to skin hunted animals. Since electricity didn't work, Len had to light up a candle to see and provide some warmth. She sat behind the workbench and examined the Elixir. The receptacle provided no notice, no information besides its helix symbol. It would be a leap into the unknown. A direct injection scared her, so she decided to ingest the substance directly. She had seen Dad do it before, so it should work.

Breathing long and deep, Len removed the syringe and drank the potion whole.

The substance tasted unlike anything she had ever felt. It mixed the texture of saltwater with alien flavors, neither sweet nor salty, neither acid nor bitter. The liquid had no natural component at all.

More strangely, the substance fused with her flesh. As she drank it, the Elixir vanished before it could move into her stomach; it went straight into her bloodstream through the

tongue and mouth, bypassing the normal digestion process. In the span of seconds, Len had swallowed it whole.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Len put the empty syringe on the workbench, wondering if something had gone wrong. Had age caused the Elixir to lose its potency?

And then her mind caught fire.

A manic surge of divine inspiration possessed Len, ideas flowing into her head. Raw, pure information filled her brain like a torrent of water breaking through a dam, expanding her neurons, changing her whole understanding of the universe. She couldn't move, her consciousness freezing as it struggled to compute an *enormous* mass of new content.

Her body went numb, a surge of blue energy phasing through her nerves, her bones, her organs. It was brief but intense, her entire self altered on a fundamental level.

As the mutation continued, Len entered some kind of fugue state. The urge to create possessed her; her power *demanded* to be used, like a baby wishing to be born into the world. As the blue light left her body, Len's hands grabbed the remains of the fridge, the tools, the washing machine, and everything within reach.

She didn't know how long she remained in that manic state. Maybe minutes, maybe hours. During that period, nothing else mattered; not Dad, not Ryan, not the world. She only needed to create something, *anything*.

When the surge lessened and Len regained control of herself, she had transformed the fridge and random stuff into some kind of bulky bathysphere. She had somehow painted it red, and even incorporated a hammer and broken

sickle into the final design; even in that fugue state, her personality had bled through.

She understood her power's nature, almost intuitively. It boiled down to one word.

Water.

Her power was all about water. How it worked. How to understand marine life, and how to adapt land animals to survive below the waves. How to alter the ocean on a worldwide scale, how to make technology that resisted deep sea pressure, how to create devices capable of causing tsunamis. She knew what creatures lived in the darkest abysses of the planet, and how she could communicate with them. Her power provided her with all the information she needed, allowing her own creativity to fill in the blanks.

For Len, who had always loved the sea and Jules Verne's stories, it was almost a dream come true. It made her wonder if the Elixir granted powers based on the drinker's personality, providing an ability that they would like based on the selected color.

But for all its wonders, her power wouldn't help Dad.

It wouldn't help Dad! She couldn't imagine any way to cure him, even with her expanded intellect! She didn't even understand how his unique biology worked, let alone how to deal with his insanity! She could make submarines, tsunami machines, water-control devices, but nothing that could help her understand Elixirs, let alone the madness they caused! And he—

"Len."

Len turned towards the door, Ryan stepping inside the garage while still in his pajamas. He glanced at the mini-sub, then at the empty bottle; his mouth said nothing, but his eyes widened.

"I had to," Len said, her voice breaking. "I had to."

There was no condemnation in his gaze, only worry. "Was it worth it?"

Len shook her head in defeat, crumbling on the bench. The creative surge had left her exhausted as if she had run for hours.

She felt his hand on her shoulder. She raised her head at Ryan, who offered her a warm smile. "Hey," he said, pointing at the bathysphere. "It's still beautiful. Now you can send fish to Siberia if they misbehave."

The lame joke came out of nowhere but made Len laugh. "You're horrible," she replied, the tension evaporating. "I should send *you* to a gulag."

"We both know that will only be a temporary solution."

"Seriously though," Len smirked, "We could travel. I can make a Nautilus from scrap parts—"

They heard the lodge's door open from the outside, the lock removed.

"Len? Cesare?" Bloodstream's voice echoed through the lodge alongside the lightning, Ryan's hand tensing on Len's shoulder. "Where are you? We have to go!"

"Hide," Ryan said, panic overtaking his voice. "You have to hide."

"Where?" Len replied sadly. "There's nowhere to go."

"We have to leave, the homeless are revolting again! They killed my clone in..."

When Bloodstream entered the garage, leaving bloody footprints behind, Ryan had moved in front of Len. The Psycho observed his daughter without a word, the blood making up his body shifting like a raging ocean.

"Len." Dad's behavior had suddenly changed from warm to tense. "What am I sensing?"

"Dad..."

"What am I sensing in your blood?"

Ryan shielded Len, like a knight in shining armor protecting her from a furious dragon. But for all his bravery, he had no sword.

"You have.... you have lied to me..." Bloodstream rasped angrily, his fingers turning into claws. "You lied to your own father!"

Len froze. She suddenly felt so small, the world so cold and unwelcoming.

"The power isn't for you!" Dad snarled angrily. "It was for me! It was always meant for me! Don't you understand, you stupid daughter? I took it for you! I took it to protect you! Protect you from this sick world!"

"I know..." the Genius apologized, lowering her eyes. "I know."

It was her fault. If she had been strong... if she had been strong, Dad wouldn't have had to take those potions and transform into a monster.

"Ever since your mother abandoned us, it was my responsibility! Mine!" Dad calmed himself, but the menace in his voice only grew. "You have to be punished."

"Dad, please..."

"Don't touch her!" Ryan tried to stop the Psycho, but Bloodstream simply slapped him out of the way with a furious backhand, sending the boy to the floor. Her father moved towards Len, hands raised to strangle her.

His daughter closed her eyes and didn't resist. She just waited for the inevitable.

But it never came.

She opened her eyes again, facing her father's featureless visage. His claws within an inch of his daughter's neck, Bloodstream trembled, as if suffering from Parkinson's disease.

"No..." Dad suddenly held his head with both hands, fighting a headache. "No... not her... not Len... I can't... I can control it... I can..."

Bloodstream walked away from the garage, his last embers of humanity struggling against the Elixir addiction. Dad vanished inside the lodge, Len hearing him bang his head against a wall in a room nearby.

Ryan had recovered from the slap, Len extending a hand to help get back on his feet. "You're okay?" she asked with

concern. He had blood falling from his nose; not Bloodstream's, but his own.

"Yeah," he said, although clearly shaken. "Yeah."

"You were very brave," she tried to cheer him up, blushing a bit. "It was very heroic."

Instead of answering with words, he kissed her.

Len gasped, as he pulled her towards him without warning, his lips against her. It was a kiss born of hunger, of a primal desire for comfort and human contact.

It felt...

It felt good.

After all the fear and tension, it just felt *good*.

They quickly broke the embrace as they heard Dad crawl back into the room, putting space between each other. Whether it was out of fear of discovery or embarrassment, Len couldn't tell.

"I am... I am well... I see clearly..." Bloodstream seemed calmer, but he didn't mention the incident. He didn't even acknowledge Ryan or his injury. "I see it clearly now. You are smart, Len. You're smarter now. You can make anything."

"Y-yes, no I mean," Len cleared her throat anxiously. "I can't make anything, but I can build stuff."

"We will leave," Bloodstream declared suddenly. "People are after me. After us. They destroy my clones and close in. You will make a sub, and we will leave. It was getting harder and harder to find good places to crash in anyway."

"Leave where?" Ryan asked, very careful.

"How about America?" Bloodstream replied, joining his hands. "The land of opportunity, Hollywood! We will be stars there, stars! Like the Kardashians!"

"I..." That was insane, Len thought. They barely knew how things were in France, let alone across the Atlantic! "I will see, Dad..."

"It's all going to be *fine*." Both Len and Ryan tensed, as Dad put a hand on their heads, almost paternally. "We'll always be together."

- *Present Day*

Silence and darkness.

The bottom of the ocean was the most peaceful place on Earth. You could always hear sounds of some kind on the surface. The singing of birds. The wind on the grass. The horns of cars. The moans of Rust Town's whores and addicts.

Here, in the deepest abyss of the Mediterranean Sea, Len was alone with her thoughts.

She liked it this way.

Carrying a plasma torch adapted for the underwater environment and clad in her diving armor suit, the Genius worked on repairing the base's outer shell. Some of the steel parts hadn't handled the stress of deep sea pressure, weakening a part of the modular habitat. While she had designed the place to be highly modular, with each 'house' independent from the others, any leak could cause a disaster down the line.

If it was to house life one day, it had to be perfectly safe. Safe from the horrors and darkness outside.

The antidepressants dulled Len's mind, made her numb after the initial manic rush, but her power allowed her to focus anyway. If anything, she only really felt happy while working. Using her power filled Len with euphoria, provided her with a sense of purpose and direction she lacked in her life.

It must be night above the surface, the Genius thought. / wonder...

Unable to suppress her curiosity, Len briefly activated her radio, listening to a conversation above the surface while working.

"Existence is subjective."

"Mm?" Even now, hearing Ryan's voice startled Len and almost made her drop her tool.

"Your question, about whether I exist if you can roll back time." Len didn't recognize that voice. A new one. *"We can never know we exist, so there is no objective truth to existence."*

"You're still thinking it over?"

"Yes. It's disturbing."

"Eh, you get used to the uncertainty."

No, you didn't.

She couldn't.

Len eavesdropped through Ryan's Chronoradio for a while, then muted it. She had watched him from afar the day after he reached New Rome, while he was close to the shores. The Genius could have sworn he knew she was nearby, and it made her retreat beneath the waves.

Ryan was looking for her. He had been for years.

And she didn't know what to tell him.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Happy Thanksgiving for all american readers. Don't let the turkey escape.

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21: The Rehearsals

All was well so far on the Augusti Path.

Ryan had met Zanbato as expected, beat up Sarin at the harbor, and now repeated the exact same conversation which would lead him to crash at Jamie's house. All was well and good, to the sound of crashing waves against the piers...

"I have to be sure about something," Luigi asked the courier. "Are you a snitch or a double agent?"

"Well, I'm not really on anyone's side," Ryan replied, but then his mouth acted on its own, "But I'm a Carnival infiltrator, yes."

... or not.

Everyone present turned to look at him, a tense silence settling in. The grunts raised their weapons, while Zanbato's face turned from shocked, to disappointed, and finally, to *furious*.

"Uh oh."

Okay, two lessons learned.

One, Ryan hated truth-tellers. *Hated* them, with a *passion*.

Two, Zanbato could make sashimi out of people with his laser sword. Ryan wouldn't look at sushi the same way ever again.

But this time... this time, it would be different. The courier had rehearsed the perfect misleading answers. Luigi's power compelled Ryan to say the truth, but only according to the teller's exact words.

"I have to be sure about something," Luigi asked him again.
"Are you a snitch or a double agent?"

"I can't snitch on a group I haven't officially joined yet, and I am not a double agent." Technically, he was a triple one.

"Are you a mole?"

"Of course I'm not a mole, I'm human."

There! Saved! He did it, he did it!

"Okay, I should work on my wording," Luigi sighed but didn't give up. "Are you, or do you intend, to relay information about us to another organization?"

"Well, yes, I intend to. Hell, I already did!"

Goddammit!

Okay.

Okay, third time's the charm.

Through timing and intelligence, Ryan had skillfully navigated through the chain of causality to avoid the fated question. He had put on the charm, befriended everyone, distracted the grunts with funny anecdotes. Now, the

courier and Zanbato prepared to return to the Plymouth Fury, and go eat some delicious pizzas.

"Hey, Quicksave," Luigi asked, as they took a few steps towards the car. "Before you go, there are a few questions I must ask every new recruit."

"Luigi, seriously, please, don't do it," Ryan replied, his eyes pleading. "For your sake, don't say this. It won't end well, I swear it won't—"

"Sorry, protocol. Are you a snitch?"

"Yes, yes, yes! Yes, I am! Is that what you want me to say, Luigi? Is that what you want me to say?"

Quicksave breathed deeply, fighting off his rising frustration.

"Luigi," Ryan pointed a finger at the truth-teller, as everyone raised their weapons at the courier's face. "We're going to have a problem, you and I."

"Where's Luigi?" Zanbato asked Grunt 1 when the truth-teller failed to show up at the harbor, leaving only the henchmen to deal with the operation. "Wasn't he supposed to take care of the shipment?"

"Sorry, he was attacked yesterday night," Gruntie said, carrying Luigi's cell phone. Apparently, he would have to fill in for the Made Man. "He's at the hospital right now, and he'll be out of commission for a while."

"What?" The news shocked Jamie, who clearly hadn't been informed. "By whom?"

"Some crazy psychopath with a hockey mask and stick, from what I heard."

"It's a very dangerous sport, hockey," Ryan said absentmindedly, looking at the sea. "I don't recommend it."

"Yeah, that was crazy," Grunt 1 nodded. "Apparently Luigi returned home late for a party, you know, perfectly normal, he starts opening his home's door and then BAM! Some *Friday the 13th* crazy jumps out of the shadows, breaks his jaw with a hockey stick, beats him up for a while, and then leaves."

"Why?" Jamie almost chortled. "Why Luigi? Was it a robbery?"

"No, the maniac didn't even take his money," Grunt 1 replied. "Maybe it was a hate crime?"

"The attacker looked really, uh, *passionate* according to witnesses," Gruntie said. "At least from what I heard."

"Well, Luigi sleeps around a lot, a real homewrecker," Grunt 2 pointed out, "Maybe it was a jealous boyfriend? It had to happen one day."

"Or it could be the Meta." Zanbato crossed his arms. "But then how did they learn where he lived?"

It actually took Ryan more time to find the hockey equipment than Luigi's address. Nobody played that sport nowadays.

"Quicksave, you're staying at a hotel right?" Jamie asked Ryan. "I think you should crash at my place for the night, just in case. The city isn't safe at all"

“You don’t say,” Ryan replied.

After that, events happened as predicted. Jamie invited him home, they played poker, went to Vulcan’s factory, and Ryan saved the pandas from extinction.

Ryan’s mind had long entered auto-pilot, as he let his sense of timing guide him forward. The auto-pilot wasn’t really a sub-power, simply a state his conscious mind entered when he couldn’t be bothered to live through the same events over and over again. It was no different than daydreaming while repeating a mind-numbing task.

Humans were bound by the laws of causality. With a few exceptions, he constantly lived through an endless theater rehearsal. People held no mystery to him after a while, always reacting the same way to the exact same things; they forgot him and relearned the same information, over, and over again. They became machines, and Ryan the only human in the room.

The repetition would drive anyone insane.

But it was necessary suffering to reach the perfect ending and soon, it would finally end. Everything would turn right when Ryan found Len. He was certain of it.

His cellphone beeping snapped him back to reality, interrupting the flow of causality.

It took Ryan a second to remember when and where he was when he snapped back to consciousness. Extensive looping and repetition often eroded the Genome’s perception of reality, especially when his power noticed an alteration in his personal timeline.

Ryan checked his phone, while Lanka had already left for Vulcan's factory, the Panda laying defeated on the ground. The message involved a photo of Rust Town's orphanage, intact, and a text below.

S: Psyshock taken care of. Children are safe.

Thanks for the tip.

Ryan lived for such surprises, good or bad.

When he noticed Pluto and her bodyguard talking with Zanbato, Ryan expected events to repeat until he met Vulcan. The Augusti's underboss froze the exact same way upon meeting him, and said the exact same thing.

“You,” Pluto asked Quicksave.

“*Moi?*” Ryan answered, preparing to repeat the same conversation.

“Have we met before?”

This surprised Ryan, as he didn't expect that answer.
“Possibly, I'm unforgettable.”

“I'm sure of it, we already met,” Pluto replied, her tone turning from curious to confused. “Who are you?”

“Boss, what is it?” her bodyguard asked Pluto, while Lanka stood still next to Ryan. The underboss' mere attention terrified her into silence.

“He's marked,” Pluto said. “But I don't remember him.”

...

And shit! Did her power somehow mark him across time?

"Is something wrong, boss?" Jamie joined the conversation, carefully backing Ryan up with Ki-jung.

"Who is your new recruit, Zanbato?"

Ryan prepared to joke when Jamie invaded his personal space, putting a hand on his shoulder. *You speak to her when talked to*, he all but said out loud. "Quicksave," Zanbato answered Pluto's question in the courier's place. "He's a Violet. Time-stopper."

"Not a Blue?" Pluto observed Ryan with an intense stare, as if trying to peer into his soul. The courier couldn't explain why, but he felt a growing pressure around him. The air thickened, something weighing on his mind.

"Cancel would have noticed a memory alteration or infohazard," Pluto's female bodyguard pointed out. "Maybe your powers interfere with each other somehow?"

Pluto didn't seem convinced, her eyes set on Ryan. The courier whistled and looked away innocently, while Zanbato came to his defense. "Quicksave may be odd, but he is reliable," the Made Man said. "He helped us fight off Sarin yester—"

"What's your name, Quicksave?" she asked Ryan, completely dismissing Zanbato's words. "Your real name."

"Oh, I'm Ryan!" he replied with mock reverence, alleviating the tension. "Ryan Romano. I'm immortal, but don't tell anyone."

"No one lives forever," she replied coldly. "I've got places to be right now, but I will call you back soon to clear this up. Play stupid, play smart, run, or say no, and you will die."

The way she threatened him... No, wait, that wasn't a threat. That was a statement.

If Ryan didn't follow her order, he would die. The end.

The courier and his group watched the underboss leave with her bodyguard in complete silence until they were out of sight. Nobody dared to speak up at first, so Ryan broke the ice. "So, who's up for Chinese?" he asked.

"Shit," Lanka said, letting out a breath of relief.

"Blabbermouth, what the *fuck* did you do?"

"What didn't I do?!" Ryan replied, just as confused. "Or would you prefer Italian?"

"This is serious, Quicksave," Jamie said. "That woman is Pluto, Augustus' sister and underboss. Her interest is *not* a good thing."

"I suggest you follow her lead without question," Ki-jung said, her face full of concern, "She can kill with a thought."

"Why is she even here?" Lanka asked her team leader.

"The boss gave the go to hit the Meta-Gang hard," Jamie replied, his arms crossed. "Vulcan will take command of the clean-up since she's been itching to test her new weapons in the field, and Pluto loaned her the Killer Seven hit squad. I say it's finally time we clean up the trash."

"Especially after what they did to poor Luigi," Ki-jung said with a frown. "To attack him in front of his own house... if you can't feel safe at home anymore..."

"Are we sure that it's the Meta who did that though?" Lanka asked, skeptical. "I mean, it was just a guy with a hockey

cross. If it was a Meta, there should have been a lot more casualties."

"It's probably an unpowered junkie they paid off," Jamie replied. "The Meta-Gang isn't a big group. It would make sense for them to outsource their dirty work."

Ryan listened to the discussion, trying to puzzle out the sequence of events. It appeared Shroud had followed through with his promise and stopped targeting the Augusti with assassinations. With no one to divert their attention, the criminal syndicate had decided to focus entirely on wiping out the Meta-Gang.

Ryan wasn't sure how Pluto's newfound interest in him would play out though. It could threaten his entire infiltration mission, and he had to figure out how she could identify him even after he altered the timeline.

Goddammit, every time he made progress, a new problem arose!

No, wait, it didn't matter. Ryan only had to play along until Vulcan told him how to contact or reach Len. He didn't have to stay with the Augusti longer than that. And if they tried to force him into one fetch quest after another...

Well, it wouldn't end well for them.

They entered Vulcan's factory next, with Zanbato lecturing Ryan on how he should talk to the Capo once more. Ryan barely paid attention, having already disregarded the advice the first time, but the tense meeting with Pluto made the courier reconsider how to treat with the mercurial Genius. With already one high-ranked Augusti suspecting him and his long-awaited meeting with Len on the line, there was no point in alienating another.

Even if he hated it, Quicksave would have to *behave*.

Ryan and co entered Vulcan's workshop, the courier's eyes immediately drawn to the enormous armor. It was odd to look at this enormous machine again after the Genius tried to murder Ryan with it.

Instead of teasing Vulcan about her height this time, Ryan focused entirely on the armor while Zanbato exchanged introductions with the Capo. Vulcan, however, quickly noticed Ryan's interest in her work.

"Impressed yet?" she asked Ryan, clearly expecting him to flatter her.

"Interesting design, especially the miniature fusion reactor," Ryan replied innocently. "But you should coat the joints with a protective, anti-shock layer. Someone might break them by applying selective pressure."

"I thought of that," she replied, a bit surprised by his insight. "But I haven't found an alloy composite which may resist the intense movement friction without causing an arm-jamming. Considering its intended target, I favored speed over defense."

Ryan remembered how Wyvern stomped on the machine last time but kept that amusing anecdote for himself. "Why not a plastic derivative then?"

Vulcan sat on her workbench, a flash of interest crossing her face. "Are you a Genius, Quicksave?"

"Not really, but I have experience with Genius-tech." He absentmindedly tossed her the A-bomb. "And, well, pretty much everything."

“Everything?” Wyvern’s nemesis observed the bomb with fascination. “Such a beautiful design...”

“Except ice-skating.” Now that he thought of it, Ryan really should dedicate a loop to mastering that skill, in case he had to fight Ghoul again. “You want to keep the bomb? Can I bribe you with it?”

“I can keep it?” By now, Vulcan looked like a child receiving a surprise Christmas present.

“Is that what love at first sight looks like?” Lanka mused with a deadpan face. “I thought it was a lie.”

“Careful with your tongue, Sphere,” Vulcan replied, keeping the bomb. “Quicksave, I want you in my division. You start tomorrow.”

Wow wow wow, she was skipping a lot of steps there! Jamie immediately tried to defend his imaginary purity. “I thought he might do well with Mercury,” he cleared his throat, “and Pluto wants to check up on him. She doesn’t like him.”

“Pluto?” Vulcan shrugged. “She’s a paranoid bitch, but I know how to handle her. She didn’t even want me on the team when I joined, and yet, here I am. Don’t worry about her, Quicksave, I’ll cover you.”

Was she actually being *nice*? The contrast with the short-fuse, violent criminal who tried to murder Ryan a few loops ago couldn’t be clearer.

“As for Mercury, I scouted Quicksave first, and he’ll be wasted on minion work,” the Genius added with smug disdain, brushing Jamie off.

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm not interested in long-term employment," Ryan replied. "I'm looking for Len, black hair, blue eyes, Marxist-Leninist."

"The Underdiver."

"I know she has an undersea base and you're in contact with her," Ryan said, putting his hands behind his back. "If you could send me there, I would greatly appreciate it."

"You're well-informed," Vulcan replied, before making a strange face. "Contact isn't the term I would employ with her. We're more like Genius penpals, trading tech sometimes. I can make a meeting happen, though not for free."

Ryan thought she wanted him to invite him for dinner as payment, but instead, she still ordered them to ruin Wyvern's movie for petty revenge. Some things never changed.

Still, he looked around for hidden cameras or a bomb. Things couldn't work out so well, could they?

"Come back tomorrow when the work is done and your trouble with Pluto is solved, Ryan," Vulcan said. "I'll give you your reward, and change your mind about the long-term employment part."

The courier noticed she spoke to him on a first-name basis now.

Nothing better than an A-bomb to earn a woman's affection.

"That worked out well," Lanka said when they left the factory, quite astonished. "I thought you would fuck this up somehow, blabbermouth, but she seems to like you."

"Are you alright?" Jamie asked Ryan once they were out of the factory.

"Why the question, Yojimbo?" the courier asked back.

"You look subdued," the swordsman pointed out. "I can't say it's a bad thing, but you seem to feel down, man."

Sharp. In truth, Ryan didn't feel so well because he was very close to reaching his goal. He had eliminated Shroud's interference, things were moving smoothly, and unless Pluto decided to kill him outright, he should be able to meet back up with Len tomorrow. The path seemed clear.

He thought he would feel excitement, joy at having overcome all obstacles in the way, but Ryan couldn't shake off a vague sentiment of unease. Like someone having trained all their life to climb Mount Everest, and having the summit in sight.

He was afraid of being disappointed.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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22: Speech Checks

And so, Vulcan's biblical judgment was passed upon the heathens at Dynamis. Wyvern's movie ended in rats and pestilence, like the previous Augusti loop.

It saddened Ryan to ruin Atom Cat's first movie appearance, especially after befriending him earlier. His adorable feline sidekick hated these commercial ventures though, so no harm done. They would make up later.

When the Made Men returned to the house in his beautiful car, the courier almost expected Shroud to blow up the place again. Ryan had never gone farther than this moment, so he couldn't tell what would happen next. Ki-jung didn't seem agitated in the Plymouth Fury's back, so her rat sentries should be fine.

The courier almost wished for an unforeseen disaster, to spice things up.

When Ryan noticed Vulcan's enormous armor parked in the garden right next to a black Lamborghini, and girls waiting at the front door, he realized someone upstairs had granted his prayer.

Instead of summoning them to her lair, Pluto had decided to visit her employees herself.

Besides her usual bodyguard and Vulcan, the Underboss also enjoyed the company of a young woman Ryan hadn't

seen before; a petite, smiling blonde with pale blue eyes, who kept her hair in two braids. She wore a white sweater and pants, and Ryan guessed she probably had Slavic origins from her facial features.

“She brought two of the Killer Seven,” Chitter said, uneasy at the sight.

“You’re ready for this?” Jamie asked Ryan, as the courier parked the car.

“Well, it feels like I’ll have to pass hard speech checks or fight a difficult boss,” Ryan replied. “But that means I’m close to the end.”

“You aren’t going to beat that one, I can already tell you,” Lanka said at the back, everyone getting out of the car.

The group approached Pluto’s own, with everyone tensing up as the Underboss looked at them. Even Ryan remained quiet at first, mostly because he knew his long-awaited reunion with Len was just around that corner.

“Boss,” Jamie cleared his throat, “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“That’s the purpose of a surprise inspection,” Pluto replied dryly, her eyes settling on Ryan. “Our business is with him only, Zanbato. Your team can do as they wish.”

“If you don’t mind, I would like to be present,” the Made Man replied calmly. “If only as moral support to the new recruit.”

“I’ll stay too,” Lanka said.

“Aw, I knew you cared,” Ryan taunted her.

"If she kills you, blabbermouth, I'll be the one saddled with corpse disposal," she replied. "I would rather do less work."

"I guess I will stay too then," Ki-jung replied, although she clearly didn't want to. A rat climbed on her shoulder, like a Pikachu. "Just don't mind me."

Pluto shrugged it off, and then immediately started barking orders. "Sparrow, search his person; Vulcan, check for any Genius tech he might have. Cancel, you know the drill."

"I'm already on it," the blonde said with a Bulgarian accent, before grinning at Ryan. "Hey! I'm Cancel, but you can call me Greta! Nice to meet you, Ryan!"

"Oh hi, Greta." The courier waved a hand at her, surprised by her niceness. "I'm immortal, but don't tell anyone."

Pluto's female bodyguard, 'Sparrow,' immediately started feeling up Ryan with her big hands, searching everywhere. She removed his mask, his hat, his jacket, and then started to look into places better left unexplored.

"You know, lady, if you wanted to look at my underwear," the courier said as she checked a... private place... "You could just ask. I'm young, easy, and available."

"I might take you up on that," Sparrow replied with an amused smile. Over time, a pile of weapons grew next to Ryan, Vulcan swiftly examining them one at a time like *hors-d'oeuvres*, until she hit the *plat de resistance*.

"How did you pack so many lasers inside such a tiny space?" Vulcan asked, examining the rabbit plushie with astonished eyes. "Even my armor doesn't have that many."

"One at a time," Ryan shrugged it off.

“What is this?” Pluto asked, curious. “Some toy?”

“It’s quite cute,” Ki-jung said.

“A toy with enough firepower to wipe out a small city,” Vulcan said, more and more fascinated by the plushie’s dark power. “Can I—”

“No,” the courier denied her.

“But—”

“No!” Ryan said firmly. “I’m not loaning it!”

A-bombs, fine, but something this dangerous? No way in Hell. It couldn’t end in anything but tragedy.

Vulcan looked deeply, deeply disappointed, but didn’t push the issue. “It’s exceptionally lethal,” she told Pluto, putting the plushie back on the weapon pile. “But it doesn’t cause memory alteration. None of his weapons can do that.”

“Neither can his power,” Cancel said. “Or at least I don’t think so. He’s as Violet as they come.”

“Oh, you’re a White?” Ryan asked, the girl nodding.

“One of the mightiest.” Pluto smiled at Ryan. “Cancel can negate the powers of everyone within a certain radius. My brother excepted, of course.”

“Ah, that’s funny.”

Cancel immediately pouted. “Why don’t you check for yourself then, huh?”

Challenge accepted.

Ryan immediately attempted to stop time... and nothing happened. No feedback, no world freezing with the power of his mind, not even an itching sensation. Nothing at all. His ability simply refused to activate.

He tried again, but he kept having performance issues. His annoyance must have shown on his face because a smug, victorious smile appeared at the edge of Greta's lips.

Well, that wasn't good.

That wasn't good at all! His save point shouldn't be affected, but if Cancel negated the automatic trigger... then if Ryan perished close to her, he might die for good.

"Miss Pluto, have I told you I find you extraordinarily elegant and beautiful?" Ryan said. When in doubt, flatter them!

"Pointless, but thank you," Pluto replied with false affability, before turning to Cancel. "Still nothing?"

"If it was memory manipulation, I should have purged the effect," the girl replied. "Whether it was Blue, Green, Yellow, or even Violet."

Pluto said nothing. Instead, she looked for a pocket inside her dress and grabbed a smoke; Sparrow brought a lighter and set it ablaze just as her mistress put the cancer stick in her mouth.

"I control death," Pluto told Ryan, Jamie's group freezing still at her words. "The metaphysical concept of death, the end of life. While I cannot count them, I can sense the weight of a person's years. And if I'm not mistaken, Quicksave, you're the oldest person I've ever met. Far older than anyone should be. Now that I've taken a good long look at you, I would peg you as..."

She breathed a cloud of smoke on Ryan's face.

"Somewhere in the triple digits, and closer to four than two."

Oh my, that long? Ryan had lost count after the first century.

"Three digits?" Ki-jung frowned. "That doesn't make sense."

"He seems a bit young for an old geezer," Lanka replied with a shrug. "Are you sure, boss? I don't mean to doubt you —"

"You are," Pluto cut her off, as sharp as a blade. She didn't raise her tone, but it silenced all critics. "My power is never wrong. So Quicksave, care to explain this to me?"

The way she phrased it, Ryan knew that Pluto would either spare or kill him depending on the answer.

No choice then.

"I knew this day would come."

Everyone glanced at the courier, who did his best 'guilty culprit confession' impersonation.

"Okay, I admit it," the courier let out a long, long sigh. "I lied. I lied to you. To everyone. About my power."

"I suspected as much," Vulcan said, now listening with rapturous attention. "I can't imagine how one could stop time and still be able to act. You should evolve in a lightless world, where every item is a deadly projectile."

"So, you lied about the nature of your power to keep an ace in the hole?" Pluto asked, playing with her cancer stick. "A

sensible thing to do, especially with strangers. I applaud your caution.”

“I guess you aren’t as stupid as you look,” Lanka teased him, Jamie elbowing her.

“How does it actually work then?” Pluto asked.

“When I freeze time, I actually jump into another parallel universe, usually to avoid death,” Ryan lied through his teeth. “One alternate world very close to mine. I ‘overlap’ with the ‘me’ of that world and we become one.”

Ryan expected denial, but much to his surprise, nothing of the sort came up.

“That’s *awesome*,” Greta all but swooned. “Does that mean you can become a woman? Like fuse with an alternate version of you that is a girl? How does it work?”

“Once, I spent three months Chinese,” Ryan lied, the bigger the better. “And I became American, twice!”

“Wait, that’s how you cheated at cards!” Lanka immediately focused on the important tidbit. “You asshole, you jumped universes whenever you had a bad hand!”

“Huh, that’s interesting,” Jamie said, crossing his arms. “That puts some of your comments at the casino in a new light.”

“That explains the Chronoradio too,” Ki-jung added.

“Chronoradio?” Vulcan frowned. “A radio that listens through time?”

“Multiple pasts,” Ryan corrected.

"You can't have more than one past," Lanka grunted in the background.

"A radio that can tap into alternate timelines?" The more she observed his technology, the more Vulcan seemed fascinated with it. "How does it work?"

"It's really complicated but—"

"I'm a Genius," she interrupted Ryan. "How does it work?"

"Observer effect, my smug friend," Ryan replied with a shrug, unwilling to elaborate much. "The observed state changes depending on the observation method."

"It works with past events?" Vulcan's eyes widened, as she struggled to grasp the underlying theory.

Meanwhile, Pluto's face was undecipherable. Finally, she uttered a single word, "Okay."

"Wow, you guys took it a lot better than I thought," Ryan admitted. "People usually think I'm pulling their legs when I say that."

"My niece Minerva can interact with parallel universes, although she's a Blue. I wonder how your respective abilities would interact. Could be interesting..." The Underboss examined the courier with a whole new look, trying to puzzle it out. "So the abnormal number of years I sense, is because you fuse with your copies and your metaphysical weight accumulates?"

"Could it be that you marked an alternate version of him," Sparrow said. "And your power followed him through his jumps?"

"Possible," she admitted. "Though the fact I marked him at all is a warning sign."

"You mark every Genome you meet," Vulcan pointed out brashly. "It's quite vulgar, frankly."

Pluto ignored the jab and observed Ryan closely, who gave her a smile in return. "Search his car for any devices," she ordered her cronies next, "I'm not entirely convinced yet."

Sparrow examined the Plymouth Fury as thoroughly as she checked Ryan's body, searching under the seats, the trunk, and the hidden compartments. She clearly had experience with these things. Vulcan, meanwhile, examined the Chronoradio, checking multiple channels.

When she opened the car hood and looked inside, Sparrow's bored face turned into one of confusion, then astonishment. "My God..."

"What do—" Ki-jung peeked inside, and then screamed in horror. The rat on her shoulder was so startled, it fell to the ground. Jamie immediately rushed to his girlfriend's side, taking her in his arms, and frowning at the car hood.

Of course, everyone gathered to peek inside, much to Ryan's confusion. Why such a reaction? Even the unflappable Pluto had raised an eyebrow, and Lanka was at a loss of words. "What the fuck..."

"Ryan."

Jamie looked at the courier as if he were deranged.

"Why is there a brain inside your car?"

Ryan peeked beneath the car hood and understood what they meant.

Below the engines and near the heat pump, there was a hidden hatch which Sparrow had opened; revealing an elongated brain floated in a jar of green liquid, the spine linked to cables.

“Oh, my,” Ryan said, scratching his hair. “I completely forgot about that.”

“I will ask again,” Jamie’s voice had turned deadly cold, while Ki-jung hid behind her boyfriend. “Why do you keep a brain in storage?”

“It’s not in storage, it’s connected to my car. I mean, how did you think the self-driving worked? The Chronoradio? You believed it was ‘magic’ or ‘artificial intelligence’?”

Seriously, Jamie was okay with Ryan keeping an A-bomb, but he drew the line at a brain-driven car? Where was the logic in that?

“That’s so messed up,” Lanka muttered to herself. “You abducted a complete stranger and extracted his brain, because you couldn’t get a driver’s licence?”

“Oh, I see where it’s going.” Ryan raised his hands. “You think I abducted homeless people off the streets with the help of a creepy hunchback assistant? And that his name was Igor?”

It said something about Pluto and Vulcan that they looked more curious than disturbed by the possibility. And Greta kept smiling, fascinated. It should have looked cute, but now it seemed downright disturbing.

"It's not a human brain," Vulcan pointed out. "The shape doesn't fit. It looks like a manta ray's but... no, I don't recognize it. Some of the parts are clearly artificial."

"It's homegrown," Ryan replied. "Entirely synthetic."

"Explain this," Pluto said. "Now."

"I worked a few jobs for Geniuses in the past, and usually, they paid me with tech rather than cash. Like my A-bomb." He drew quite a few angry glares at this, except Vulcan, who was more and more interested. The courier powered through. "I couldn't get the Chronoradio to work due to lack of processing power, and I wanted my car to drive by itself. A client proposed to solve both problems at once."

"By putting a brain in your car?" Lanka deadpanned.

"One of his specialties lied in wetware computers," Ryan replied. "He had like, hundreds of brains in jars. He grew them like weed."

"So it's not sentient?" Ki-jung asked, looking at the brain matter with an anxious face. "It's just a computer?"

"Of course it's not sentient," Ryan protested. "You think I would do half the things I do with my car if there was a real person inside? Do you take me for a savage?"

Nobody answered that. Jamie kept his arms crossed. "I don't know how to feel about this."

"Me neither," his girlfriend admitted.

Pluto, who had remained completely unflappable so far, threw her smoke on the lawn and glanced at Vulcan. "What do you think?"

"He clearly had multiple Geniuses work on his car, and I think I see a miniature particle accelerator connected to the brain," the weapon designer replied, before closing the car hood. "It will take me a few days to review everything, but I doubt any of his devices can be used for memory manipulation."

"I see," Pluto said, turning to Ryan next, "Quicksave."

"Yeeeess?"

"You're on probation for now. I'm not entirely sold yet, but I will give you the benefit of the doubt. Don't make me come back." She glanced at Vulcan next. "Jasmine, he's yours to do as you wish. If he fucks up, I'll hold you responsible."

Jamie seemed a bit disappointed in the background, perhaps believing she would assign Ryan to his own superior's division. But he knew better than to mouth off to that lethal woman.

Without a word nor goodbye, Pluto considered the matter settled and moved towards her car. "See you soon!" Greta waved at everyone, while she and Sparrow went for the Lamborghini.

Crisis averted!

No sooner after they left, Vulcan tried to buy Ryan on the spot. "Okay, three thousand," she declared out of nowhere, unable to resist her newfound feelings for the courier. "To work as my lab assistant, and let me examine your rabbit."

"Does a toy warrant more attention than a brain-driven car?" Ki-jung whispered to Jamie, who shrugged his shoulders. He had long stopped trying to make sense out of the situation.

"Three grand per month?" Ryan smiled smugly at this cute offer. "My, you're cheap—"

"Per day," Vulcan corrected the courier. "Half cash, half wired."

Ryan merely raised an eyebrow; Lanka was the one who almost died of a stroke on the spot. "Per *day*? For him? He cheats at cards!"

"I will make you your own armor, everything else you want," Vulcan continued, completely ignoring the minion. "Drugs, enough whores to break your nuts on, your own personal lab? And of course... your girl."

"You grease the hinges, the door opens," Ryan replied. "My main quest first, then we'll see about the side-quests."

"Alright, fair," Vulcan replied, moving towards her armor. "We're going."

"To the Mooooooooon?"

"To your friend," Vulcan replied as if he was saying something stupid. "There's a second seat in my suit's cockpit, so climb in."

Finally.

He was going to see Len at long last.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Next chapter's title: "The Reunion."

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23: The Reunion

When Vulcan said she had a second spot in her cockpit, Ryan thought he would have his own baby seat at the back. But as it turned out, the Genius was more fond of motorcycle designs than cars.

“People are gonna talk,” Ryan said, holding Vulcan by the waist with his chest against her back as the mech accelerated. The crazy woman had designed her cockpit like a motorbike, with screens and computer interfaces at the front. The bench seat did allow for two people inside, but Ryan had to lean on the pilot due to a lack of space.

If outsiders could watch them, they would probably find their current positions *suspicious*.

“Let them,” Vulcan replied. Due to the oceanic pressure, the mech had entered some sort of alternate mode to protect its weaker parts, contracting its joints, shielding the cameras, and using only sonars and thermal sensors for navigation. From outside, the armor must have looked like a bulky lump of metal. “I don’t give a shit.”

“Interesting choice of design though,” Ryan said, hearing the faint noise of the fusion reaction powering the suit. “Was that a personal preference or—”

“Dynamis’ elite soldiers are trained to target the center of mass,” Vulcan cut him off. Ryan had noticed that she was very fond of lording over her knowledge whenever the

occasion presented itself. “Since most armor cockpits are located there, this means enemies usually shoot straight at your vitals in a fight. I used to overcompensate for that with thicker shielding, but that’s pretty limited when you fight someone who can bench press tanks.”

“Ah, I get it,” Ryan realized, as he felt the mech slow down. “With your current design, the cockpit is actually located between the shoulders, thus away from the area where most soldiers shoot at. This improves the chances of successful ejection in a pinch, but you must also cut down cockpit space to avoid making the frame unwieldy.”

“I use a neural interface to control most of the systems,” she replied, briefly putting a hand in her hair; Ryan noticed some kind of black cranial implant hidden below her bun. “This removes the need for systems in the cockpit, except emergency ones.”

Oh, so that explained how she could command her suit from afar. Ryan wondered about her range. “I suppose it’s an even trade in exchange for the close, uncomfortable physical proximity.”

“If you use your hands to feel me up, I’ll castrate you,” she warned him. “I can already feel your cock in my back. Gee, when you said you were easy, you weren’t kidding.”

“You don’t want me to upgrade the difficulty to hard mode right now.”

Vulcan chuckled at the dirty wordplay. Ryan couldn’t believe it, but the violent Genius was quite lovely when nobody threatened her fragile ego. “You’re fucking shameless,” she said. “And here I thought you loved that girl though.”

"I loved her once, yes," Ryan admitted. "But that was a long, long time ago."

Well, his devotion to Len had never wavered through the years, but Ryan no longer desired her romantically; he had been in romantic relationships in the past, all erased by time. At this point, the courier could settle for a friend, even an acquaintance who could recognize him. Someone with whom he could have a connection that would survive his endless travels across time, no matter how fragile.

All Ryan wanted was someone who could alleviate his loneliness. No more, no less.

The courier sighed. Moving kilometers below the sea gave him the blues. "Are we there yet?"

"Are you going to ask this every minute?"

"Yes, until we are there."

"If you ask it again, you can say goodbye to another A-place," she replied.

"Are you coming on to me?"

The Genius ignored him, the mech shaking. Ryan guessed that they must have landed somewhere. "Are we," he started, Vulcan glaring at him over her shoulder, "friends yet?"

"You must have a death wish," the Genius said, the cockpit's ceiling shifting. "And as a matter of fact... we're here."

About time.

A hatch opened above the courier, alongside a mini-ladder. Ryan could see a red lamp outside the metal suit, enshrined inside a rusted ceiling, but little else.

"I'll be waiting here, working on other stuff," Vulcan said, as Ryan started climbing out of the cockpit. "Since you guys need some time alone. Just don't take too long, or I'll leave without you."

"You would leave a major investment stranded miles below the sea?" Ryan mused, before nodding at the Genius.
"Thanks."

"You did your job, I did mine. I ain't a fink, Ryan."

"Well, I certainly appreciate a woman of her word." It saddened Ryan a little since he might bypass all these fetch quests in the future, depending on how things turned out now. He would have to find a way to balance the scales.

The courier climbed out of the mech, standing atop the suit.

The room looked like an airlock, albeit one big enough to house something as large as Vulcan's suit; walls of steel surrounded Ryan, thick enough to withstand the undersea pressure outside. Vulcan's machine stood with its boots in a puddle of water, enormous closed gates at the back, a smaller human-sized door at the front. While a lamp provided a dim crimson light, Ryan didn't notice any camera.

"Shortie?" he asked, before leaping off the mech and onto the puddle. When he received no answer, he moved towards the smaller door. No sooner did he approach it, that he heard a sound coming from behind. The gate opened on its own, spurred on by an automatic mechanism.

Carefully, Ryan stepped out of the undersea airlock, and into an apartment.

Well, it looked like an apartment, albeit one sparsely furnished. It was around fifty meters square, including a main resting room, a small kitchen, and doors leading to what Ryan assumed to be a bedroom and bathroom. The walls were painted blue and red, her favorite colors.

The whole place smelled of her presence.

“Where’s that Jamaican crab to sing a song when you need him?” Ryan whistled to himself, finding this place too silent for his liking. Yet he didn’t see any stereo nearby.

The courier moved towards the kitchen, noticing a fridge. When he opened it, Ryan found an assortment of tasty dishes straight from the sea: crabs, fishes, algae... a tube seemed to provide the food from another part of the complex. The courier tested the sink next; it worked perfectly, but clearly hadn’t been used much lately.

“Shortie, where are you?” Ryan then wandered towards the main resting room, made of a sofa and a plastic table. Instead of a TV, the main room’s sofa faced a massive porthole allowing sitters to see the world outside; namely, an undersea abyss as dark as the blackest night. Strange fish looked on the other side of the reinforced glass, perhaps curious or attracted by the strange house’s warmth.

The courier noticed a pile of books on the table, including *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers*—the exact same book Len found in Venezia all those years before—alongside Karl Marx’s compiled *Das Kapital*, and Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.

Some things never changed.

However, much to his alarm, the courier also noticed a large amount of medications next to that mini-library. Ryan quickly analyzed them, identifying the products as Dynamis-made antidepressants and anxiolytics. Powerful ones too.

Ryan didn't know Len's self-medication treatment details, but it was clearly unhealthy.

As the courier walked in front of the porthole and peeked through, he noticed other sources of light in the darkness. On a closer look, they came from other portholes in sphere-shaped structures, an egg nest at the very bottom of the abyss. A complex set of corridors linked the structures together, forming a vast community.

Did Len build that? Certainly not in six months, even with Vulcan's help and funding. She must have spent at least a year slowly building this place, going to New Rome when she needed specific technology she couldn't manufacture herself. If each habitat was a self-sufficient apartment, then there was enough space to house hundreds of people.

Silly Len, she was building her own undersea Khrushchyovka!

But still, this place felt like it lacked a soul.

There was no personal touch, no warmth to it. All the accommodations were utilitarian, meant to cover a human being's basic needs without any aestheticism whatsoever. Besides the books, Ryan didn't notice any source of entertainment or even a photo. This place was a brightly colored undersea tomb, nothing more.

He heard another door open behind him, perhaps the bedroom's one.

She didn't make a sound at first, yet he could sense her eyes peering at his back. She didn't dare say anything, so Ryan broke the ice.

"Hi Shortie," the courier said, looking over his shoulder. "It's been way too long."

It was her.

She was... she was both so familiar, and yet so different. But it was her, unmistakably her. She wore a brown diving suit, albeit not the towering armor as in the last loop, alongside some kind of water rifle.

Len had had a growth spurt since the four years they last met, although she was still small enough for him to tease her. Her teenage cuteness had blossomed into a true beauty, albeit one lessened by exhaustion and the pale complexion of her skin. She clearly didn't go out often enough.

They both needed to take a vacation.

"Riri," Len smiled, but it was more sadness than joy. Her voice was music to Ryan's ears, yet she sounded so weak and anxious.

It had been so long since he had heard that nickname, that the courier had almost forgotten it. It awakened old emotions he had long since buried through decades of time-looping. Happiness, and sadness too; she looked so terrible, her eyes blackened by tiredness and antidepressants, that it made Ryan feel guilty not to have found her before. It was his job to make her happy, and she clearly wasn't.

Ryan fully turned around to hug his oldest friend, but she took a step back when she saw him move from his spot. He

froze in place, confused, while the sofa stood between them like an insurmountable barrier.

"Don't... don't come closer," Len pleaded, a hand on her water rifle. She wasn't pointing it at him, but she didn't set it aside either. "Please."

"Shortie, what's wrong?" Ryan asked. This wasn't the reception he had hoped for, let alone expected. "It's me. I've been looking everywhere for you."

"I know," she replied. "I know."

Ryan tensed up at these words. "For how long?"

His best friend looked away, before finally confessing, "Two years."

Ryan froze, as his reality came crashing down.

He had always refused to entertain the thought, even if... even if deep down, he knew it was the only logical explanation. Ryan had made so many waves across Italy, he thought that if Len was alive, then she would have contacted him. If she didn't, he believed it meant that she was dead, captured, or in a terrible position.

Ryan never wanted to accept the most likely scenario.

Namely, that she avoided him on purpose.

"Why?" Ryan asked, feeling as if he had been shot in the gut. "Why? Why did you avoid me?"

She didn't answer immediately, not with her voice; but her body spoke for her. Her trembling hands, her unease in Ryan's presence...

"You're..." The courier couldn't believe it. "You're afraid of me?"

"No," she said. "It's just... your presence."

"You have PTSD," Ryan recognized the symptoms, glancing at the pile of medications. Suddenly, it all started to make sense. "I remind you of the bad days. I remind you of Bloodstream. I'm... I'm an open wound."

"Riri, your power," Len shook her head, "it's done something to your mind. I can see it. You're not... you're not stable. Your behavior, it's... it's not that of a sane person."

"Len, I'm not insane," Ryan protested. "I just get the joke."

"You don't get anything," she accused the courier. "You never did."

"I—"

"You killed him."

The words echoed across the undersea habitat, an awkward silence settling in.

"You led the Carnival to us," Len accused him. "You didn't pull the trigger, but you brought the gun."

"I did," Ryan admitted. He had an eternity to ponder his choice. "And it had to be done. My only regret is that it separated us for years."

More silence. Len had never been good at articulating her feelings, but all these years had only worsened her social skills. He wondered if she had any people to talk to.

"Len," the courier said. "Your father was never going to get better, and one day, he would have killed you. He almost did. I spent years studying the nature of Genomes, trying to find a solution to the Psycho condition; see if I could have made it right. But there is no cure. Or at least none I could design with the means at hand."

Even Ryan, for all his power over time and causality, hadn't dared take two Elixirs; for powers worked on a level far greater than mere gene manipulation. Another Elixir would cause his original power to mutate, maybe create another save point or permanently leave him mad. If Ryan ever became a Psycho like Bloodstream... with his save point, no one would be able to stop him. It would be an unending nightmare, for himself and countless others.

"I know," Len admitted. "I know. But he was still my dad. That wasn't your choice to make."

Ryan put his hands behind his back, studying her for a moment. Then, he removed his hat and mask, so she could see his true face. The gnawing unhappiness beneath the smile.

"I apologize," Ryan said, and he meant it. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Len looked into his eyes, and then glanced away, unable to hold his gaze.

The sight hurt way worse than Acid Rain's knives.

He bore witness to the end of his main quest, and it wasn't a happy ending.

"Why did you make this place?" Ryan asked, glancing at the habitat. Perhaps there was something he had overlooked, a

detail that could let him salvage their friendship.

"For me," she said. "Then for others."

"The orphans above," Ryan guessed. "That's what this place is for."

"Yes," she said, looking at the distant lights through the porthole. "I want to bring them here when it's finished. Give them a place where they can belong, begin again. Make it right."

"Len, you can't retreat from the world, even if it's harsh and absurd," Ryan said. "Or else you will lose part of yourself too. Look at you, you're... you're miserable, Len. You're not happy living like this."

"Riri, there's nothing above for them, or for me," Len argued. "There's just violence and Psychos and powerful bastards kicking down the little guy. I thought the bombs had wiped the slate clean, but more than a decade afterward... it's more of the same."

"If that's how you feel, then let's make it better," Ryan said. "I can help. I've got all the time in the universe to fix it. I can make everything right."

"I am already... I'm already fixing it. I'm making a new, better place. A place where everyone is equal."

"No, you're running away from your problems, just as I did," Ryan argued. "The medications are dulling the pain, but they won't make it go away. No matter how many times you repeat the same process, the outcome won't change. Neither will this place help you. It's sunken. You're literally sinking, Len."

He extended a hand.

"Let me help you," the courier asked her, begged her. "Once, you wanted to explore the world. We can do it. Travel together, and look beyond the horizon. There's still so much to do, so much to learn. I've seen things you can't even imagine. I can show them to you. We can start over."

Len looked at his fingers, and for long, agonizing seconds, she looked tempted to take his hand. If only she would... then their days of loneliness would finally end.

But she didn't take it, held back by her own fears.

Crushed at the sight, Ryan realized it wouldn't do. She was too hurt, too wounded, to take the risk. Their friendship was an old wound she feared might fester again, and sink her deeper below the sea.

He...

He was just making things worse.

"The world is absurd," Ryan declared. "But it's not hopeless."

She frowned at him, confused.

"I've faced the same situation over ten thousand iterations, and made a different choice each time," he explained. "If it was all hopeless, then nothing should have changed. A single man can't make any difference, right? That's fatalism for you. Well, fatalists are cowardly crybabies. Every choice I made led to a different outcome. Sometimes it changed little; other times, it changed everything. Sometimes, I killed people, and other times, I saved them."

“Where... I don’t understand, where are you getting at?”

“That in the end, my decisions changed things,” Ryan said. “Even if I was the only one who could see it. It doesn’t matter if the change is big or small. The change *exists*. Yes, bad things often happen for no reason... and sometimes good things too. While not guaranteed, justice is attainable. Nobody is in control of anything, but that doesn’t mean your actions have no impact. So please, Len, don’t ever say it’s hopeless. If time-travel has taught me anything, it’s that everything can change, and the perfect ending is always within reach.”

“Time... time-travel?”

Instead of burdening her with his own issues, Ryan put the Quicksave mask and hat back on, then walked towards the hatch’s door. She didn’t make a move to stop him. Even if she seemed to hesitate.

“No matter how bad it gets, Len, I won’t give up on finding happiness,” he said, looking over his shoulder at his old friend. “I hope you don’t either.”

Ryan walked away, his silent steps echoing below the sea.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

End of the first arc.

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24: Transition

It was a bright new day in New Rome.

The sun was rising. Bullets were flying. Rats were singing.

Standing at the balcony of Jamie's apartment in casual clothes, a coffee mug in his right hand, Ryan glanced at the rodents occupying the area. Ki-jung's rats seemed to be doing some stretching exercises while dawn rose beyond the horizon, showing incredible levels of flexibility. They were cute, for enormous mutant rodents.

But Ryan was a cat person at heart, and he was in a foul mood.

He grabbed his cellphone with his left hand and played pre-recorded music he had prepared just for the occasion. The terrible noise of felines meowing echoed across the apartment, startling the rats and sending them into a frenzied panic. They immediately dispersed, hiding beneath the sofa.

"Ryan!" Ki-jung shouted from the kitchen, busy making breakfast. "Stop it!"

"What?" he asked innocently, the rats glancing at Ryan upon realizing his trick. "It's not forbidden to listen to cat music!"

"I'm not forbidden to throw you off the balcony either!"

“What is all the racket?” Jamie emerged from his bedroom, wearing only a shirt and boxers. Without his armor, he reminded Ryan of a grizzly bear emerging from his cave. The first thing the mob enforcer did was to kiss his girlfriend, then join the courier at the balcony with a coffee cup of his own.

“Nothing,” Ryan replied, hiding his cell phone. Ki-jung's rats emerged from their hiding spots to gather behind his back, glaring at him. Seeing a dozen rats in that position may have frightened a normal person, but the courier just meowed at them.

“You're impossible,” Jamie replied, his eyes blinked as he slowly woke up. A rat jumped on the balcony's ramp, the Genome scratching it between the ears. “How are you feeling?”

“Whimsically peachy.”

“Ryan,” Jamie looked at him in the eye, “how do you really feel?”

Was he that bad at hiding it? Ryan looked at the distant, warming sun. “I don't feel anything.”

“Anything as in...”

“Nothing,” Ryan replied with a sigh. “I feel empty.”

Well, to be precise, he felt like someone whose years-long quest had ended disastrously. Ryan had expected a happy reunion that would make everything better, and he had only found more tears and sadness. Emptiness had been his natural state for years, until learning of Len's survival had given him a newfound direction. His endless existence finally had a purpose.

Except Len didn't want Ryan in her life. Hell, she was an even bigger wreck than he was.

"But I'm used to it," the courier replied with optimism. "That just means I've just got to find something to fill the void!"

Even that stunt with the rats was an attempt to get his mind off Len. He had found chaos and whimsical jokes a welcome distraction when in a bad mood. Confusion energized him, while introspection made him feel stale and restless.

Jamie shook his head, before looking at the sunlight too.
"I'm sorry."

"About what?"

"About your girl. I'm sorry she broke your heart."

"I haven't been *dumped*," Ryan protested since he clearly had misunderstood the situation.

"I know rejection is painful," Zambato consoled him, digging himself deeper. "And that's *okay*. It happens to everyone. She wasn't the right person for you, or perhaps now was not the right moment. You're still young, you will find someone."

For empty platitudes, Jamie managed to make them sound inspired. Maybe because he earnestly tried to cheer him up.

"The worst part is," Ryan said, letting out some frustration instead of bottling it up, "she's in pain, and I don't know how to help yet."

His words seemed to resonate with Jamie, who opened his mouth without saying anything, seemingly rehearsing his words in his head. He glanced at the rats and told them to

shoo away. The rodents let out a vengeful screech at Ryan and then moved to the kitchen.

"You know one day, a former friend and I found someone having an overdose. A homeless woman." Jamie spoke once the rats out of earshot, his voice breaking. "She would have died if we hadn't been there."

Ryan could sense the sheer emotion brimming in Jamie's voice, and said nothing. It clearly came from the heart.

"Even when she was out of the hospital, I considered her my responsibility. I tried to help her clean herself up. It was hard. It was really hard. It took months to deal with the relapses, the bad habits, and help her find a job... a lot of my friends, they didn't understand. They thought I was just wasting my time. That she was hopeless. But... but she wasn't. It worked out. It was hard, but she recovered."

Ryan glanced at the kitchen and Ki-jung's shadow.

"People take time to heal," Jamie said. "And from what I heard, that girl seems to have pretty deep scars. Don't give up and do your best, but don't beat yourself over it either."

Ryan nodded but didn't respond.

"I talked with the others," Jamie said, swallowing his coffee without savoring it the way Ryan did, "and we will organize a party next Thursday at the house. To welcome you in New Rome."

"A Hugh Hefner party, or a friendly house-warming party?"

"Genome-only, most of whom are single."

“Hugh Hefner then. Wait, are you going to whore me out? Am I to pay the rent in my flesh and blood?”

“Don’t worry about rent. However, everything that will happen during the party will stay at the party. You may see... weird stuff.” The more Jamie spoke, the more embarrassed he sounded. “Stuff that would shock most people. I think you’re pretty open-minded, but... I’m not sure how much.”

Since Genomes were naturally immune to most diseases, including STDs, and had a high drug threshold, Ryan had a pretty good idea of how the party would degenerate. “Oh you know, without arrogance,” the courier smiled, “I’ve seen *everything*.”

“Okay, good. No *Bliss* or cats allowed, and you help clean up tomorrow morning,” Jamie added firmly. “Also, no matter what happens, don’t fuck Vamp. You can hook up with anyone, *anyone*, but her.”

“A forbidden romance route? How can I resist?”

“By reminding yourself that she’s a goddamn succubus who will drain you to death if you fall into her arms,” Jamie said, with a hint of dislike. “She’s a nasty shade of Green.”

“Why invite her at all if you don’t like her?”

“She’s part of the hit squad, and she takes it personally when she isn’t invited to group events. Trust me, it’s less drama that way.”

“And Livia!” Ki-jung shouted from inside the apartment.
“Don’t forget to tell him about Livia!”

"And Livia too, thank you, honey!" Jamie shouted back, before focusing on Ryan. "She's off-limits for a reason I cannot divulge yet, but trust me. If you make a move on her, you *will* die."

Jamie didn't know anything about reverse-psychology, did he?

...

Nah, the courier wasn't in the mood.

"I think I will pass on the matchmaking attempt," Ryan said, bored with romance. "I've had my fair share of hook-ups."

"Really?" Jamie didn't hide his surprise. "I didn't take you for a party animal. Or at least, not that kind."

"At one point in my life, my motto was '*try them all until you find the perfect one,*'" Ryan explained. "But afterward, it became stale and superficial. It was just doing the same thing over, and over again."

"I... I think I see what you mean."

"Also, why are you advocating for me to fight for true love, and then try to hook me up with someone else?"

"No, I said, you don't give up on helping your friend with her issues, but if she isn't interested, take the hint and look for companionship elsewhere." Jamie put a hand on Ryan's shoulder, overflowing with warm *dad radiations*. "I know it's a leap of faith, but I'm sure you will find someone that can make you happy at that party. That's all I wish for you."

Ryan turned towards the apartment. "Ki-jung!"

“Yes?!” she replied, busy making lunch.

“If you don’t marry this man, I will do it myself!”

“I don’t share!” she replied with a deadpan tone.

“I told you that you had the same sense of humor,” Jamie said, putting a hand on Ryan’s shoulder. Both Genomes returned to the kitchen, putting their empty cups in the sink.

By then, Ki-jung had cooked a big brunch for her man and herself. However, she also handed a lunchbox to Ryan.

“Here,” she said. “For midday. It’s bibimbap, so I hope you like rice and vegetables.”

“It’s fine, I was going to grab a sand—”

“Take it,” she insisted, all but shoving the lunchbox in Ryan’s arms. “Knowing Vulcan, she won’t let you out of her workshop until she has worked you to the bone.”

Goddammit, these guys were so nice, it was almost oppressive. They were killing him with kindness.

His lunchbox under his arm, Ryan prepared to leave for work but stopped in front of Lanka’s bedroom first. “Sleeping beauty?” The courier knocked. “It’s the police, wake up! Hands on your head!”

He heard a groan behind the door, alongside the sound of empty bottles falling to the ground. “Is it three in the afternoon already?”

“No.”

“Then fuck off.”

Come to think of it, she remained awake very late into the night. She probably worked evening shifts.

After putting on his Quicksave costume, Ryan waltzed out of the house, put the lunchbox on the backseat, and then drove the Plymouth Fury away. Even at this early hour, traffic in New Rome was insane, reminding the courier of the worst hours of the pre-war era; right after leaving the suburbs, he found himself trapped in a jam. The courier opened the windows and put on the radio, singing to himself when he found the *Pink Panther's* song.

"Tada, tada, tada tada tada..." Curse Henry Mancini, and his catchy tune.

He needed a cheery song, especially after last night.

The reunion's disastrous ending had gnawed at him all evening, as he tried to figure out a way to help Len get over her issues. Unfortunately, he saw none yet, or at least none that wouldn't make things worse. Ryan had gained a certain insight into human nature through his loops; his best friend seemed so far gone into her shell, that forcing himself into her life would worsen things. She needed to reach out to others first.

But if not him, then whom? The orphans? How did it fit?

His main quest had ended in a disaster, and Ryan didn't know what to do next.

Well, now that he had *somewhat* fulfilled his main goal, the courier could devote his time to do side quests instead of starting a new loop. He had promised different people to drive the Meta out of Rust Town and to blow up the Augusti's superlab, and the courier would be true to his word.

Afterward though...

He didn't know. Finding Len had been the driving force of his existence lately, a welcome intermission in his meaningless wandering. If he couldn't help her, then...

No, he couldn't allow himself to think this way. There was a way to solve this, he just needed time to figure it out.

"Don't turn around."

Ryan turned around in the back seat but saw nothing. "The green giant is in the garden," he said. "The green giant is in the garden."

No answer.

"You're supposed to say a code," Ryan replied, looking back at the road. "What if I were a shapeshifter? You would have blown your cover. Frankly, you should leave the real work to professionals."

"The orange is in the hen house?"

"See, you're learning."

"How was your reunion with Len Sabino?" the Shroud asked, clearly sitting in the back while invisible. The courier wondered if he had waited all morning, just to surprise Ryan as he took off to work.

"Were you peeping?" Ryan sighed. "Not all that great, but I handled it like a champ!"

"I am thankful you didn't rat me out once your goal was achieved," Shroud replied, blatantly ignoring the question. "That makes me trust you a bit more."

“Is there an actual reason you want to visit me, or do you just spook people on principle?”

“You wanted me to keep you updated on the Meta-Gang, and you are supposed to report how things are advancing on your side.”

“Shouldn’t you already know?” Ryan asked, quite certain the invisible jackass had kept him under tight surveillance. “I’m in.”

“You have infiltrated the Augusti, but not the right part of the organization,” the glass man said. “Bacchus leads the drug division, not Vulcan.”

“The road to complete a quest often takes twists and turns,” Ryan replied, raising his finger and delivering his wisdom. “Sometimes, you must wait for the right opportunity.”

“Like your party?” Shroud mused. “I will wait longer, but the deal is off without meaningful progress.”

My, for an infiltrator he wasn’t very subtle about thinly-veiled threats. “How about our Psycho friends?” Ryan changed the subject. “Did you clean out the trash yet?”

“They have a sensor, warning system, or maybe a seer.” Shroud sighed. “Whenever I move too close to the Junkyard, they send a heavy hitter after me. Neither invisibility nor disguises helped.”

“Alright, so no stealth mission. What else?”

“Psyshock.”

“Didn’t you deal with him?” Ryan asked, remembering his previous message.

“Yes. More than once.”

Ryan looked at the streetlight. “Regenerators are annoying, aren’t they?”

“Yes.” Then the invisible jackass dropped the bomb. “But not as much as duplicators.”

Ryan didn’t move an inch.

“I tried to capture him at the orphanage,” Shroud explained, “but he killed himself rather than become a prisoner.”

Impossible. The only thing nearly as strong as a Psycho’s addiction was their survival instinct. Especially old ones like Psyshock, who had survived for more than a decade.
Unless...

“You said they sent heavy hitters after you,” Ryan guessed.
“Including him?”

“Including Psyshock, whose original remains are still in my possession.” Shroud’s visor became briefly visible, reflecting the dawn’s light. “That scenario should remind you of someone else.”

Bloodstream.

Len’s father had had an incredibly loathsome cloning power, as ghastly as it was effective. It had made him nigh-unbeatable for years until the Carnival tracked all his doubles down and managed to prevent him from duplicating. Psyshock had seen it in action. Could it have inspired him?

“If his duplication works the same as Bloodstream...” Ryan trailed, his hands clenching on the driving wheel. “I’ll take it

personally."

"I can't confirm it," Shroud replied. "But I thought you should know. If you learn anything new, please inform me."

"Or I will deliver the pieces," Ryan replied. "Anything else?"

"Bacchus, alias Andreas Torque, is a Blue," Shroud explained. "He can drive others mad with visions and hallucinations, though I do not know what triggers his power. Tread against him carefully. I don't have a lot of information on his person, except that he is an excommunicated priest. He rarely leaves the superlab, and only to visit Augustus. If you want to get into the division, you will need to reach him through an intermediary."

"Great, a new chain quest. I suppose I won't get a reward for it?"

No answer. The courier turned his head around, touched the backseat with his hand, and sensed nothing. Not even a calling card.

Wait.

That bastard had stolen the lunchbox!

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Hi guys, I've been reading a very good story called the [Tower of Somnus](#) by Cocop here on Royal Road, and the first volume has just concluded. It's an excellent Cyberpunk/Virtual Reality story and pretty much one of my new favorites. The story is scheduled to go on Kindle Unlimited soon, so if you want to check it out for free, now is the time.

Really, it's excellent, and I don't say this lightly.

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25: Never Enuff Dakka

Vulcan's workshop echoed with the sound of welding, while Ryan reviewed an armor sketch, ass on a chair and legs on the workbench.

Ryan's job as Vulcan's assistant turned out to be more desk work than anything exciting like target practice. She handed him designs for new armor, guns, or vehicles, and then asked him to review and improve on them.

As he examined her sketches, the courier realized that Vulcan's Genius power was probably '*weapon creation*.' All her inventions either had an offensive application or served to support weaponry. The Genius could even make cyber-warfare programs, like viruses capable of detonating cell phones from afar.

While it made Vulcan a devastatingly dangerous Genius, you couldn't make a vehicle with just guns. She never patched her armor's joints weakness, simply because her power refused to entertain innovative solutions in theory unrelated to warfare.

No wonder Vulcan desperately wanted a Genius assistant. She was a missile without a tripod.

"So, let me get this straight," Vulcan asked, welding a new cannon to her armor's right arm. "Underdiver doesn't want you in her life, and Zanbato suggested you persevere?"

"Pretty much," Ryan replied, scribbling notes on her sketch. He always found Genius-tech to be an interesting intellectual challenge, which was why he had devoted so many loops to studying it. "Oh, and he's also throwing a party Thursday night."

"Well, Jamie doesn't know shit," the Genius snapped back angrily. "I fucking hate white knights, and Underdiver doesn't need one. She doesn't need anyone."

"I'm not sure—"

"Can you even fathom that girl's sheer potential?" Vulcan interrupted him. "At least a third of the Earth is uninhabitable nowadays, and she can make self-sustaining habitats that can survive deep oceanic pressure. I'm making weapons, but her? She's building the future. I could do without her tech, yes. But the money I send her? It's an investment for mankind."

She stopped welding, put her tool and iron mask away, and wiped away the sweat with her hand.

"White knights, they're smothering," she ranted, grabbing a water bottle and taking a sip. "They don't help because they're *nice*, but because they're *needy*. They're oppressive. What your girl needs is self-confidence, and she's only going to develop that by building something that is hers alone. So if you really like that Len girl, don't get in her way. If you want to help, don't help."

It didn't sound at all like psychological projection. Not at all. "I'm sure there's an interesting story behind that opinion," the courier teased her.

"Wyvern was the worst of the white knights, casting everyone in her shadow," she replied, as Ryan had guessed.

"You think she's being a hero because she really believes in justice? It's all ego. Self-righteousness. She wants the cheering children, people looking up to her, without making the hard decisions. If she really wanted to change things, she would have ditched Dynamis long ago. But she didn't."

"But what did she do to you *personally*?" Ryan asked, a bit confused.

"Haven't you been listening? She kept me in her shadow. When we started, I was the brain and she was the brawn. I gathered intel and made the plans. She's powerful, but she's a mace. All the force in the world doesn't matter if nobody can wield it in the right direction."

The Genius continued going into a rant, venting off. Her voice dripped with bitterness and anger, her fingers crushing the now empty plastic bottle.

"Wyvern became famous because of me, but she was always the one in the field. The hero everyone talked about. And when we made a deal with Dynamis, it got worse. I wanted their resources to build myself a suit, make a name for myself. Become Wyvern's partner, instead of her sidekick. But they kept me in a lab, vetoed all my plans. I can make any weapon, the likes that rival Mechron's, but to the Manada... I was just the girl making their soldiers' armor."

"Let's make a gun then."

"A gun?" she frowned.

"A very big gun," Ryan said. "A laser gun that can draw a logo on the Mooooooooon."

"Why would I draw a logo on the moon?"

“To copyright it.”

Vulcan raised a finger, remained silent as she considered his sentence in-depth, and finally realized that she had no answer to it.

“I defeated you with *logic!*” Ryan gloated. In response, Vulcan threw her plastic bottle at him, although with a thin smirk at the edge of her lip. She moved towards the courier and grabbed the sketch, reviewing his additions.

“Interesting idea, though it’s useless in the rain,” she said, before raising an eyebrow. “Why is there a duck drawn in the bottom left corner?”

“I got bored halfway through.” She wanted him to review a stealth-model of armor, capable of blending into the environment. Invisible lunch-thief had given Ryan the idea to use optic cameras to record the wearer’s surroundings, and then portray them on the surface.

“You don’t enter a fugue state while working,” she noted. “Curious, curious.”

“Nice work,” a voice spoke from behind Ryan. “I want one.”

“Why thank you,” the courier said, peeking over his shoulder to welcome the newcomer.

A Genome had entered the room, somehow without opening the only door. It was a tall, lanky figure whose costume reminded Ryan of a scarecrow. A ghoulish, metal skull mask hid the face, and a black hooded cloak the rest of the body. Most importantly, that gentledevil seemed as fond of weapons as the courier, carrying guns on bandoleers and a sniper rifle.

"Tch, not even spooked," the man complained, although Ryan wasn't sure it was a guy at all; the skull mask digitally altered the voice, even if it sounded vaguely male. "You're not fun."

"Mortimer, stop bullying the newbie," said Sparrow, as Pluto's bodyguard entered the room through the door; instead of her absent mistress, she was followed by Cancel and a new face. "Sorry, Quicksave, he gets off on startling people."

"Hi Ryan, hi Jasmine!" Greta waved a hand at them with an endearing smile.

"Hi, Greta!" Ryan returned the greeting, though he paid more attention to the third person in the group.

It was a young woman his physical age, and *gorgeous*. Not pretty-gorgeous, but top model-gorgeous. A hazel-eyed blonde whose hair fell down to her hips, with tanned skin and a perfectly chiseled face, this Venus could probably bring any man to his knees in adoration. Even her bright white clothes and jewelry were the apex of New Roman fashion, things Ryan would have expected to see on an actress.

Unfortunately, from the way she carried herself, her appearance had clearly gone to her head. She moved with such pompous pride and self-confidence, it was almost nauseating.

But Ryan didn't care about her beauty.

He cared about her resemblance to a certain feline.

Unfortunately, she mistook his rapturous attention as something else. "I'm Fortuna," the bombshell introduced

herself, the courier immediately remembering the name as one of Atom Cat's sisters, "the world's luckiest woman."

Ryan chuckled. "If you have met me, no, you aren't."

"Oh, really?" she moved in front of a metal wall and put her hands on her waist. "Shoot me."

"You're *sure*?" the courier asked for confirmation.

"Yes. Shoot me."

"Okay."

Ryan immediately rose from his chair, pulled his Desert Eagle out of his coat, and then fired with enthusiasm. The suddenness of the gesture startled Fortuna's teammates, although they made no move to step in.

When he ran out of bullets, Ryan didn't bother reloading. Instead, he threw the gun away, pulled another sidearm in his arsenal, and fired away. When he emptied the magazine, the cycle continued with new weapons.

AMT Hardballer, Browning Hi-Power, Beretta 92FS Inox, *gold-plated* Beretta 92FS Inox, CZ 75, Glock 17, two Glock 17L, Sistema Colt Modelo 1927, Stechkin APS—because the Russians made the best guns, followed by a Smith & Wesson Model 629.

"He's persistent," Mortimer muttered, Ryan almost unable to hear him over the sound of gunfire.

"That's a lot of weapons," Sparrow noted. "Where does he find the space?"

"The only certainty in life is that when death comes for you, you will never have enough guns!" Ryan shouted. His gloves fumed with gunpowder.

At that point, armored guards entered the workshop, perhaps expecting a shootout. They looked at the scene, Ryan glanced back, and froze time. When time resumed, the guards found their submachine guns missing, the courier wielding both as he opened fire on Fortuna. Vulcan raised a hand at the confused guards, who wisely returned to their post with confusion and sheepish embarrassment.

When he ran out of small arms after ten minutes of nonstop shooting, Ryan moved on to shotguns, bombarding the model with a Remington Model 870. Then he upgraded to his coil gun, and finally threw almost every single knife he had.

He only had two surprises left.

Ryan paused, as his hand didn't find the first of his prized weapons. "Hey, where did my A-bomb go?"

"I took it while you were busy shooting," Vulcan said, raising the metal sphere in her hand. "I knew it would come down to this."

"Give it back!" Quicksave pleaded like a child, but Vulcan kept the bomb out of arm's reach. "Give it back!"

"Impressed yet?"

Ryan turned to look at Fortuna, who stood completely unharmed while the wall behind her had turned into Swiss cheese. She didn't have a single scratch.

Not a single one.

And he was only three steps away, shooting at point blank range.

Goddammit, now Ryan felt like a Stormtrooper in *Stars Wars*.

"That's a Pulp Fiction level of divine providence," the courier admitted. "Although..."

"Although?" the young woman replied with one of the smuggest grins the courier had ever seen.

"I have a secret technique," Ryan said, abandoning the use of nuclear weapons to get back to his trusty knife. "Which, if I use, will cut your hopes short. I must warn you though. Nobody ever managed to stand up to it."

She silently told him to bring it.

Alright, she asked for it.

"Za Warudo!"

Time stopped, the workshop turning purple.

Ryan quickly glanced at Cancel, as frozen in time as the others. As he suspected, her negation power offered no automatic defense: she had to switch it on and off.

Good to know. Ryan memorized that information for later.

He took three steps towards Fortuna, expecting to slip up through her ridiculous luck... but he didn't. His power trumped her own. The courier briefly wondered where he should hit her, hesitating about giving her a light cut, but that sounded a bit too savage.

Instead, as Amerindians scalped their victims as trophies, he swiftly cut her blonde hair to shoulder-length with his sharp

knife, keeping the rest for himself.

“Za Warudo: Hairdresser Style!”

She may be lucky, but in this world of frozen time, the courier ruled without equal.

“Toki wo tomare,” Ryan spoke in Japanese, quickly returning to his original spot in the nick of time, before his power ran out.

When the clock turned again, Fortuna let out a ghastly wail of horror and surprise, which startled Ryan by its intensity. Greta didn’t flinch, Mortimer glanced down at his teammate’s hair with what appeared to be quiet satisfaction, and Vulcan...

Vulcan didn’t pay attention to the girl. She only had eyes for one handsome courier.

“You cut my hair!” Fortuna protested, her arrogance replaced with shock. “You cut my hair!”

What? Her stylist probably did that every month, and that woman reacted as if she had been stabbed! “You asked for it,” he replied, putting the cut hair inside his coat. “Now, I shall keep your hair as a war trophy.”

“How could you?” she replied with noble indignation. “Have you no respect?”

“*Mademoiselle*, I believe in true equality,” Ryan declared. “Equality of gender, of religion, of race. All shall suffer without discrimination. I have no chivalry, no scruples, no respect for the elderly, and I’m utterly color-blind. Doesn’t matter which gods you pray to, none of them will help. Beautiful or ugly, I shall torment without respite!”

Fortuna didn't share his civilized point of view, but Ryan guessed such was the lot of those ahead of their time.

"Morty, Greta," Fortuna clenched her teeth, "say something!"

"Serves you right," Mortimer rasped, unsympathetic. "All the times you mocked poor Mortimer, because he couldn't hit you. Not so smug now."

"Wait, is this the first time someone managed to 'wound' her?" Vulcan asked, curious.

"I never use my power on my teammates," Greta replied, her expression ever cheerful. Ryan thought that her behavior had gone from endearing to positively creepy.

"Hey, don't look at me like that," the courier told the crybaby, who kept glaring at him. "If anything I'm the victim."

"You?" Her glare morphed into a confused expression.

"Yes, I grant you your wish, obey your command without flinching, and I only get ungratefulness in return. Truly, I don't think we'll ever be friends."

Fortuna merely stared at him, unable to form a coherent answer.

"Alright, enough with the bullshit." Vulcan clapped to get everyone's attention. "Quicksave, these are the Killer Seven. Our organization's hit squad."

"I must be bad at math because I only count four," Ryan deadpanned.

"We're six with the Vamp and Night Terror," Sparrow replied. "The former isn't good for direct combat, and the latter's power only works in the dark."

"Wait, wait," Ryan immediately asked the important question. "Why do you call yourself the Killer Seven when you're only six?"

"We started at seven when Boss Pluto led us, one for each color," Mortimer answered. "But since she mostly does admin nowadays, we've rotated between four to six members depending on turnover. The name stuck though. Killer Seven is catchier than Killer Six, ya know?"

"Only Mortimer and I remain out of the original lineup," Sparrow explained. "We were each a different color."

"We would need a Violet to complete the set," Greta said, grinning at Ryan. "Want to join?"

"I veto that proposal," Fortuna said immediately.

"Me too," Mortimer added with a shrug. "He's new meat."

"But we don't have a Violet to complete the rainbow," Cancel complained.

"Greta, you cannot invite an unproven recruit," Sparrow said, before looking at Ryan. "Nothing personal, Quicksave. Our missions are the most sensitive, so we only welcome Genomes with an extensive history of loyalty towards our organization. Maybe in a few years."

"Don't poach my boys," Vulcan shot down the idea.

"I'm sorry, but I can't get past the name thing," Ryan pointed out. "I mean, if you aren't able to commit to a

theme, you should find another one entirely. What, next you're going to tell me Sparrow's supervillain name has nothing to do with her superpower?"

Sparrow answered with a forced smile.

Ryan glanced at her with disbelief. "It doesn't?"

"She shoots lasers," Mortimer said. "Sort of."

"I find sparrows adorable," the Genome replied, embarrassed. "They're my favorite animals, and the name wasn't taken."

"What's wrong with you people?" Ryan complained, disappointed. "No respect for tradition and proper branding."

"I'll give you a brand, you crazy..." Fortuna mumbled, still reeling from the humiliation.

"Enough chit chat," Vulcan said, growing frustrated with the banter. "I gathered you to attack the Meta-Gang today. We will drive them out of Rust Town, even if we have to fight them city block by city block."

"Bout time," Mortimer snickered.

My, Ryan may actually fulfill most of his goals in this loop. Could this run finally improve, after the disastrous reunion with Len?

"What about our armor?" Sparrow asked the important question.

"I've designed variants for each of you." Vulcan glanced at Ryan. "With one exception."

"I'll pass." Frankly, while he understood the appeal of armor, Ryan preferred mobility over defense, since his power made death a non-issue. As for stealthy versions, well, he wouldn't dress in bright colors if he didn't *want* to be seen.

"Even one that enhances your power?"

Ryan squinted his eyes at the Genius. "You can't."

"Mechron could enhance powers," she replied, annoyed. "That's how he recruited his few living followers."

"Yes, *Mechron*."

It said something about Vulcan, that she took the comparison to the world's most powerful Genius as a challenge. "I can make armor which enhances the user's power, though I need to study it in depth. I managed to do so for our Fireman division."

"They took the Firebrand knockoff Elixirs, which grants pyrokinesis," Sparrow said. "You've probably seen one in New Rome. They're very popular."

Maybe? He didn't pay attention to extras. "How much firepower did they gain?"

"They went from throwing embers to fireballs," Vulcan boasted, putting a finger on her chin. "Now imagine what your power could do."

This was a trap.

Ryan had noticed it the moment Pluto interrogated him at Jamie's place. His power fascinated Vulcan to an unhealthy level, perhaps because she suspected he lied about its

particularities. That was only an excuse to lower his guard, so she may gather data.

And yet...

Ryan had struggled for years to explore his power, and he knew he hadn't tapped into its full potential yet. If he could enhance his power, create multiple save points, or move his current one further back into the past...

"I will think about it."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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26: FPS

Ryan thought his life was a role-playing game.

“Kill them all!” a druggie shouted from atop a roof, hitting Ryan’s car with a submachine gun, the bullets unable to pierce the shielding. Everywhere, the courier heard the sound of bullets flying. “Kill them all!”

But somewhere along the line, it had turned into a FPS.

Hiding behind his car with an earplug in his right ear, Ryan reloaded his pistol while mourning the Plymouth Fury’s paint job; at his side, Fortuna fired over her shoulder with a pistol with one hand, and texted on a phone with the other. She didn’t even *aim*, and her bullets always resulted in a headshot. At least she had taken to wearing a white, streamlined armor to protect herself.

Seriously, one bad haircut, and suddenly the world wasn’t safe anymore?

In total, twelve people, Ryan and Fortuna included, hid behind the cover of half a dozen cars and SUVs. Most were henchmen wearing riot gear and carrying powerful firearms, with one exception: a woman in a suit of heavy, red padded advanced armor whose design reminded Ryan of steampunk comics. That Genome had drunk the Firebrand knock-off Elixir, and as promised by Vulcan, her armor boosted her pyrokinesis. Sometimes, she looked over her cover to throw a car-sized fireball at the enemy.

“You know texting while fighting is the first cause of bullet accidents?” Ryan asked Fortuna, as one of his car’s windows exploded, shattered by a 20mm round.

“I’m texting my brother,” she replied dismissively, barely paying attention to the battle. The lucky Genome didn’t even bother to protect herself, the snipers having a clear line of fire to hit her head. Yet so far, every bullet had narrowly missed her helmet.

“Felix the Atom Cat?”

“You know that?” Fortuna groaned. “I’m in the middle of a firefight and he won’t answer his big sister!”

Having reloaded, Ryan froze time for ten seconds and peeked over his car. Beyond the protective vehicle line, the welcoming committee had taken refuge inside two half-demolished apartment buildings, surrounding the main road leading to the Junkyard. Most of the walls had fallen, but the remains provided snipers with enough protection. As for the road itself, the Meta’s men had blocked it with a trash barricade, leaving only small openings to allow their machine guns to fire through. The Augusti’s Firebrand Genome had managed to set the road on fire though, forcing the defenders to flee or die in the flames.

However, it didn’t look like the snipers would run out of ammo anytime soon. Ryan shot two of them, before taking cover as time unfroze. Far in the distance, west of his position, he noticed crimson beams piercing through Rust Town’s polluted clouds. Sparrow’s doing, probably.

In total, Vulcan had deployed three hundred soldiers to retake Rust Town, divided in groups all across the district. Most of them were non-superhuman paramilitary. Others were Genomes having drunk a knock-off Elixir; people like

Ryan or the Killer Seven, with original powers, were a minority in the squad.

The Private Security had watched the squadron move inside Rust Town without reacting, perhaps hoping the Augusti and Meta would slaughter one another. Vulcan then deployed her forces all around the Junkyard, where the Meta had established their headquarters.

Unfortunately, as soon as Ryan's group approached the area's outskirts, they found themselves welcomed by armed men.

"Vulcan here," Ryan heard through his earplug. *"How's the situation?"*

"It's a camper contest here," the courier replied. "It's the bad days of *Quake* all over again! But my car is alright!"

"Yes, that's the important thing," Fortuna replied with a sassy tone. "If someone could help us, that would be great. I've got a date tonight."

"You will wait," Vulcan replied, although she sounded quite blasé. *"Cancel and Sparrow are busy dealing with Gemini and Sarin, and I'm fully occupied dealing with cannon fodder. It's such a drag, pursuing them house to house."*

"No sign of Acid Rain or Adam?" the courier asked. The Meta's leader was their main target, as Vulcan believed he alone held his group together; if he died, the Psychos would splinter and become manageable.

"Scared?" Fortuna taunted him, putting her cell phone back into one of her armor's pockets.

"Frankly, I could do without Acid Rain," Ryan replied, being in no hurry to die to her again. "Our powers interfere with one another. She can predict my shifts and counter them."

"Then Fortuna will stay with you," Vulcan declared. Wise choice. No matter how powerful she was, Acid Rain needed guns, knives, and weapons to kill. And Fortuna's cheat code of a superpower allowed her to neutralize them. *"And no, no sign of either yet. Nor of any of the big guns, oddly."*

"Why do I have to stay with that maniac?" Fortuna complained, as their fire Genome set a building floor on fire with a well-placed fireball. "Can't you send me with Greta?"

*"You will stay with Quicksave because I say so, **brat.**"*

"I'm older than you!"

"Don't waste my patience, Fortuna. Clearing out the outskirts is already more exhausting than I expected, so I'm not in the mood to hear your whining."

Clearly, Vulcan didn't think the battle would last for so long. The Meta had a lot more foot soldiers than anticipated.

Ryan briefly froze time and glanced over his cover to survey the situation. Much to his horror, a new, scrawny sniper had appeared inside the left building, rejoining two other men with what appeared to be an archaic rocket launcher.

"Uh, oh, rocket launcher to the left!" Ryan shouted a warning as time resumed. How did the Meta-Gang recruit so many mooks?!

"On it," a voice echoed through the earplug.

Mortimer suddenly phased through a wall behind the sniper nest in the left building, taking them by surprise. Mortimer was the only member of his hit squad who went into the field without armor, perhaps because it interfered with his power. From what Ryan had seen, the killer could phase through surfaces, from cinder block walls to the earthly ground.

In any case, Mortimer slaughtered the mooks with a submachine gun, then phased through the ground within the blink of an eye. The man with the rocket launcher fell through a destroyed wall, falling on the ground below.

"Thirteen," Mortimer gloated through the earplug. *"I'm leading."*

"Not for long, Morty!"

Fortuna fired one bullet.

Two snipers fell from the right building's roof.

Ryan was about to participate in the kill contest when the reality of the situation hit him like a deer in a headlight.

She... killed two people with one bullet.

She killed *two* people with *one* bullet.

...

"How did it work?" Ryan asked. "How did it work?"

"I don't know," Fortuna replied with a shrug, amused by his confusion. "The world simply bends to my whims."

Ryan stopped time and spent the entire ten seconds looking at the scene and trying to puzzle it out. Did the bullet

bounce back on one sniper's skull and killed a second? When he realized he had no logical explanation, he turned toward Fortuna as time resumed. "Can I cut off your foot?"

"What? Why?"

"Because if it's anything like a rabbit's, I want some of that sweet luck!"

"As a matter of fact, go BLEEP yourself, you crazy... homeless... you crazy homeless."

Ryan looked on at her pitiful attempt at improvisation, shaking his head. "You're such a disappointment."

Fortuna let out an angry snarl, rose up from behind the car, and unleashed a volley of bullets at the defenders. When she emptied her magazine, the fighting suddenly came to an abrupt halt.

Ryan peeked over the car, as did the rest of the Augusti. They only faced corpses with holes in their skull.

"Eighteen," Fortuna declared, smoke coming out of her gun's barrel. "I win."

"I call hax," Mortimer complained. *"You cheat."*

Their group had probably killed fifty people in total, and lost only one henchman, shot at the beginning of the firefight. Such was the gap between normal human beings and Genomes.

"Stay here and secure the area until I give new instructions," Vulcan ordered. *"I'll be done in a minute."*

The Augusti spread over the perimeter, but Ryan didn't join them. Instead, he focused on what truly mattered to him.

His Plymouth Fury.

"My car is alright," Ryan let out a sigh of blissful relief after he reviewed the engine and key parts. The protective alloys had held against the gunfire. "I will have to repair the windows, but none of the vitals have been hit."

"The vitals?" Vulcan mused through the intercom. *"Does your car have a heart, on top of the brain?"*

"All cars have a heart, but not everyone can hear it."

"Poetic." Ryan heard an explosion on Vulcan's side, and then nothing. She must have gone Michael B. on her enemies.
"Alright, all clear on my end. Cancel, Sparrow?"

"Sarin and Gemini retreated," Sparrow replied, ever the professional. *"We have control over the main roads."*

"And they're mighty sore losers about it," Mortimer said, his voice turning raspy as he cleared his throat. *"Look at the skies."*

Ryan did so, noticing acidic clouds spread above the Junkyard, and extending towards the outskirts.

Acid Rain.

Thankfully for him, the clouds moved to the west, so she was Sparrow and Cancel's problem this time.

"They sent weaklings to delay us until they could mount a counterattack with their heavy hitters," Vulcan guessed.

“But I wonder how they recruited so much manpower to draw upon. I miscalculated.”

“That’s trash mobs for you,” Ryan replied. The courier was quite optimistic though. If the Meta struggled to mount a defense, it meant the attack took them by surprise. He could always refine the plan in a future loop, make it into a blitzkrieg.

“I don’t understand Adam’s plan,” Vulcan muttered. “Now that we have control over the roads, he won’t be able to resupply and we’ll call in reinforcements. How does he expect to break the siege?”

“He’s a camper,” Ryan said. “It’s not about winning, it’s about getting off on our tears of frustration.”

“Chief, I only see mountains of trash from my rookery,” Mortimer said. *“It looks like they’re shifting though.”*

“Do we advance?” Sparrow asked. “We could take them in a pincer attack.”

Vulcan shot the idea down. *“I’ll fly by and do some recon first. Hold the road, there’s definitely something fishy going on.”*

Given an official order to laze off, Ryan whistled to himself, waltzing through the battlefield with his gun. Mortimer stood on the left building’s roof, watching the road like a hawk, while Fortuna had again begun to text on her phone. The courier checked the dead mooks’ weapons, in case he found one badass enough to add to his collection.

As he examined the various firearms, Ryan couldn’t help but notice the Dynamis logo on quite a few. It made sense since

the company was the main weapon manufacturer in the area, but... suspicious.

As for the archaic rocket launcher, the courier found it oddly familiar. As if someone had pointed it at him not so long ago.

A doubt crossed the courier's mind, as he turned the dead sniper's body on his back, to get a good look at his face. His balding, familiar face.

"Paulie?" Ryan said, astonished.

"Who?" Fortuna asked, looking away from her cell phone.

"A Rust Town mechanic," the courier replied. "But that makes no sense, he hated the Meta-Gang!"

"They must have press-ganged him into their service," the pompous woman replied, her voice softening. "My condolences. You were close?"

"Once, I threatened to throw a plushie at him."

Fortuna immediately returned to her texting and did her best to ignore Ryan's existence.

"What the—" Vulcan's voice turned from surprised to panicked. *"All units, retreat!"*

"What?" Fortuna asked, putting her cell phone away. "But we're winning!"

"Retreat! They have Mechron tec—"

Ryan heard the sound of an explosion, both in the distance and through the earplug.

Then, without warning, the atmosphere turned *oppressive*.

Ryan couldn't quite put a word on it, but he felt no longer welcome in Rust Town. He sensed hundreds, thousands of invisible eyes gazing at him in judgment; the courier's body entered a fight-or-flight response, his muscles tensing in alarm. He had entered the den of a mighty predator and now had its full attention.

The psychic attack seemed to spread among the Augusti, Fortuna dropping her phone and suddenly collapsing to her knees. A cloud of yellow energy flared around her body, an ethereal field surrounding her. An invisible force pushed it back inside the Genome, compressing the halo.

Immediately afterward, tremors shook the ground, before escalating into a full-blown quake. Ryan struggled to stand on his feet, as some of the henchmen tripped and the road broke up into large rifts.

"It's the Land!" Mortimer warned through the intercom. Before he could say more, the building he stood on collapsed due to the earthquake, the hitman phasing through the falling cinder blocks and vanishing amidst a cloud of dust.

Ryan had learned about her during the attack's debriefing. That Psycho could fuse with an area, melding her body into it and gaining psychic control over a certain territory. Add geokinesis on top of that, and you had a truly deadly combination.

But apparently, their intel had miscalculated her powers' range. The tremors spread all over Rust Town, collapsing every building in sight in a catastrophic domino effect and blowing dust across the district.

Fortuna shouted a warning as the buildings collapsed, debris raining on them. The Augusti ran in all directions, Ryan included, but some of the henchmen were soon buried alive under cinder blocks anyway.

“W-what’s happening?” Fortuna panicked, as the golden cloud around her started getting thinner and thinner, threatening to disappear entirely. Debris that passed through the yellow aura miraculously missed the Genome, but those that avoided it hit her armor just fine.

“I can’t get hit!” Fortuna panicked, finally getting the memo that her life was in danger. “Nothing can hit me!”

“Get into my car!” Ryan shouted a warning, rushing to his Plymouth. Above, advanced rockets pierced through the pollution clouds, falling down upon them like a rain of arrows. Ryan counted dozens, if not hundreds of them.

While the courier reached his car’s hood, Fortuna’s field short-circuited and she tripped on debris. Before Ryan could even react, she was buried beneath a rain of stone and dust. She would probably survive with her armor on, but she would need help to escape.

Whatever invisible force had taken over the area, it interfered with her luck.

Ryan stopped time, and to his immense relief, found that his power hadn’t been affected. It must have been a case of Yellow interfering with another Yellow, instead of something as threatening as Cancel’s negation.

However, even as he fired bullets at the missiles in an attempt to detonate them before they hit the ground, Ryan could only do so much in ten seconds. Most of the

projectiles landed when time resumed, the courier thrown backward by a massive explosion.

Everything went white and silent for a moment, Ryan taking several seconds to regain consciousness. The left half of his body burnt, the flesh seared to the bone, and dust seeped inside his mask.

"We need reinforcements!" Sparrow shouted through the intercom, Acid Rain's manic laughter echoing in the background. *"Vulcan?!"*

"I'm trying!" Vulcan snapped back, her voice almost covered by the noise of gunfire. *"Ryan?! Fortuna?! Answer, damn it!"*

Everywhere, Ryan could only see burning craters, corpses, and shattered stones. Clouds of smoke filled Rust Town's polluted skies, turning the area into a vision of Hell. The bombardment had savaged the entire warzone.

And worse, his car, his beloved car, was a smoking wreck.

"Not again!"

What did the Meta have against his Plymouth?

As far as he could see, Ryan was the only survivor. The Augusti's men had been blasted into burning body parts, even the armored one. Mortimer may have survived if he had phased through the ground, but he didn't answer through the intercom. The courier heard explosions both west and east, the Meta launching a counterattack.

"Vulcan?" Ryan called through the intercom but received no answer. *"Must I call Wyvern for help?"*

He only received a static noise for an answer. Something interfered with their communications.

And then, emerging from the ruins and towering over the debris, the source of the attack showed up to finish him off.

It was a colossal dark blue machine, twelve meters long and four meters wide. Six metal legs carried its body, while a scorpion-like tail flung at the back, the tip replaced with some kind of laser cannon. Missile launchers covered the warmech's back, while two flamethrowers and turrets formed the 'head.' Wire tentacles wriggled through small cracks in the shielding.

A silver gear with a stylized 'M' at the center was painted at the front.

Mechron's symbol.

The enormous mech was clearly one of his robots, repurposed by the Meta into a weapon platform. From the wire tentacles slipping through the cracks, Ryan guessed that Psyshock piloted it from within, using his peculiar biology to hijack the machine's command centers.

But the robot wasn't scavenged. It looked pristine, and straight out of storage.

"Little Cesare." Psyshock's voice came out of the warmech, startling the courier. "What a surprise."

"I come with a gift box," Ryan deadpanned, struggling against the pain.

"Where is Ghoul?" the Psycho replied, wires coming out of a thin crack in the mech's shielding, while its cannon aimed at Quicksave. "What did you do with the body?"

“I gave him to dogs, to play fetch with.”

Psyshock responded to the joke by opening fire, the cannon unleashing a massive, crimson beam straight at the courier.

Having outlived his car and seeing no point in continuing after such a slaughter, Ryan made a dramatic pose and embraced the light.

It was May 8th 2020 for... the ninth time?

Ryan didn't remember and didn't care all that much. He guessed the previous loop hadn't been his Perfect Run in the end, and there was clearly still room to improve. Vulcan's attack had gone terribly wrong, and now he had to consider what to do about it.

He also now knew where Len was, and how to contact her without owing a favor to either the Carnival or the Augusti. A connection he had overlooked, and now seemed so obvious to him.

The Meta subverting Rust Town's denizens, and having one of Mechron warmechs in reserve, was cause for alarm. They also clearly had access to Dynamis-made weapons, and the supply of Elixirs implied a connection of some sort between the two organizations.

Wait.

The Meta that Ryan had captured in the previous loops said robots protected the bunker they wanted to access. Machines powerful enough to fight a gang of Psychos.

And Mechron was infamous for his robot army.

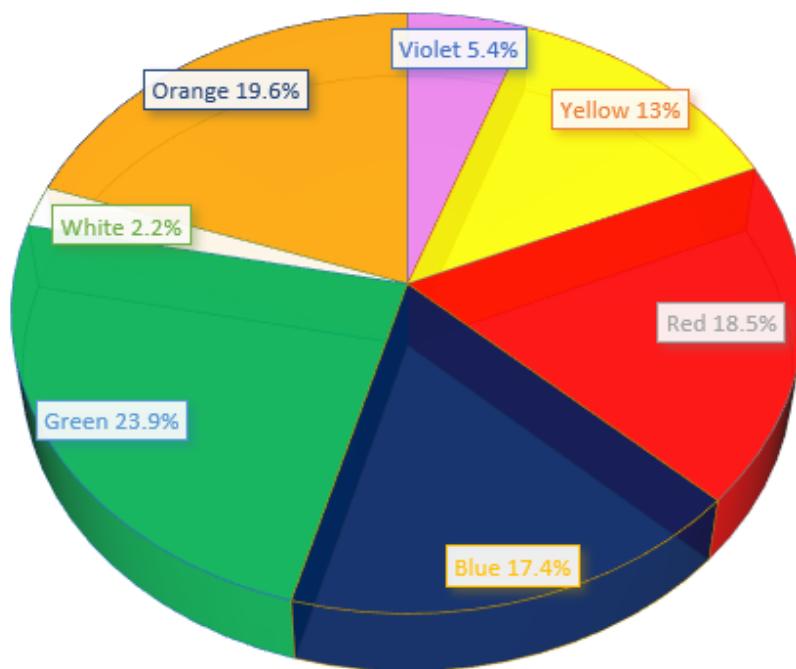
“I’ve got a *bad* feeling about this,” Ryan muttered to himself. The Meta wrecked his car, killed him multiple times, and finally erased the loop when he had finally managed to confront Len.

Now?

Now was the time for *war*.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

ELIXIR DISTRIBUTION RATIO



Green: Life.

Blue: Information.

Violet: Spacetime.

Red: Energy.

Orange: Matter.

Yellow: Abstract Concepts.

White: Meta-Powers (powers affecting other powers).

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WowIExist, Beqa Aduladze, P. S. Hoffman, Edwin Jose, Andrew Wilson, Pooya Daravi, Sunerl, Steven Lindsay, Thaco4, Ryan Naquin, Tyler Chesney, Hazza Vanderbyl, Venturas, NLRUmbra, Zachray, Kyle J Smith, Rommelfanger Bob, Davvy chappie, Preston West, Branden Bryan, Micah Brown, Christoph Kunz, Alex Nimmer, David Burchfield, Jordan McDonald, Matthew Powell, Bbyh, Connor Moffat, Mihai Popescu, Denver Drew, JJ B, Andrew Odom, Danielle Warvel, tommy R, Shaggy, Colin, George Ive, Welkin 2, Ivan Kalinovic, AdAstridPerAspera, Jon _, Reviv3pls, Patrick Christopher, Andrew Jones, Jason P, Seadrake, Connor Kogut, Dark Chaos, Saysca, Nate, Folk Chanin, Jdosnoen, Konrad2, Bunny Waffles, John Johnson, MaikD, Colby, Jacob B Haire, Pumpkin Mouse, Helsgarde, Gabriel Boudreau, Harry Williams, Alex Canavan, Hobold the kobold, Jacob Ellis, AQ, Adam Johnson, Daniel Aguirre, Zack Hoeken, Daniel Mackie, Chip Twothousandone, KatarnK, NOT0B0K, Razvan, Okuyanokuyucu, Calvin, Gavin Olsen, Colby, John, Jordan Chan, samuel baldauf, Heikki Aitakangas, OccultOwlbear, RichWalrus, TheBreaker, Localthiccboi, Justi martinez, Thomas Rossiter, Jonathan Caselli, John, Richard Lee, Njordt, Lasne, Joshua Thompson, PJ LeBlanc, Maxun, Seijax, Demetre Zurebiani, Iron_Giant, Guilherme Silva, Slade Schlaudecker, The Arcane Emperor, Erik Sjöström, RedZone, Vlad the mad lad, MaliMi, Michael Forrester, BadSnake971, ZRhulad, Joshua Miller, Ryan, Cole Mathews, Scott Bosse, sean mccusker, Timo Reti, Jarre7, SlipperyFish, Dietz, Thomas Gamble, James J, Nonnuvya Bizniz, Sean Basa, Tagmin, Julien Castellijos, Skovboa, Kasan, Zach Jamison, Zack, Ethan Bell, William Vickers, Njordt, Ilvesmäki, Alexander, Devarya Raman, Marcus Seigman, James Jackson, Preston M, Subliminary,

TDMC, Jordan, Kite 7, Alfredo Spuri, Russel Todd, Demetre Zurebiani, Zach, Tate Browder, Brandon Stiles, Minow, G Gill, Joachim Janssen, Michael S., evilperson41, edmuck, Connor Jones, Jade Green, just_a_potato, Victor Newman, Malphas, Kyle Reid, Zagig Yragerne, aezrith ferova, Hulg Gohen, matticide FOWD, Jame, Jackietron201, Dark Chaos, Michael Yamashita, Hntpo, Andraste Chevalier, Julien Castillejos, Duncan Sproule, William Johnson, Abdiaziz Ali, John Evans, Johann Pelzmann, Kyoma, Liark Lane, Joey Nguyen, mcanamara ?, HarbingTarbl, Spartanstoryteller, Thordur hrafn, David Ge, Lululelolo, qqyyy, KilledbyBooks, IronJim, Xaozal, William, Demetre Zurebiani, David Cox, hippityhoppity, Magnus Margenfeld, nicholas Maas, Dertyer, Guy Incognito, Paul Hughes, TaoBio, Soufyan Zerrad, mars kiyu, HenryMorgan, Iudi, Meredith Leu, Wilhelm bengtsson, Wargen, Esdraelon, Gaëtan Hillion, Bernice0311, Trespitry, Galandry, Eirik, Christian Julien, Andrey Kutsey, Scipio, Andrew Rutherford Butler, Aeon, Sharath, brett thomas, Yiğit Köymen, Thiago Ruiz, Yamibomb112, Devon, Imran, LictorSivas, Dark Chaos, Tijay Arnie, Comedy Knight, Qwer, Gerrant, Jacob Sharman, Ciara Banks, Bryan Mulligan, William Swearingin, Anonmily, William Brayer, Armo, Aehs, sedael, Darien Benner, Ligma, Michael Buchler, Daniel Spencer Vargas, Gabriel Aptekar, BedlamBlade, Walter, Joko, Dynrakmos, enabi, Goggy123, maou99sama, Erostan, Clemens Hochstädter, Noah Rimmer Skov, Spence, Jacob Barger, Sam Paley, Ariel reyz, Juppaware, House of Pantheon, Aymeric Penven, Dantalian11, Harold Sandahl IV, Francis Chartier, Kody Ihnat, Samuel Alexander Vall Andersen, Rein Warner, Toc Anastar, guipe, mikael persson, morganmoll, Reviv3pls, Warper 6, Markus Gemperle, Ell Lan, 11037, Andrew

Holland, Jdosnoen, Bbyh, Xerias, manspider0002, Sebastiano H. C., Zachary D Nickell, Terry Winter, Maalsc, TTG, Oliverthms, Richard Wall, Siphor, Dark Chaos, Jeremy Humphrey, Nikhil Majumdar, Leon Schultz, Leaored, Cipkenop, Chistopher Waits, Jefferymoonworm, Robert Blank, Ervin Ughy, Phoebe Vale, Shaoraka, Zachary Smith, PonyReader, agoniste, Colby Last, Max Hu, Brycen Legler, KeyMan BrB, Jonathan Spaulding, Ausner Gentil, Kazzy, Erriballon, Larry Smith, Sanjay, christian Mordal Andersen, Oliver Gray, Adrian Barter, Alex Rhone, Karthic, Grant, Tailor Tylbury, Bob le Poisson Rouge, Colin Ford, Lindsey Webb, David Cullen, Ashley Cameron, Bogdanov Dmitriy, Ivan Elyshev, Anthony, Particlepigeon, Adam Retana, Ryan Trueman, James Elwell, Kalle, Jack, Chris, Roden, rene hofy, Andrew Stinson, Thomas Tessier, M Clason, Alex Lindsay, Sadinar, Adam Roundfield, Daniel Everest, Exiled Knight, LinenZero, Tomas Puskas, DtjHeutii, alex godbeer, Kyle Reese, RandomGift, Corgi McStumperson, Peter Christensen-Calvin, James Teeple, Dom Ceremonia, Mikkel Kolding Christensen, Sands, BlackFire13th, Jamie McKay, Kevin Ramos, Letmeinillread, Charles handgis, damien, Jeb, J, Jeb, Sebin Paul, Andrew Kahn, 白酒鬼, Trevor Sales, Calvin Miner, Rory, PbookR, Glader, John Carroll, Quentin, Andrew Parsadayan, Igor Mikulik, RepossessedSoul, Parker Groseclose, James Walsh, Athra, Chris M, Jim of Trades, Koen Hertenberg, Enaz the Great, Alex Pruitt, Saul Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.

27: Past Fragment: The Crimes of Augustus

- *Region of Campania, Italy, December 2008*

Julie Costa tended to her garden, hastening the growth of its wheat.

As a green aura flowed through the plant, it bore purple yields, full of nutrients. She had spent weeks tuning the exact ratio of protein, improving its resistance to cold, and increasing the plant's ability to remove pollutants from soil.

Julie's Green power activated whenever she touched a living being, allowing her to intuitively understand how their body functioned, down to the genetic level. She could make minor edits to the DNA, breed new species from a single parent.

This special plant was only one of many experimental crops growing inside the farm. Wheat capable of thriving in a polluted area, maize absorbing ambient radioactivity... Her personal plot of land was a strange, colorful assembly of unique floral constructs.

Although the sun had already set, light shone upon her, making the thirty-year-old biologist stop in her tracks.

"Julie," a man's voice echoed above her, sounding like embers consuming wood. "Still working at this hour?"

"Hello, Leonard," Julie raised her head at the man flying four meters above her, a human-shaped figure of flames and blinding light. "I could say the same for you."

Even when he toned down the light his body produced, it was difficult to look at Leo Hargraves. His Red Elixir had given him the ability to turn into a living sun, transforming his human flesh into solar flames and giving him control over his own gravity. Leonard had once told her that he always suppressed most of his power, lest he incinerate entire cities with his mere presence.

Unlike many Genomes, the Carnival's leader always used his real name, believing it made him accountable and more trustworthy. It hadn't stopped people from giving him a nickname though, one worthy of his overwhelming power.

Leo the Living Sun.

Unfortunately, the poor man burnt his clothes whenever he transformed. Unlimited power came with downsides.

"Is your husband here?" Leonard asked her. "I have news."

"He's putting Giulia to bed," she replied. "You're finally moving on?"

The fiery man nodded with a hint of regret, his presence attracting a few gazes. At this hour, most of the community was still awake; farmers patrolled the walls, tended to the fields, or just played dice outside.

The Costa family's farm included a large house, shacks, a barn, farmlands, and several pens for animals. Two dozen people lived on the property, mostly refugees which Julie and her husband had taken in after the Genome Wars started. Over time, the community had built wooden walls

and fortifications around the property, to deter attacks from bandits and marauders.

In fact, one such attack was how Julie met Leonard in the first place. His Carnival had slain a Genome bandit leader terrorizing the region, then stuck around to make sure the local communities could sustain themselves.

Her husband Bruno, a muscled, handsome man with black hair and blue eyes, emerged from the barn, smiling upon seeing Leonard. He had many knives around his belt, for his power allowed him to turn any blade so sharp that it could cut through anything. Wood, steel, diamond... nothing could resist him.

When they heard about his power, most people believed Bruno was some kind of badass killer, but they couldn't be farther from the truth. Julie's husband was the sweetest, most wholesome person on earth, and the only living beings he had used his gift on were cattle.

It was that kindness that made her fall in love with him in the first place. Julie had moved to Campania in 2002 to investigate the high number of cancers in the region for her Ph.D. thesis. She had interviewed Bruno as part of her research, and what had started as an academic project had transformed into a happy marriage.

And then Last Easter happened.

That Wonderbox... Julie still didn't understand why her family had been selected to receive one. Why did a couple in the middle of nowhere receive Elixirs? Why did that Alchemist maniac even distribute something so dangerous?

Before she knew it, Julie's world had been turned upside down. A madman had devastated Salerno in a power-fueled

rampage, a totalitarian Genome dictator called Mechron had taken over central Europe, and all of Italy had been carpet-bombed back to the stone age.

Since the family farm was located away from population centers, it had been spared from the destruction. Bruno had decided to hole up there, waiting until the dust settled.

It never did.

“Bruno, Julie, it’s been a pleasure,” Leonard said, “but unfortunately, the day has come for the Carnival to relocate.”

“So it’s finally time, uh?” Bruno said, clearly saddened. “It has only been two months, but to me, you’re part of the landscape now.”

“Ah! Maybe one day, once peace returns, I will build myself a house nearby.” Although she couldn’t see his face through the flames, Julie was convinced Leonard was grinning ear to ear. “Campania is such a beautiful region.”

It was. Even the rampant chaos couldn’t change that. “So this is goodbye, not farewell,” Julie said with optimism.

“You’re always welcome among us,” Bruno said. “Giulia will be the saddest. She calls you Uncle Leo now, you know?”

“‘When will Uncle Leo come?’” Julie mimicked her daughter with a chuckle. “‘Uncle Leo is best Uncle!’”

Leonard laughed in response. “Ah, stop, you’re making me want to stay so much,” he said, before sighing. “I promise I will return for her birthday.”

“I will hold you on to that,” Julie replied.

"Your daughter... your daughter is the future, in more ways than one," Leo said. "We must fight, so that our children may grow up happy. No matter the burdens they will bear."

Yes. The burden of powers.

Bruno and Julie had conceived their daughter soon after they each took their Elixir. Their little girl hadn't manifested powers yet, but she already showed signs of secondary Genome mutations. Resistance to sickness and toxins, hardened organs, accelerated healing...

A second-generation Genome.

Julie suspected it had been the Alchemist's goal all along. To foster a new race of superhumans capable of breeding; a species that would soon replace the homo sapiens, until the old humanity vanished like the neanderthals.

"There is a new organization making waves in Calabria," Leo said. "I thought you should know."

"Doesn't the 'Ndrangheta control the area?" Bruno asked. The Calabrian mafia had taken over the region after some of their members received Elixirs, overpowering the local authorities.

"They *did*," Leo replied. "They have been wiped out."

"Wiped out?" Bruno frowned. "As in—"

"Wiped out. Men, women, and children." Leo crossed his blazing arms. "The responsible party is apparently an offshoot of the Camorra, but ten times deadlier. It wants to unite the mafia families under one banner, and if met with resistance, its Genomes leave no survivors. It has made it

very difficult to track their members, and the communities they subvert won't even speak to outsiders."

"Will you fight these people?" Julie asked him, worried. Calabria wasn't very far from Campania.

The mighty Red Genome shook his head. "Pythia wants us to move north and fight Mechron. She has seen him develop orbital weapons in a few years, with catastrophic consequences down the line. And a new Psycho in France, Manic Plague, is a living pandemic whose danger grows exponentially the longer she remains active."

As Julie feared, there were simply so many dangerous Genomes around. Some of them were existential threats to mankind as a whole, and Leo's Carnival couldn't be everywhere.

Even now, Mechron, Genome warlords, and the remnants of the pre-bombing military fought for control over the wasteland they had created. The Genome Wars, people called it. The fighting was way worse north of Italy, but it didn't mean the south was safe.

With the collapse of civilization, mankind had embraced both its worst and better instincts. Marauders, Psychos, and bandits roamed the countryside; but Bruno had welcomed many refugees inside the farm, and they had formed a stable community.

One that, hopefully, would help the world heal.

"We'll be careful," Bruno promised, putting a hand around Julie's waist.

"Please do," Leo said, giving them a final nod. "Kiss Giulia for me."

And so, Leonard Hargraves flew away, moving across the night sky at a fighter jet's speed.

"He never was one for long speeches." Bruno held his wife in his arms. "I'll miss him."

"Me too," Julie said. The region felt safe with the Carnival nearby. Even while their community and neighborhoods could defend themselves, nobody dared pick a fight with a freaking *sun*. "But so many people need his help, far more than we do."

Her husband nodded, glancing at the crops. "They're ready?"

"Yes," she said. "Once I would have said introducing new species into the ecosystem is a terrible idea, but..."

"I would rather have purple maize than glowing corn," Bruno chuckled, Julie shaking her head at his lame joke. He kissed her on the lips. "I love you."

"I love you too."

Times may be hard... but they would beat them.

They spent a few minutes making out until someone dared interrupt them. It was Benny, one of the guards. The only farmer taller than Bruno, who never went anywhere without his trusty shotgun. "Sorry, chief," he apologized. "But I gotta stop you before you move past second base."

Bruno laughed, breaking the embrace with his wife. "What is it?"

"We have a visitor. A lone traveler, who asks for hospitality."

"At this hour?" Julie frowned. It often happened, but few people dared travel at night nowadays.

"What kind of traveler?" Bruno asked.

"Clearly a Genome, all shiny and chrome," Benny replied. It had to be, to travel alone at night through unsafe roads. "He says he comes bearing gifts, and he brings a horse full of supplies. Fuel, weapons, food."

It wasn't the first time another community sent a trader to the Costa farm. More often than not, they exchanged food for scavenged tools.

Unfortunately, some traders were marauders in disguise, scouting a community for a future attack. Once, the farm let everyone in, but after an incident cost them three people, the group had grown far more careful.

"We can't let him in," Julie told Bruno. "I'm sorry, but..."

"We can offer him food and water, but no roof," Bruno told Benny.

"That's the thing, he says he will just give gifts and then leave," Benny replied. "But he wants to talk with you personally, Bruno."

"Me?"

"Yeah, he has heard of your power and is curious to see it in action. Apparently, he researches superpowers, and he's curious to see if you can really cut anything."

That was odd. Julie exchanged a worried glance with her husband, who was clearly suspicious. "How many people are awake?" Bruno asked Benny.

"Piero, Donna, Alice, and Luca keep their weapons aimed at his pretty head," the man replied, putting his shotgun's barrel on his shoulder. "I told the others to ready their guns, just in case."

"Okay, I will meet him. Hopefully, it's just paranoia talking." Bruno put a hand on Benny's shoulder. "I entrust my wife to you, my friend."

"Y-yes, sure!" Benny instantly tensed, taking this seriously.

"Don't joke about this," Julie lightly scolded her husband, but he waved her hand before moving towards the camp's main gates.

She looked at Benny, who fidgeted awkwardly. "Sorry, 'mam. I'm not good at casual conversation."

"Benny, stop calling me that," Julie said, exasperated. "You've been there for three years. I believe we could talk on a first-name basis."

"And I will still call you 'mam until Giulia is old enough to take over."

The biochemist shook her head, before returning to her garden.

With nukes and plagues having devastated the western coast, Julie hoped to introduce these new species to fight against environmental pollution. According to her projections, it would take only five years to purify Italy's air and soil back to their pre-apocalypse level... and ten to undo the degradations caused by humanity's industrial activities.

In time, all of Earth would become a garden.

"I'll never get used to it," Benny said, as he watched her use her power on the wheat. "I'm not religious, but... it makes me wonder if a God does exist."

"That wasn't an Act of God," Julie replied. She heard booming thunder, briefly wondering if a storm approached. But the skies were clear, cloudless. Odd. "Just an experiment from a brilliant, but twisted mind."

She couldn't explain it any other way. God wouldn't be so cruel as to create monsters like Mechron and unleash them on the world.

And suddenly, lightning hit the farm.

A crimson flash of light filled Julie's vision, as if thunder had struck the earth right in front of her. She heard a powerful boom, coming straight from the entrance, while the farm trembled.

She turned around, and when her vision returned to normal, there was a burning hole where the farm's mains gates once stood.

"Bruno!" Julie immediately panicked, rushing towards the entrance before Benny could stop her. The farm's alarm system activated, signaling an attack while smoke spread in all directions.

When Julie moved close enough, she was welcomed with a scene of horror.

A powerful force had blasted people through the farm's fortifications, with enough force to shatter them. Corpses were dispersed on the ground, utterly savaged. Julie could barely recognize Donna among them, most of her body having been incinerated. Piero had lost his head, Julie only

identifying him thanks to his trademark blue shirt, now painted red.

And Bruno... Bruno was among them.

Both parts of him.

A bolt had thrown her husband through the gates, tearing him in half below the waist.

Julie let out a wail of horror, as the farm descended into utter chaos. Guards rushed towards the breach with weapons, while non-combatants fled into the house. Crimson lightning surged from the smoke, dividing and bending around corners. The bolts slaughtered everyone in their path, incinerating hearts or detonating skulls, before spreading from one person to the next.

Julie watched eight people she had known for years die in an instant.

Another, mightier bolt hit the farm's main house, shattering walls and setting the whole place on fire. "We have to evacuate, 'mam!" Benny shouted, grabbing her by the arm.

"Giulia," Julie panicked. "Giulia is in the barn!"

An ivory statue emerged from the darkness and the smoke, confidently striding into the property. Its eyes radiated a crimson glow, its gaze blasting anyone it saw with lightning bolts.

For a second, Julie thought it was Zeus himself, having descended from the heavens. For this man, this Genome held a striking resemblance to the ancient deity. It was a tall, muscled figure pushing near two meters in height, with a long beard and a golden laurel crown atop his combed

hair. He seemed in his middle-age, combining the confidence of old age with the strength of a mature man.

The intruder's entire body was an ivory statue. His hair, his flesh, even his eyes were an unnatural shade of white. Only his ancient toga, sandals, and laurel crown were made of normal materials.

Perhaps his body had been transformed into an alien alloy; perhaps it was a stasis effect, freezing his body in space and time. Whatever the case, he kept his hands folded behind his back, like a conqueror overseeing his new territory.

And then, he noticed Julie.

Benny immediately moved in front of her, shielding her with his body while he raised his gun. "Behind me, 'mam!"

The ivory man appraised the two with an amused look. It reminded Julie of a vulture glancing upon a dying camel; of a killer toying with his victim, before delivering the coup de grace.

"Ms. Costa?" he asked, upon noticing Julie. His voice was deep and radiated authority.

"Who the hell are you?" Benny snarled angrily.

"Jupiter Augustus," the man answered.

"You dare call yourself after a god?" Benny shouted, charging at the Genome with his shotgun, and opening fire at point-blank range. A volley from his firearm would have torn a normal man apart.

Instead, the bullets hit the chest and flattened out on impact.

“No. Of course not.”

The ivory man backhanded Benny with his left hand. The fingers went through Benny’s body like an iron sword through paper, his flesh and bones turning as brittle as dirt upon impact. The backhand tore off the skull from the body and sent both flying to the side, killing the farmer in one blow.

“I am one.”

Julie froze in horror at the bloody scene.

The biochemist had grown somewhat used to the sight of blood and violence, but she had never seen such casual brutality. That man had murdered her friend with the same care as one swatting a fly.

And now, that psychopath stared at her.

Lightning manipulation, and some form of super-strength. Two powers at once.

A Psycho.

No. Not a Psycho. In spite of his egotistic boasting, Julie saw no hint of madness in that vicious man’s eyes. No craving for the blood of other Genomes. She only saw sneering arrogance and a cold-blooded disregard for human life.

“Kneel,” he ordered.

Instead, possessed by vengeful anger, Julie rushed at this vile man and slammed her left hand against his cheek. He made no move to stop her, allowing her to activate her power.

Although she had never used her power offensively, she would make an exception for this monster. She would cause his DNA to break down, destroy his organs. Make him *pay*.

Nothing.

No feedback.

That... that *thing* ignored her power. It didn't even register him as alive.

"That was no request," the man said, raising his hand in a karate chop, aiming for her left shoulder.

Before Julie knew what hit her, his hand cut through her body like butter, the blow severing her arm and tossing her to her knees. A pain more terrible than anything she had ever experienced raced through her nerves, as a shower of blood flowed out of her veins. She let out a wail of agony, her body growing numb and cold.

"Saddening," the monster said, although there was no regret in his voice. "If you had known proper etiquette, I might have let you live. I take no pleasure in killing one of the chosen ones. Especially a young widow."

"Why..." Julie asked, struggling against the pain and shock. "Did you want to... take the crops for yourself?"

"The crops?" Augustus glanced at her garden, an eyebrow raised. "What about them?"

He... he didn't know? Then why?

Why?

"Answer me," the murderer ordered Julie, without bothering to look at her. In his eyes, she was already dead.

"They..." Julie's thoughts suddenly turned to Giulia, sleeping. If she distracted that monster, perhaps... perhaps she could get away. "They can survive in... toxic and radioactive environments... they can... feed everyone... help us save... save everyone... you have..."

"Crops that can feed everyone?" He gazed at the garden with sudden interest. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

If... if the crops could endure, then...

"You have been lied to," Augustus taunted her with a soft voice, his eyes shining with electricity, "the meek will not inherit anything."

He blasted the garden with a crimson lightning bolt, setting it ablaze.

The wheat, the maize, all the genetically enhanced crops Julie had spent years cultivating... all that work turned to ashes in an instant.

After the horror of watching her husband burnt alive, Julie thought she wouldn't scream again. But she did. She shrieked in despair, as the very seed of hope went down in flames.

"The future came to me in these Elixirs," the ivory man said, lost in his thoughts. "Where the unchosen could not stand the power, I alone wielded it to its fullest potential. Such was the proof of the high esteem that Fate had for my family; that we were destined to rule the Earth and the new humanity, once this trial had weeded out the unworthy."

He finally deigned to look down on Julie, his towering body casting her in his dreadful shadow.

"If you ask me," Augustus said with a soft, serene tone, "this planet hasn't been nuked enough."

"Why?" Julie asked, pleaded for an answer, struggling against the blood loss and utter despair. "What... what have we... done to you?"

The ivory man smiled to himself, finding something funny in the question. Yet he answered her request. "There was once a fox that could never be caught, so a king sent after him a dog destined to always catch its prey. Jupiter, seeing the paradox, removed both animals from the world and turned them into constellations."

"What are you—"

"That is the why," Augustus replied, glancing at her dead husband with satisfaction. "That was me, removing a paradox from the world. An unstoppable force cannot coexist with an immovable object."

An invulnerable man couldn't stand a blade capable of cutting anything.

This brutal, cruel *monster* had murdered her husband, a kind man who had never harmed another human because he *might* one day become a threat?

"You fear..." Julie glared at him. "You fear death so much?"

Augustus' eyes flared with prideful anger, and he raised both his hands above Julie's head, clenching them into fists. His face was no longer one of false divine serenity, but hellish, demonic fury.

He brought his fists down like a hammer on Julie's skull, and all went dark.

Augustus spent the next minutes scouring the farm in search of survivors. The Costa woman's blood dripped from his hands, tainting his ivory skin red.

Anyone he found, he slew with lightning bolts. Men and women alike. He had learned this lesson from his days among the Camorra. Leave nobody alive to pursue a vendetta against your own blood.

No man, no problems.

Besides, he spent enough resources developing a good reputation. No need to let anyone complicate the narrative with troubling tales.

The Genome didn't particularly take pleasure in this. He was simply protecting his family from future retaliations. Augustus might be invulnerable as far as he knew, but his kin weren't; even if they had each taken an Elixir, they could die. As the Augusti clan's patriarch, the future emperor of Italy saw no point in taking risks.

But he didn't regret that massacre either. The very idea of this community filled him with revulsion.

Genomes existed to rule over old humanity, not serve it. The apocalypse was a trial for all of mankind, a great cleansing meant to remove the corruption, the laxity, and self-entitlement that had poisoned Europe for so long. To feed everyone would be to coddle humans, to prevent them from rising to the challenge.

Genomes had been chosen to rule the new world, like the gods once guided humanity from Mount Olympus. Among the mundanes, only those who proved themselves worthy through skill and service would be elevated. Only the best would receive an Elixir and be *Made*. The rest would live to serve and offer tribute.

Life should be earned, not given.

A pity that woman couldn't see that simple truth.

Once he had cleaned the surface of life, Augustus moved to the barns, ignoring the cows and the sheep. The place must have stunk, but the Genome hadn't smelled anything since he consumed his two Elixirs. Neither did he need to breathe, eat, or drink. He felt no taste or tactile sensations, to the point his beloved wife's embrace gave him no pleasure anymore.

Even his hair and beard hadn't moved since that day.

Such was the burden of invulnerability. It protected the Genome even from other Elixirs, preventing him from consuming a third. But Augustus could live with it. The heavens had smiled on him enough, and they abhorred greed.

Once, the people of Italy had built the greatest, most prosperous empire the Earth had ever known; and it was Augustus' destiny, to raise them back to glory.

Guided by his power, the Genome found a hidden trapdoor at the back, tearing it off with his bare hands. As he did so, he noticed a tiny speck of the Costa woman's brain matter stuck to his impermeable skin. Augustus wiped it away dismissively, though it would take a dedicated cleaning to remove the blood.

He stepped down a wooden stair, entering an underground basement below the barn. Most of the floor seemed to be bedrooms, to host the vulnerable members of the community away from sight. A smart choice in these troubled times. Augustus ignored the empty rooms, stopping in front of the only occupied one.

The place where the last survivor hid.

Slowly, the warlord opened the door and entered a small children's bedroom. Since there was no light, Augustus activated a light bulb with a jolt of lightning, casting light upon the room; its walls were painted blue, and a tiny shape cowered beneath the bed sheet.

"I see you, child. I know you aren't sleeping."

Augustus could sense electricity in all its forms. Though he could not manipulate weak currents, he could easily detect the presence of living beings. The energy flowing through their nerves gave their presence away.

The child, a little girl no older than three, peeked over her sheet, terrified by this strange man moving inside her bedroom. Her eyes were oceanic blue, her hair brown.

Augustus appraised the child, recognizing the facial features from his previous victims. Mercury had warned him that the Costa couple had a daughter, though the warlord hadn't expected her to be so young.

"Shush..." Augustus said, sitting on the bed. "Did your parents have powers, when they conceived you?"

The girl said nothing, too intimidated to make a sound. But as Augustus examined the odd currents flowing through her

body, so different from a normal human, he identified her as a Genome. A second-generation chosen.

"If there is even a small chance that you inherited your father's power," Augustus said, kindly stroking her hair, "then I cannot let you live."

The girl began to cry, as the Genome put his hand around her mouth to silence her. It would be quick. He would simply fry her alive with lightning, or snap her neck. An instant, merciful death. If she survived, she would surely try to do her duty and avenge her parents.

Better to kill her now, before she became a problem.

And yet, as he looked into these blue eyes, the mobster couldn't help but feel a hint of shame. Such an alien feeling had no place within him, yet he couldn't expunge it.

"You remind me of my daughter," Augustus admitted, as tears rained down the child's cheeks. "She has the same eyes as yours."

Augustus had no scruples murdering a child, just not his own. And when that girl looked at him, it felt as if he was about to strangle his own blood. Even covering her eyes with his hand didn't ease his mind.

Come to think of it... his lieutenant and good friend Mars had told him about a certain problem recently. An issue this child could solve easily enough. Perhaps this was a sign from the heavens.

Gods were cruel, but they could also show mercy.

"I won't kill you."

Augustus gently carried the crying welp up the stairs, his hands still red with her mother's blood.

"Something better comes to mind."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Some people are evil because of what life forced them to endure. Augustus isn't one of them.

Next time, Ryan goes to war.

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28: Suicide Run

After attacking Ghoul with his car in all his previous restarts, Ryan thought it had grown a little stale.

So this time, he hit the Psycho with a truck instead.

Ryan couldn't find a Japanese one, but the one he 'borrowed' did the job, crashing through the walls and tossing Ghoul against the counter. The courier climbed down from the vehicle, carrying a black cane he had purchased at a shop down the street.

"Ghoul, there are a few things I can't tolerate. The mass-murder? Eh, I've seen worse. The child-abductions? Now it gets my blood boiling. Trashing my car, thrice?" Ryan shook his head. "I can't let that slide, Ghoul."

"Who the..." As it turned out, a truck did a lot more damage than a Plymouth Fury. Some of Ghoul's bones had broken upon impact, and he struggled to get back up. "Who the hell are you?!"

"You see this?" Ryan pointed at his hat. "This is my normal magician's hat. The happy hat."

He tossed it away and showed Ghoul a new, black bowler hat.

"This is the war hat."

Ryan put it on and suddenly looked far more intimidating.

“You know me, Ghoul. I’m a model of mental stability and composure. I’m well-adjusted. But now that I’m wearing my war hat? Oh boy! Oh boy, no more Mr. Nice Guy! I will do great and terrible things today! It’s going to be terrific!”

“What are you—”

Ryan hit Ghoul’s knee with his cane, causing the broken Psycho to fall helplessly on the ground.

“Bartender, a Moloko Plus!” The courier ordered the frightened Renesco, before kicking Ghoul while he was down. “It’s going to sharpen me up for a wild night of mindless property damage!”

Because this restart was going to be an espresso.

Short, but intense.

After paying off the Private Security, Ryan moved to Rust Town and stopped his car in front of Paulie’s place. Ghoul’s head and torso were on the backseat, the courier having tossed the rest in a dumpster. As it turned out, the Psycho had great difficulties channeling his ice power without his arms and lower parts.

Or maybe it was learned helplessness at work.

“I have something to confess,” Ryan said, looking at his captive in the rear-view mirror. “I’ve been feeling down lately. The stuff with Len really weighed on my mind, and I still have a lot of work ahead to make up with her. I was aimless, with no main quest or distraction, nor any clear path ahead. I had no distraction to fend off the boredom and existential dread.”

The helpless skeleton looked at him with a mix of abject terror and confusion.

“But now I’m rested!” Ryan said, turning his head to look at the skeleton dead in the eyes. “I’m pumped! I’m on top of my game again, and I’ve got a new main quest! To give your whole gang a wedgie they will never forget!”

“What are you going to do to me?” the Psycho asked, more and more frightened the longer he listened.

“We’re going on a trip to Happyland, my droog!” Ryan grabbed Ghoul’s skull, bringing him close to his own face. “Happyland!”

“Somebody help!” Ghoul shouted, as loud as he could.
“Somebody save me!”

But nobody came.

Ryan stepped out of the car, wielding his cane, and waltzed into Paulie’s place. Since it was the loop’s first day, the Meta-Gang hadn’t pressed the shopkeeper into service yet. He raised his eyes at Quicksave, his gaze turning into a glare upon recognizing him.

“Hey, Paulie my old friend!” Ryan announced his unforgettable presence. “It’s me, Quicksave!”

“You?” The shopkeeper raised his archaic rocket launcher at his future client’s face. “You dare show your face here?”

“Yes, yes, I know we had our differences, but ooh boys, Paulie, do I have a deal for you!”

Ryan slammed the ground with the tip of his cane.

“How much for that facehugger missile?”

As it turned out, when Paulie learned what Ryan had planned, he gave away the rocket launcher for free.

It took thirty minutes for the courier to prepare. It wasn’t the first time he did a suicide run, so it was a well-oiled routine, but he only tried that kind of stunt when he didn’t risk facing a Genome capable of permanently killing him. While Psyshock was dangerous, the courier was confident he could take the maniac out, or kill himself before being brainjacked. From the intelligence he had gathered over the previous restarts, the Meta didn’t have anyone else capable of threatening future loops.

As far as Ryan knew, the circumstances were right, especially if he could take out Acid Rain early. Since the Meta had struggled to organize a counterattack when three hundred foot-soldiers had invaded their territory, then logically, they shouldn’t expect a lone wolf.

After all, who would be mad enough to attack them head-on with no back-up, and no chance of survival?

“Don’t tell anyone,” Ryan said, driving straight for the Junkyard with his trench coat closed to hide the surprise underneath. The rocket launcher waited on the seat next to him, alongside two submachine guns, and the courier had put the *Fisty Brothers* gauntlets on his hands. “But I’m immortal.”

Chained to the car hood, Ghoul let out a shriek of horror, as the courier drove through the streets of Rust Town at full speed.

Besides avenging the three times the Meta trashed his car—no score was too small to settle—Ryan thought they simply deserved to be wiped out. They kidnapped children, including orphans under Len’s distant care, enslaved civilians, murdered people without provocation, and just made the world a worse place to live in. While neither Dynamis nor the Augusti were perfect, some of their members were good people.

The courier couldn’t say the same for the Meta.

It was the last loop that settled it. These Psychos were simply too dangerous to be left alone, and Ryan needed to check on that famous bunker for himself. Stealth was a lost cause, from what Shroud had told him, and the Meta-Gang would quickly organize a defense if a large group moved into their territory. A lone wolf suicide attack, fast and unpredictable, seemed more likely to succeed in gathering intelligence.

As he approached the junkyard, Ryan briefly raised his mask to consume red pills. They were doses of *Rampage*, a Genius-designed, combat-enhancing drug. It boosted pain tolerance, reaction time, accelerated the production of adrenaline, and hastened the metabolism for four hours. It was powerful enough to affect even Genomes.

Well, afterward the drug made the user vomit for days and increased the risk of strokes, which was why Ryan never took it during normal runs. Thankfully, that wouldn’t be a problem for this one.

After passing the dilapidated neighborhood without being interrupted, Ryan finally came into view of the Junkyard. Stacks of cars, piles of trash, and cranes overshadowed a three meters-tall fence topped with barbed wires. The

metallic items seemed organized into hills of various sizes, with the biggest one at the center.

Two Psychos protected the entry point in the fence. One was some kind of humanoid lizard, two-meters tall, with scales of various colors. The other was a pale woman, whose whole body, from her long hair to her creased face, were as white as milk; her shadow, however, was that of a monstrous, demonic creature. Ryan identified the woman as Gemini but didn't recognize lizard-boy.

"Ghoul?!" Lizard-boy shouted upon seeing the car approach, his yellow, reptilian eyes widening upon realization.

In response, Ryan screamed like a berserker and accelerated. "Valhalla!"

Gemini instantly disappeared in a flash of light, but lizard-boy wasn't so quick. Ryan ran him over, the body letting out a 'thump' as it went flying against the fence nearby, his body jolting from an electrical current.

Ryan drove inside a labyrinth of trash walls, with forking twists and turns. The *Rampage* drug started taking effect, accelerating his heartbeat, sharpening his senses. He quickly crossed paths with a few Psychos scavenging the area, Mongrel among them. The mutant raised his head in shock upon seeing him approach, his teeth sunk inside the carcass of a large rat.

Ryan opened the car's window, grabbed a submachine gun, and fired at anyone in his path. The fastest Meta members dived to the ground to dodge a hail of gunfire, but Mongrel took a full volley to the face for his trouble, collapsing on his back.

"I thought life was meaningless, but I was wrong!" Ryan shouted to Ghoul. "It's your suffering! Causing you pain is my reason to live!"

As he drove through the labyrinth in search of the bunker's entrance, Ryan heard the sound of bells echo through the Junkyard. Someone had sounded the alarm.

Immediately afterward, he sensed an invisible pressure weighing on his shoulders. The same effect as during the last loop, before everything went to hell. The feeling of someone judging him.

The Land.

So that settled it. The Meta used their new recruit as a sensor, but as Ryan had guessed, it wasn't a perfect spying method. He doubted anyone could oversee an area as vast as Rust Town and pay attention to every single detail.

It clicked during the visit to Paulie's place. Mosquito ambushed him the last time Ryan went there, but no welcome committee had interrupted the courier today. This implied that since Ghoul was nearby, the sensor didn't pay much mind to the Plymouth Fury. She must have mistaken the situation for a return trip, especially since bone daddy had gone on an assassination mission hours before.

The trash walls started to tremble and rain debris on the Plymouth Fury, though Ryan dodged them with driving skills honed over countless loops. The courier guessed the Land couldn't cause an earthquake inside their HQ, and her geokinesis didn't seem very precise.

However, acid clouds had started to appear in the skies. Ryan had expected something like this. Considering her

power, Acid Rain was only effective in an open space, and thus would be assigned to defend the surface.

Moving towards the center, Ryan tossed grenades behind him, causing trash piles to fall and condemn the roads behind him. Eventually, after a wild ride, the courier finally reached a twenty-meter tall tower made of rusted cars, debris, and domestic items like washing machines. As he had thought, the base of the 'landmark' had been dug up, revealing a tunnel leading down below the earth.

Mosquito and Acid Rain guarded the entrance, the psychotic woman already drawing two knives. Instead of paying attention to her, Ryan focused on Mosquito. Having emptied the submachine gun, he tossed it through the window, then drove straight at the insectoid monster.

Mosquito looked up, saw death approaching, and extended his wings. But while he may have the appearance of a genuine bloodsucker, he couldn't move faster than a car racing at two-hundred forty kph. Ryan grabbed the rocket launcher, opened the door, and then jumped out before the collision.

Ghoul let out a final scream, as the Plymouth Fury hit Mosquito head on before he could fly away.

SQUASH!

Mosquito perished the way of his kind: stuck to a windshield.

The Plymouth Fury finished its course inside the trash tower, sending pieces of Ghoul flying in all directions. Ryan himself had managed to roll over the ground, but the collision with the ground had torn some of his trench coat. A normal human would have had their skin torn off, but for a Genome, the wounds were superficial.

"I'm sorry," Ryan apologized to his car as he rose back to his feet, the Plymouth Fury buried alongside Mosquito's remains under a pile of debris. "I will make it up to you later!"

"You teasing thief!" Acid Rain shrieked, charging at him with astonishing dexterity, knives raised. Toxic raindrops already fell on the ground, eating at Ryan's hat. "I'll tear you apart!"

"Duty. Honor. Courage." Ryan pointed the rocket launcher at her pretty face and pressed the trigger. "SEMPER FI!"

A missile with a smiley face painted on it flew straight at Acid Rain, who teleported atop a wall of cars.

The rocket switched directions and pursued the Psycho.

Acid Rain immediately teleported to another trash wall, only for the facehugger missile to chase after her with relentless, implacable ferocity.

Ryan rejoiced at the sight. He had had the idea when Paulie warned him his facehugger missile could track him down in a previous loop, even if he could stop time. Acid Rain wasn't so different from Quicksave as a fighter, except she moved through space instead of frozen time.

The missile would keep tracking her until it either caught the Psycho or ran out of fuel. Which could take minutes. By then, Ryan would hopefully be in the bunker, the absence of rainfall negating Acid Rain's power.

Still, Ryan hurriedly rushed towards the tunnel before the acid rain could turn into a downpour. He tossed the rocket launcher away before bringing out his coil gun and desert eagle from under his coat, wielding one in each hand.

He descended into the tunnel, fires spreading in the labyrinth behind him. He didn't know how long it would take for the Psychos outside to clear the way after he had collapsed some of the trash walls, but he might find himself surrounded anytime soon. He had to keep the initiative and adopt an all-offense strategy.

When Ryan had advanced far enough though, the earth walls around him trembled. The Land must have figured out his intentions and tried to block the entrance by collapsing it. If she hesitated so long about doing so, it meant a lot of her teammates were inside and risked being trapped as well.

"Just what I was looking for," the courier said, "victims!"

Rushing against the clock, Ryan quickly arrived in front of an opened blast door with Mechron's symbol on it. The thick steel construct probably weighed more than two dozen tons, and wouldn't disgrace the Cheyenne Mountain bunker. The Meta had clearly forcefully opened it with a laser weapon of some kind, removing the joints and putting the gate next to the entrance.

A pack of four Dynamis drones protected the area, immediately charging at Ryan with their weapons raised. The Genome stopped time and shot each of them with the coil gun, the electromagnetic projectiles piercing through their metal shells. When time resumed, the various machines crumbled into scrap and screws.

Ryan loved to challenge himself, but sometimes, it was relaxing to play life on Easy Mode.

The courier rushed past the blast door before the tunnel collapsed behind him, entering a long metal corridor. The second he walked inside, the invisible pressure vanished.

For whatever reason, the Land's power didn't carry inside the vault. She probably needed dirt or earth to serve as a relay for her sensory abilities. He briefly tested his time-stop, just in case a power negation effect covered the bunker, but thankfully his ability worked perfectly.

Reinforced glass windows on both sides of the path allowed Ryan to peek inside underground hangars below the Junkyard.

The one on the left held the mecha which Psyshock piloted in the previous loop, waiting on top of a platform. Ryan noticed a closed door embedded in the ceiling, perhaps to allow the robot to quickly move the surface. The hangar on his right, meanwhile, housed some kind of sci-fi submarine, halfway submerged inside a large pool probably leading into the sea. Like its brethren, Mechron's symbol was painted on the back. Normal humans whom Ryan assumed were engineers worked on both of the vehicles.

Huh, so they had already unearthed these mechs prior to the courier's arrival to New Rome. That made his plans for a blitzkrieg much more complicated.

The Meta had forcefully opened each gate on the path and didn't bother to close them afterward. The distance also muffled sound from outside, so Ryan simply walked in the room at the end of the corridor without anyone bothering him.

He eventually entered some kind of atrium, which the Meta had repurposed into a recreational area. Well-lit, the room included an assortment of pastimes, such as a pool table, a bar stand, and even a *Street Fighters* arcade game. Considering the number of doors on each side, it seemed to

be some kind of hub room; he also noticed an elevator on the other end of the atrium, leading to levels below.

A group of Psychos, Sarin included, were in the room. Hazmat girl was currently wielding a cue stick, and sending a ball into a hole, much to her fellow mutants' frustration.

"Hey, what was the cause of the racket out...." Sarin asked as she raised her head from the pool table, trailing off as she didn't recognize Ryan, "side..."

"Sarin," Ryan raised his guns. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

Hazmat girl looked at him in confusion. "Who are yo—"

"Don't break my heart like that!" Ryan shot her in the chest with his Desert Eagle, the impact propelling her backward. "I'm a sensitive soul!"

And then, the courier opened fire on the surprised Psychos while laughing like a maniac.

For the Meta, the survival horror had only started.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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Thordur hrafn, David Ge, Lululelolo, qqyyy,**

KilledbyBooks, IronJim, Xaozal, William, Demetre Zurebiani, David Cox, hippityhoppity, Magnus Margenfeld, nicholas Maas, Dertyer, Guy Incognito, Paul Hughes, TaoBio, Soufyan Zerrad, mars kiyu, HenryMorgan, Iudi, Meredith Leu, Wilhelm bengtsson, Wargen, Gaëtan Hillion, Bernice0311, Trespitry, Galandry, Eirik, Christian Julien, Andrey Kutsey, Scipio, Andrew Rutherford Butler, Aeon, Sharath, brett thomas, Yiğit Köymen, Thiago Ruiz, Yamibomb112, Devon, Imran, LictorSivas, Dark Chaos, Tijay Arnie, Comedy Knight, Qwer, Gerrant, Jacob Sharman, Ciara Banks, Bryan Mulligan, William Swearingin, Anonmily, William Brayer, Armo, Aehs, sedael, Darien Benner, Ligma, Michael Buchler, Daniel Spencer Vargas, Gabriel Aptekar, BedlamBlade, Walter, Joko, Dynrakmos, enabi, Goggy123, maou99sama, Erostan, Clemens Hochstädter, Noah Rimmer Skov, Spence, Jacob Barger, Sam Paley, Ariel reyz, Juppaware, House of Pantheon, Aymeric Penven, Dantalian11, Harold Sandahl IV, Francis Chartier, Kody Ihnat, Samuel Alexander Vall Andersen, Rein Warner, Toc Anastar, guipe, mikael persson, morganmoll, Reviv3pls, Warper 6, Markus Gemperle, Ell Lan, 11037, Andrew Holland, Jdosnoen, Xerias, manspider0002, Sebastiano H. C., Zachary D Nickell, Terry Winter, Maalsc, TTG, Oliverthms, Richard Wall, Siphor, Dark Chaos, Jeremy Humphrey, Nikhil Majumdar, Leon Schultz, Leaored, Cipkenop, Chistopher Waits, Jefferymoonworm, Robert Blank, Ervin Ughy, Phoebe Vale, Shaoraka, Zachary Smith, PonyReader, agoniste, Colby Last, Max Hu, Brycen Legler, KeyMan BrB, Jonathan Spaulding, Ausner Gentil, Kazzy, Erriballon, Larry Smith, Sanjay, christian Mordal Andersen, Oliver Gray, Adrian Barter, Alex Rhone, Karthic, Grant, Tailor Tylbury, Bob le Poisson Rouge, Colin Ford, Lindsey Webb, David

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alex godbeer, Kyle Reese, RandomGift, Corgi
McStumperson, Peter Christensen-Calvin, James
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Letmeinillread, Charles handgis, damien, Jeb, J, Jeb,
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of Trades, Koen Hertenberg, Enaz the Great, Alex
Pruitt, Saul Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber,
Marc Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.**

29: The Rampage

Six.

Ryan counted six future victims in the atrium as he opened fire, Sarin included. Some took cover, while others immediately charged at him. All were Psychos, and soon, they would be dead.

One was a featureless woman made of black ink, with a rather sexy silhouette. Bullets phased through her easily, although the attack's savagery had briefly stunned her. Another was a deathly pale guy without any hair, wearing only black pants; while looking sickly, he had the muscles of an Olympic swimmer. Unlike his fellows, he didn't take cover, instead dodging the bullets with supernatural reflexes. The fourth Psycho in the room was a humanoid in a suit without any facial features, not even ears or eyes, and the fifth a humanoid jaguar hybrid. Unlike his kindred, that fury took a few bullets to the chest but survived them.

As for the tentacled Psycho behind the bar...

No, not tentacled. On a closer look, what Ryan mistook for tentacles turned out to be translucent arms of crimson energy. The courier counted dozens of them, lifting a disembodied woman's head with Asian features and long black hair above the ground.

Her name was probably Fuckface or something.

"Miss Chernobyl, I once told you that no matter what, I wouldn't take you seriously," Ryan said, shooting Sarin again before she could recover and blowing more holes in her suit. Due to her overwhelming offensive power, he had to take her out first. "Guess what! I still don't!"

"Sarin, who the hell is this guy?" the ink woman asked, her body turning from black to crimson while she charged at Ryan. It briefly reminded the courier of Bloodstream, much to his displeasure. "Your ex?"

"I don't know alright!" Sarin protested while crawling on the ground towards the closest door, toxic fumes flowing out of the holes Ryan shot in her suit. The gas ate away at the metal walls of the bunker, rusting them. "I'm leaking!"

"You can turn to ink and change your color?" Ryan asked the ink woman. "What's your name, Inky Winky?"

"Ink Machine," the woman replied with a hint of wounded pride, turning her hands into axes and attempting to behead the courier with them.

"I guess you weren't good enough to call yourself Murder Machine," Ryan taunted her, stopping time for three seconds to sidestep out of her way. Considering her power, his bullets wouldn't do anything to her, so he decided to focus on the others first. Surprise wouldn't last forever.

"A teleporter!" someone screamed as time resumed.

"Incognito, go down and call Frank! We'll make that faggot sleep in the dirt!" Fuckface opened her mouth and spat a stream of fire at Ryan. The courier dodged, the attack hitting a wall and starting an isolated bonfire.

“It’s an enclosed space, you stupid whore!” Pale Guy snarled, grabbing numbered pool balls and tossing them at Ryan with deadly accuracy. The Meta may work together, but clearly, they had no teamwork nor respect for one another.

Stopping time for five seconds yet again to avoid the projectiles, Ryan took the opportunity to stomp on Sarin and then cut off her retreat. Seeing the faceless man in a suit, ‘Incognito,’ run towards the elevator, the courier shot him from behind with skill honed over countless restarts right as time unfroze. Four bullets, two from the coil gun, hit his skull and chest from behind, the corpse collapsing to the ground.

Critical hit!

However, the courier ran out of projectiles for his guns, forcing him to toss them aside. Fuckface snarled and flew in his direction, her telekinetic crimson arms lunging for his neck while Inky Winky flanked him.

Ryan opened his trench coat, revealing the explosive belt around his chest.

And not the kid-friendly kind most madmen used. The adult-only stuff.

“NAGASAKI!” he shouted, rushing at the flying head like a bull towards a cow in heat.

Fuckface immediately stopped her attack and backed off in fear, leaving her open for attack. Ryan gave her the full *Fisty* facial experience. The gauntlet sent her crash against a wall, the crimson arms popping out of existence along with her consciousness.

"Just kidding!" Ryan taunted her. "I have to say the safe word first."

But he was having so much fun! It was way too soon to end it with a blast!

"It's not teleportation," Pale Guy said, throwing more pool balls at Ryan's head with incredible skill. Even with his enhanced sense of timing, the courier needed short bursts of time-stop to avoid headshots. Neither did Inky Winkey make his life easy, harassing him with her ax-hands. "He's messing with our perception, paralyzing us! My power can't see him clearly!"

"A Blue then," Inky Winky replied, turning her head at the jaguar man. "Rakshasa, don't just stand there and call reinforcements!"

The beast-man let out a mighty roar, having somewhat recovered from his bullet wounds. As he did so, tiny furry creatures appeared around him in a flash of violet light. They appeared to be cute goblin monsters, with long hair, sharp teeth, and adorable eyes.

Aww, time to commit goblin genocide.

Ryan looked under his coat to grab a new gun and shoot them all, but Pale Guy managed to hit his hand with a pool ball, sending the weapon flying into a corner of the room. Inky Winky then attempted to behead the chronokinetic with her ax-arm, and while she missed, she sliced some of his hair. To make matters worse, the gremlins charged at Ryan like a pack of rabid rats, and their master kept summoning more.

Argh, the Psychos had recovered from the surprise and were taking back control of the fight. Since they outnumbered

Ryan in an enclosed space with reinforcements on their way, he had to settle this quickly.

Desperate times called for desperate measures.

"You want a furry contest?" Ryan asked, drawing out his secret weapon from his trench coat. "I know I should say it isn't personal, but guess what?"

He flipped the plushie's on button.

"It is."

And then he tossed the terror amidst his enemies.

Ink Girl was the closest, and thus got the first view of the plushie. The plushie looked up at her with its tiny blue eyes, the very picture of innocence. Its body let out violet sparkles, energy suffusing its limbs and fur.

Ink Machine didn't understand.

And then she exploded, as two crimson laser beams disintegrated her torso and blew two holes in the wall behind her. The rest of her ink body collapsed into a puddle.

"I love you!" the plushie said with its cute pre-recorded voice, its blue eyes now crimson red. The toy turned toward the gremlins and vaporized them with a look while they rushed at it. The shadow it cast on the walls wasn't that of a rabbit, but of something bigger, and not of this world.

"I love you so much!"

Then it ran straight at Jaguar Man at incredible speed, jumping at the surprised Psycho. Knives appeared from its

tiny paw, and it leaped at the Psycho's stomach, tearing a hole inside.

"Let's go to Disneyland!" it said while burying itself inside Rakshasa's chest, the jaguar wriggling in terrible pain as the plushie moved *through* his chest.

Ryan heard voices coming from the shadows; voices not from this world. They spoke in hushes, making death threats in an alien tongue he could barely understand. If it had progressed this far, then the effect might start spreading outside the bunker.

And it would only get worse with time.

"What is, what is this..." Pale Guy stared at the rabbit making its way into his teammate's stomach. "It's not a rabbit... I can see... something else inside..."

Oh my, Pale Guy had some kind of sensory power. "No, don't look at it with your ability," Ryan warned him, "it's a terrible idea, you can't handle its true for—"

He didn't listen, and he *saw*.

Pale Guy let out a scream of pure horror, as his mind confronted a truth so horrific, that the Psycho's remaining sanity could only break. He immediately grabbed a pool stick and charged at Ryan with murder on his mind. "Stop it!"

"I can't, you have to throw a child at it first," Ryan taunted him, barely dodging a strike aiming for the carotid artery. He couldn't find any opening though, as the maddened Psycho relentlessly tried to stab him. "The younger the better."

The plushie would imprint on the first preteen it found as its best friend, but, well... that would solve the problem by causing a new, even more interesting one.

The courier stopped time, cut the stick in half with his hand, and stabbed Pale Guy in the left eye with the tip. The killer let out a scream when time resumed, before attempting to engage Ryan in hand-to-hand combat. The courier backed away, more worried by his own creation than the Psycho.

Once unleashed, there was no putting the genie back in the bottle. Unless he could flip off the switch by surprise, Ryan had no way of controlling that murderous rabbit.

The plushie had emerged from Rakshasa's corpse drenched in blood, reshaping his intestines into a thick noose. It then leaped on Pale Guy's back before he could react, put the organ garrote around his neck, and then started strangling the Psycho. The killer tripped while desperately trying to throw the rabbit off his back, gasping for air.

"Let's hug!" the plushie said, its white fur was now tainted red. It looked so happy and peaceful strangling Pale Guy.
"I'm your friend!"

The worst part was, Ryan didn't program it for such violence.

It just loved killing.

Except for Pale Guy, only Sarin was still alive, but she couldn't keep the gas making up her body inside her suit. It looked like someone bleeding to death, except gas instead of blood. Without waiting for reinforcements to arrive or the plushie to turn its deadly attention towards him, Ryan moved towards the elevator, called it, and entered. There was only one other floor available, and down.

Pale Guy raised a hand at Ryan, his eyes pleading for mercy while the plushie choked him to death with a blissful expression. “Why?” he managed to rasp, while the courier pushed the down button. “Why?”

“You wrecked my car,” Ryan replied, abandoning Pale Guy to a painful death as the elevator’s doors closed.

The transport system went down multiple floors, making Ryan wonder how far the bunker went... and how large it was. Did it span all of Rust Town?

The elevator eventually reached its destination and opened its doors.

Ryan walked inside an underground chamber of thick black metal walls. At the center of the room, a projector provided a source of blue light, alongside a holographic bust of Mechron: an old man in his seventies, with wrinkled skin, unkempt hair, and a white beard. One could have mistaken him for a Gandalf or Dumbledore type, if not for the cold intensity in the hologram’s gaze. Two blast doors stood on opposing sides of this room, although only one was opened.

The debris of broken robots covered the ground. Some looked like black metal humanoids, equipped with laser rifles, while others were bulky, spidery assault drones. Ryan recognized the designs as Mechron’s, many of these machines having massacred entire communities during the Genome Wars. In some spots, the courier noticed traces of dried blood and moss. Bodies had been left to bleed out and decompose in some corners, before being moved away.

The Meta had clearly fought a hard battle for the floor and only bothered to remove the bodies of their own. They probably harvested them for the Elixirs within their blood.

"Anyone there?" Ryan shouted, but received no answer. Once confident no one would ambush him, he examined the room, finding a map of the complex in front of the projector.

As Ryan had worried, the installation was large enough to encompass most of Rust Town, although located so deep below the earth it couldn't be accessed except through the main entrance. The upper floor which he had just left was actually the living quarters and the smallest part of the complex. The rest, far better fortified, was a labyrinth of corridors and rooms with worrying names written in Bosnian.

Laboratory A and B. Quarantine Area. Nanobot Factory. Robot Production Facility. Army Storage A, B, and C. Robot Maintenance Center. Armory. Munitions Depot. Weapon Testing Ground. Matter Replicator. Orbital Communications Center. U.B. Command Center. Reactor Core. Forbidden Area...

It wasn't a survival bunker.

It was a weapon production and research facility.

One of *Mechron's* facilities.

Even six feet under, that megalomaniac had left a mess behind. If so many robots defended the less important areas, then there must have been a whole army in storage below New Rome. An army without a master.

A chill went down Ryan's spine, as he finally understood the Meta-Gang's plan.

These bastards sent people to their death in an attempt to break past the defenses, all to access the command center. If they took control of Mechron's robots and whatever

weapons the Genius had left, they would be able to take over New Rome, or at least contest it to the other factions. Hell, the armory *alone* would give the Psychos a tremendous boost in firepower.

Dedicated to causing as much destruction as possible in the time he had left, Ryan moved through the only opened door.

He walked through a tall corridor, noticing a large window to his right. He peeked through, observing what appeared to be an infirmary, albeit the asylum kind. The room had clearly been left to rust for years, the white walls having lost their color, though Ryan noticed crates of medical supplies piled in a corner. Two people, one man, and a woman were strapped to different operating tables. From the spots on their skin, they were Bliss addicts.

Psyshock was busy brainjacking the man, his wire tentacle shoved through the druggie's mouth. The woman meanwhile, seemed sedated, her gaze empty.

The Psycho raised his head when Ryan stepped inside the infirmary. "Little Cesare." If he was afraid or surprised, he didn't show it. "How strange to—"

"*Omae wa mou shindeiru,*" Ryan cut him off in Japanese.

"What?"

Very poor choice of last words.

The courier froze time, closed the gap between them in ten seconds, and then punched him the second the effect ended. Psyshock's head exploded in a shower of brain matter and other fluids, his wires thrashing around. The one inside the captive slipped away, the tentacles laying on the ground like a squid's corpse.

"Are you alright?" Ryan asked the captive, although he didn't move to remove the bindings, since the run would end in a few hours.

The man responded by shaking in place, something *wriggling* below the skin. The skull shifted in shape, and the eyes turned white.

"Is this a drug withdrawal thing?" the courier asked.

Ryan's reflexes saved him, as a wire tentacle erupted from the man's chest and nearly smashed his skull. The courier backed away, as more cables emerged from the body, with the exception of the skull, which underwent a biomechanical metamorphosis.

Soon, a monstrous amalgam of wires stood over the drug addict's husk, cold eyes peering at Ryan.

"I have your father to thank for this."

Ryan's eyes widened in shock, as he faced a reborn Psyshock.

"When he gave me those wounds during our last encounter and showed me his true power, I wondered... What if I had misunderstood my ability's limits? Could it allow me to transcend mortality itself too?"

His tentacles lunged at Ryan's head, the courier using a brief burst of time stop to leap towards a corner of the room.

"I can do more than read minds," Psyshock ranted while continuing his assault, tossing the operation table at the courier. Ryan lowered himself to dodge the projectile as it hit the wall behind him, trying to make sense out of the

situation. “I can reshape them, rewire their brains, make them into vessels for something greater. Assume direct control.”

Every time he died, Psyshock possessed a thrall whose brain he had tinkered with. The courier remembered the battle at the orphanage; how the Psycho had forcefully connected with his hostage, and how the medics noted her abnormal brain waves even after the madman’s demise.

“You tried to do that to a child,” Ryan realized, horrified.

“Which one?”

The chilling response filled the courier with fury.

Ryan froze time and punched this soulless monster’s face into a fine paste with Fisty without giving him any chance to defend himself. No matter the consequences.

Immediately after time resumed, the second captive started undergoing the same ghastly transformation. Ryan spared her the misery with another deadly punch, disgusted.

“I’m killing you in every single restart now,” the Genome promised the corpse. As soon as he figured out a way to negate this horrifying ability. It was Bloodstream all over again, although thankfully, Psyshock needed to die first to activate this ability. The similarities with his save point also made Ryan somewhat uneasy, and all the more determined to get rid of the maniac permanently.

The courier moved towards the medical crates, breaking them open to peek inside their content. His suspicions were immediately confirmed.

Dynamis Knockoff Elixirs.

Dozens of them. If all the crates contained more, then the number increased to the hundreds.

Okay, that settled it. No way a theft of that magnitude wouldn't have made it to the news or caused a retaliatory strike from Dynamis. Atom Cat had guessed correctly, someone within the company supplied the Meta with their fix, weapons, and information.

Why? To have them weaken the Augusti while maintaining plausible deniability? Make villains for their heroes to arrest? Or were the Meta exploring the bunker on behalf of their client, instead of pursuing their own interests?

Who was the supplier? Enrique? His father Hector? Or someone Psyshock had brainwashed with his loathsome ability?

Ryan heard heavy steps coming from the corridor and quickly exited the infirmary. Psyshock and a new Meta walked at the end of the hallway, opposite of the entrance. The other Psycho was a three meters and a half tall colossus, a towering monster entirely made of rusted steel. The upper body was larger than the lower half, with the arms slightly longer than the legs. The US flag was painted on his chest. The creature looked more like a humanoid tank than a human being, with even the face was replaced with a mask device that reminded Ryan of a famous *Star Wars* character.

Oh god, Ryan loved Star Wars, even the prequels. He was glad the old world ended before anyone could make cash-grab sequels though. They would have sucked. He knew it deep within his bones.

"It's useless, Cesare. I have hundreds of vessels around." Psyshock glanced at the enormous Psycho. "Frank, kill him

please.”

“Yes, Mr. Vice-President,” he replied with a deep voice, having to lower his head to move inside the passage.

“Mr. Vice-President?” Ryan asked.

“The Vice President of the *United Fucking States of America*, the greatest nation on Earth!” The giant lunged at Ryan and —HOLY SHIT HE WAS FAST!

Ryan would have died without his time stop, Frank’s enormous fist stopping within an inch of his face. The courier quickly back flipped away while throwing knives at the giant’s eyes.

When time resumed, Frank’s fist hit the ground with enough force to shake the entire floor, the hand punching through the alloy ground up to the forearm. As for the knives, they went through his eyes. Literally. The Psycho’s body absorbed the metal knives into itself.

“After the initial push, humans let me in. They want it, Cesare.” Exploiting the narrowness of the corridor, Psyshock used his tentacles to hang from the ceiling above Frank, moving like a biomechanical spider. “People want to be my slaves. The burden of thought, of individuality, it oppresses them. But I get inside their brain, when I remove the confusion and replace it with my will... they become truly happy. Deep down, you want it too.”

“You are a living birth control advertisement, Psypsy.” Every word he spoke was somehow worse than the last. It took a lot of effort to make Ryan truly *hate* anyone, but Psyshock had won the lottery.

"I'm going to free you, Cesare," the madman said in response, Frank managing to free his hand from the hole he had made. "I'm going to free you from yourself."

"You know, killing me is only going to be a temporary solution!" Ryan shouted, grabbing a grenade under his coat and tossing it at the two. "Only therapy can help you with your problems!"

The grenade exploded right in front of Frank's face, unleashing a powerful blast.

And it did...

Absolutely nothing. The giant didn't even flinch, and Psyshock had retreated behind his bodyguard for safety. Worse, a crimson aura surrounded Frank's body, and the Psycho seemed to grow a few inches taller.

"Uh oh."

"Pearl Harbor..." Frank trembled as if having a PTSD episode. "It's Pearl Harbor all over again..."

"I'm sorry?" Ryan asked.

"I will never forgive the Japanese!" he snarled, raising his fists in fury and hitting the ceiling, causing the hallway to shake. "I'll never forgive them! Never ever!"

Ryan started to understand why they called him Frank the Mad.

However, if he could shrug off grenades and absorb metal, then the courier didn't have anything that could take that guy down. Except maybe the A-bomb, but obviously, it

would end the run here and now. Ryan had to think of a solution, and fast.

The lights started to malfunction, and tiny steps echoed in the hallway. Ryan worryingly peeked over his shoulder.

The plushie walked inside the corridor carrying Pale Guy's scalp, its eyes shining maliciously.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)



The face of evil.

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30: Bites the Dust

“Do you want to be my friend?”

The plushie’s words echoed in the corridor, while Ryan found himself trapped between two monsters. On one side was a ruthless abomination against nature, and on the other, Frank the Mad. Psyshock remained in the background, carefully waiting for an opportunity.

The plushie and Frank locked gazes, two apex predators recognizing each other. The tension grew palpable, the rabbit throwing Pale Guy’s scalp away while Frank adopted a krav maga fighting stance. Eldritch whispering voices echoed through the hallway, promising sweet destruction to all living creatures.

“Behind me, Mr. Vice-President,” the giant told Psyshock, warily gazing at the rabbit. “It’s an Afghan hare.”

A tense silence stretched for several, agonizing seconds. No one was brave enough to take the first step. The plushie’s ears turned towards the Psycho ever so threateningly, while Frank’s fingers fidgeted. Ryan held his breath, knowing the following seconds would decide the fate of the entire run.

And then...

And then it started. The rabbit leaped forward, knife-claws extended, while Frank let out a bestial roar and charged. David versus Goliath. Robot versus robot. Man versus rabbit.

Of this epic battle...

Of this epic battle, nothing would be said, for Ryan ran away.

Realizing he would die if caught in the crossfire, the courier stopped time for ten seconds. He ran towards Frank, slid on the ground between the giant's leg, and then quickly got back up and fled towards the other end of the hallway.

"I love you so much!" he heard from behind him.

And the clock was still stopped.

Unfortunately, the moment time resumed, Psyshock whipped Ryan in the torso with his tentacle arm from the ceiling, having attached himself to it like a spider waiting for his prey.

Thanks to the *Rampage* drug, Ryan didn't 'feel' the pain, but he heard one of his ribs break under the strain. The blow propelled him further down the hallway, brightened by flashes of crimson light. The bunker trembled, as Frank frantically hit the ground and walls in a fruitless attempt to catch the rabbit.

"It seems you are quite the glass cannon, Cesare," Psyshock mused, leaping with his wires and attempting to pin the courier to the ground. "You can dodge a thousand times, but you can only stumble so often."

Ryan managed to roll over to dodge the attack, quickly getting back on his feet and running away. Psyshock pursued him, with the two demons remaining behind to fight.

Ryan eventually exited the hallway to enter another underground chamber, with lamps embedded in black

panels all over the walls; blood had recently been spilled on the ground, leaving spots on the metal. Seven vats full of colored liquids, one for each Elixir, were lined up on a nearby wall. Linked to strange-looking machines, three of the containers held mutated animals; Ryan struggled to see them fully through the liquid but identified some strange hybrid of a lizard and dog the size of a Doberman in the violet tube. The laboratory had two other blast doors, one opened, one closed.

Psyshock's tentacles launched themselves at Ryan, who had finally recovered from his cooldown. The courier dodged with a leap to the side after a short two seconds time stop, the drug in his system helping him fight off the pain of the broken rib.

"That's all you got?" Ryan taunted Psyshock, as both he and the Psycho faced one another. "Guess it's easier with Japanese schoolgirls?"

"Classy," the wire squid replied, launching one of his tentacles. This time, instead of dodging, Ryan grabbed it with his hands. With the strength boost from the Rampage drug, he rotated on himself and tossed Psyshock against a nearby wall. The Psycho managed to recover but quickly turned still.

Heavy steps echoed close from the open blast door, something huge moving into the underground lab.

"My, my," a playful voice with a thick New York accent interrupted the battle, "what do we have here?"

A massive figure, not as tall and massive as Frank but close, stepped through the broken blast door. An obese Psycho with the power to turn his skin into an indestructible, black carbon alloy, he was already transformed when he showed

up. The man was heavily mutated, his face heavily scarred and possessing prominent teeth like a hippo. He dressed like a man from the fifties, though his clothes had fuming holes in them, probably from lasers.

And his eyes... his brown eyes shone with a mix of fiendish cunning and malignant narcissism. He briefly glanced at Psyshock, who instantly submitted without a word.

“Big Bad Adam,” Ryan said dramatically, “we finally meet again in the fat.”

“Oh my, we’ve got a new Mark Twain here,” the living balloon mocked him back. “Such a razor-sharp wit. You make Oscar Wilde proud, laddie.”

He was the worst kind of criminal.

The one with a sense of humor.

“You’ve been making a mess above, chump,” Adam said, keeping his left hand behind his back and his right one exposed. “I’ve been looking at you through our cams for a while. Sorry not to have welcomed you myself, I was busy doing important work.”

“Well, fatass, now that we got to know each other better, perhaps we can discuss your plan to conquer New Rome with a robot army over dinner?”

Adam chuckled. “You’re wired,” he mused. “They’re always wired when they say that. Sorry, mate, you’ll warrant no exposition from me.”

Well, it was worth a shot.

"Wait, widdy wait, you said we meet *again*?" Adam snapped his fingers. "You're Bloodstream's kid. Cesaire something."

"Cesare," Psyshock said, clearly itching to attack Ryan, but wise enough to humor his boss.

"Is that the reason for all this fuss?" Big Fat Adam asked the courier, raising an eyebrow while explosions echoed through the hallway nearby. "A score to settle? It's old news, mate. Old news."

"It was an impulse thing, really," Ryan shrugged.

"Well, whatever the case, when you invade my home and start killing all my men, I take that real personal, mate. The ride's over boyo."

"Oh well, I had fun. I guess I'll just blow myself up then."

"Mate, we'll survive your pretty belt." Adam grinned, though his smile never reached his eyes. "You won't."

"A fight to the death then?" Ryan did some footwork and shadow boxing. "I'm pumped for a few rounds."

"There won't be a battle, kiddo. You see, you're mistaken about something. The media call me Big Adam, because they don't want to face what I am, but my real moniker..." He smiled, showing three rows of sharp teeth behind his lips. "Is Adam the Ogre."

He revealed his left hand, and Ryan flinched.

Adam held a beaten and bloody teenager no older than fourteen within his fingers; probably some Rust Town denizen, clearly of Arab or Turkish descent. The prisoner had

tears of terror at the edge of his eyes, pleading Ryan to save him with his gaze.

"And though I prefer to eat French," Adam said with a vicious smirk, holding his captive with both hands like a sandwich, "I can settle for a kebab."

He opened his mouth and prepared to bite his captive's head off.

Time seemed to slow down as Ryan frantically thought of the situation, and it wasn't even his power's doing. It was clearly a trap, a cruel blow to unbalance him mentally. The courier had gone far enough anyway, and trying to rescue the teen would probably fail. He had everything to lose by making the attempt, instead of sacrificing the hostage and making a getaway to explore the bunker further.

But there were some lines Ryan couldn't cross, even without consequences. Afterward, it would be a slippery slope.

The courier froze time and charged at Adam, punching the ogre's hand with all his might.

The fist broke.

His own, that is. Fisty and Ryan's bones shattered on impact.

When time resumed, the courier didn't even see Adam's fist hit his chest. He just heard the impact, alongside his ribs and spine breaking under the strain. The blow didn't detonate the explosive belt but sent the courier flying against the blue vat. The glass cracked on impact drops of liquid falling off Ryan's body.

The effects of *Rampage* spared him from the pain, but the courier didn't feel his legs anymore. He coughed blood, a warm fluid filling up his lung.

"You martyrs are all the same," Adam taunted him, scratching his prisoner's hair with his finger like a pet. "I knew you would do that when you stopped your rampage to save our testers. Psyshock, pick his brain open before he bites the dust. I want to know who sent the laddie after us."

"Shut your eyes, Cesare," Psyshock said with relish, his tentacles swirling around Ryan's neck and lifting him above ground. "It's easier when you look away."

This was the end. Well, it was fun while it lasted, even if the last seconds sucked.

Ryan shouted his safe word.

"Jar Jar Binks!"

The belt let out a beep, before blowing him and Psyshock up in a fiery blast.

And so ended Ryan's vacation.

As he returned a few hours earlier, driving towards Renesco's bar, the courier felt like someone commuting to his job the day after a massive bender. He had his fun, but now was time to get serious again.

Should he do another Dynamis run, dig deeper into the Meta connection? He had the feeling it would come into play, even if he somehow managed to wipe *Hannifat Lecter* and his goons from the face of New Rome.

However, Ryan only saw one way to kill Psyshock permanently yet, and the option was Augusti-exclusive. The courier had already progressed rather far on that path, and he wished to see how this party would unfold.

And so Ryan prepared to return to the Augusti Path...

Until he remembered he would have to visit Len again.

To maintain the sequence of events, he would have to say the same things, make the same moves, go through the same heartbreak until it became routine. Every feeling, every special moment, emptied of their substance and uniqueness. An ancient bond turned into a formality.

Just like everything else.

Ryan parked the car in the first spot he found, his hands on the driving wheel. He stayed there for a few seconds, trying to gather his thoughts. He activated the Chronoradio, put some *Post Apocalyptic Blues* in the background.

“Len,” the courier said suddenly. “I know you’re listening, Shortie. Watching me. You’ve got to, somehow.”

He received no answer, no change in the world around him. But Ryan carried on.

“You have a table near your sofa, in your undersea apartment. You’re currently reading *Karl Marx, Hegel*, and the *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* book you found in Venezia. You kept them all these years because you’re a ship geek and that will never change.”

Ryan glanced through the window, at the sun shining upon the peaceful Mediterranean Sea. He couldn’t see anyone peeking over the water. Maybe she was, maybe not.

“I know because I was there. Just as I know you give the orphans in Rust Town supplies and money, and that you want to take them to your complex under the sea. Before you believe I’ve teleported there, or that this is a horror stalker movie, I’ll tell you a secret. My secret.”

Ryan inhaled and dropped the bomb.

“Len, I can time-travel, mentally. Not far, but I can relive the same events over and over again. I drank the Violet Elixir that fateful day, and it granted me that power. From your point of view, it has only been four years, but for me? It’s been many lifetimes. I’m probably older than most countries by now. I’ve forgotten more than you will ever learn. But never once did I forget you.”

Here he was, getting all mushy-mushy and sentimental. It felt so strange, as if the courier unloaded a burden which had weighed on his shoulders for days.

“I...” Ryan struggled to find his words since they came from the heart. He was never good at this, even before the loop. “I know why you don’t want to see me. You told me in another history, now erased. Why I hurt you with my mere presence. You hate me for what I did to your father, and how I remind you of the bad days. And I... I understand. I understand.”

It still hurt just to remember that conversation, but he understood.

“I want to help you, Len. Because I... because I care for you. But I don’t know how I can help. I never did. Some say I should persevere, others that I should let you pursue your own destiny without interfering. And... and I don’t want to learn the best way, Len. Because it means going through countless trials and errors. We will have the same

conversations over and over again, you will forget everything, and every special moment we have will become routine to me. You won't be a friend, you'll be a goal."

Still no answer.

"I don't want to do that to you," Ryan persevered. "So if... if you're listening, and there is any chance we can make up and find a way around that curse of mine, please give me a sign. If not... if not, I will let you be. I will still take action to save the orphans from Adam and his band, but you'll never hear from me again. I'll be gone from your life. Because otherwise, it will hurt too much, for the both of us."

He looked back on the driveway. "So please, I beg you," Ryan pleaded, "please give me a sign. Anything."

His forehead hit the driving wheel. "Don't leave me alone again."

Seconds, minutes stretched, with only the noise from the cars around him.

Hearing no response, Ryan sighed, regained his composure, and prepared to run over Ghoul yet again. If the courier waited longer, he might arrive too late to prevent his killing spree.

Her voice came out of the Chronoradio.

"Meet me at the orphanage."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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31: Knight of Faith

Nightfall was upon Rust Town when Ryan arrived at the orphanage. His good and unwilling friend Ghoul was trapped at the back, missing most of his limbs. Hopefully, his presence would get the Land off the courier's back for the evening.

"I would take you out on a walk," Ryan told his captive while stepping out of the car, "but I don't think this place was built with the elderly in mind. Besides, the kids there are too old for you."

"BLEEP you!" Ghoul snarled. "I swear I will—"

Ryan closed the car's door behind him, the skeleton's insults turning into muffled noises. Most of the animals were asleep in the big pen, a few dogs barking at the courier as if he were an intruder. Unlike his previous visit, the orphanage's doors were closed, though Ryan could see light coming from inside.

The Genome knocked and waited. Eventually, a little girl in pink opened the door, raising a gun at his face. "What do you want, druggie?"

"Hi, little Sarah," Ryan introduced himself. "Is your mama here?"

"How do you know my name?" she asked, looking at his hat. "You're a magician?"

"Oh yes, I'm especially good with explosions and disappearing acts. Watch." He stopped time and switched her crappy revolver with a Desert Eagle. "See?"

"So cool..." she said with admiration, examining her new toy as if it were a doll. "Is it loaded?"

"Yep, but I put the safety on. I can switch it for a shotgun, or pretty much any firearm."

"You're Mr. Ryan?" she asked him, the courier nodding.
"Mama is inside. She said you would come."

"Can I get in, or do I have to break my own hole?" he asked, pointing a finger at a broken window nearby.

"You can. But you do anything to Mama or the others, and I will disappear your *face*." Ryan said nothing, making her frown. "That sounded way better in my head."

"It comes with practice, my young *punawan*," Ryan said, walking inside while she closed the door behind. From within, the orphanage looked as dilapidated as the outside, with wallpaper peeling from the walls, and only one lamp for two rooms. Sarah wagged her new toy at Ryan, guiding him through.

Now that he could take a good look inside, Ryan grew convinced that this place had been an animal shelter first, and repurposed into an orphanage years afterward. The kids had made bedrooms out of caged compartments originally meant for animals, half of them already sleeping or reading old books from Jules Verne; some of the children slept with a cat or dog under their bedsheets.

He found Len in the kitchen, cooking fish for a group of four kids gathered around a table.

His old friend wore the same brown diving suit as last time, and she kept the water gun in a corner of the room. The kitchen clearly lacked equipment, since Len used a camping stove for the meat.

She immediately froze still upon seeing him, Ryan removing his hat and mask like a true gentleman. "Riri," she said.

"Who is this, ma?" Ryan recognized the speaker as the girl whom Psyshock tried to brainjack, Giulia. He examined her facial features, the vague shape of her skull, and a chill went down his spine.

Psyshock had a similar facial structure when he attacked Ryan at Shroud's shack.

He also noticed the boy that had been playing with Sarah, before the Psychos attacked the area. His golden retriever waited at his side, looking at the dish while wagging his tail. "He looks weird..." he said, observing Ryan's costume.

"He's a magician," Little Sarah showed them her Desert Eagle. "Look!"

"Sarah," Len scolded her but took no step to remove the gun. "What did I tell you? Don't point weapons around, especially not at strangers."

"It's fine, Ma, I know how to use them!" the little girl pouted in response.

"Yeah right, you can't even hit a soda can at three meters," a boy taunted her, Sarah pinching him in the arm. "It's true!"

"Ryan, this is Sarah, Giulia, Romain, Albus, and Valeria," Len made the introductions, before looking at the courier with a

conflicted face. "Kids this is Ryan. He's an old... an old friend."

"Does he come from the magical place?" little Valeria asked, a dark-skinned brunette no older than twelve.

"You don't talk about the magical place to strangers!" Sarah told her, the other girl putting her hands on her mouth.

"Sorry, Ma."

"It's okay," Len replied, putting a hand on Sarah's shoulder.

"Can you serve the food to the others and make sure everyone gets their share? I must talk with my friend."

"Is he your friend or your *boyfriend*?" one of the boys pestered her. "I want to know!"

Len responded with a strained smile, while Ryan remained silent. If it had been anyone else, he would have cracked a joke, but he didn't want to embarrass her. "I'll be back soon," Len promised, grabbing the water gun and leading the courier outside the kitchen. The kids looked at them with suspicion, Sarah clapping hands to get their attention.

Adorable.

"It's nice, what you're doing here," the courier started, immediately finding his words awkward. Len had that effect on him nowadays, to the point he couldn't do sarcasm in her presence.

The invisible barrier between them wouldn't fall anytime soon.

"Thanks," she said, embarrassed, before leading up towards a stairway. "We can go to the roof. They'll listen through the door and pester us otherwise."

Ryan was pretty sure they would follow and try to eavesdrop on them anyway. He knew children all too well; none of them could resist the lure of a magician's hat.

Len led him to a door reaching the roof, locking it behind them. Ryan sat at the edge, his feet dangling into the void. His old friend glanced at him before sitting in the same position, albeit with two meters of distance and her water gun in hand.

For a moment, neither dared to break the ice, both glancing at the skies above. Even with the lights of New Rome and the polluted air, the stars shone as bright as ever. It made Ryan wonder if he should invest a few loops in researching how to build his own spaceship and explore the universe.

A ski vacation on Pluto sounded quite appealing.

"Kinda reminds you of the old days, doesn't it?" the courier spoke up first. "We always debated if there was sentient life out there."

"I still think we're alone in the universe," she replied. "It's all dark and cold beyond our little blue planet."

"We aren't alone," Ryan argued back. "And if you ask me, the stars shine brighter still."

She shifted uncomfortably on her spot. Ryan realized his attempt at small talk just made it awkward. "Did we..." Len trailed off, biting her lower lip. "Did we already have this conversation?"

So, she had taken him at his word. It seemed Len still trusted him somewhat, even after all this time. "We only talked once, in your house under the sea," Ryan admitted. "You told me you didn't want to see me after I led the

Carnival to your dad, how you had known I was alive for two years, and that you had built your underwater base for Sarah and the others.”

“So it was true,” Len muttered to herself. “Time-travel. It’s... it’s possible since many Violets can alter spacetime on a limited basis. But... I still can’t grasp it. Do you travel physically? Or is it just information transfer?”

“I can mentally return to a point I fix at a specific moment, with my last one made a few hours ago,” the courier explained. “Only my consciousness travels back in time.”

“A save point, like in your video games?” Ryan had always loved playing with them, whenever he found a console that still worked. “Can you...”

“I can’t move my save point back into the past, no.” The courier shook his head. “When I create a new point, it erases the first. I wish I could save your father, save us, save the world, but I can’t. I can’t change the past, only the present, and future. What’s done is done.”

Len winced at his words. Ryan instantly regretted his bluntness, but he had to say it. He couldn’t let her get any false hope up. “How does it work?” she asked more questions. “You create or travel to alternate timelines?”

Ryan shook his head. “You know about Schrodinger’s Cat? The thought experiment? Some psychopath puts a cat in a black box, where the animal has a fifty-fifty percent chance of dying or surviving. As long as you don’t open the box to check the result, the cat is technically both alive and dead.”

“I heard of it,” Len replied. Of course she would, she read everything she could get her hands on. “I thought it was meant as a nonsensical joke towards quantum physics.”

"It was a joke. But as it turns out, I'm a cat, both alive and dead at once."

Ryan joined his palms together as if holding something unseen. "That's our spacetime continuum," he explained. "It's a black box where all of time and space happens. All moments in time, all possible timelines. Past, present, and future."

"It's too small to contain the whole universe," Len replied, smiling thinly. The sight warmed Ryan's heart; it appeared the children had a positive effect on her mood, compared to the last loop.

"You just have to fold it enough times."

"But if our universe is the box, then does that mean there's something outside it?"

"Yes." Ryan nodded. "A dimension outside space and time, the observer's dimension. Let's call it the Purple World."

"The Purple World?" she frowned.

"I haven't set on an exact name, but Purple World sounds nice." Even Acid Rain seemed to agree. "The Purple World exists between all moments in time and points in space, though I only really affect the first part."

Len listened without a word, trying to make sense out of his words. But she was smart, even without her power, and while it seemed outlandish, she agreed to entertain the theory.

"I actually exist at two points in time," Ryan continued his explanation. "When I create a save point, I divide. One version of me exists in the Purple World, trapped between

two seconds, and another me continues on; the person you're facing right now. I'm both at once, and we share the same consciousness. You can say that my power is *temporal bilocation*."

"So when you die, it's like Schrodinger's cat," Len's expression changed into one of horror. "You're alive and dead at once."

"Yes, except that since my consciousness is spread between the two versions, I cheat. I collapse the timeline where I'm dead, and I create a new copy from my save point with the knowledge of the erased future. All events between the two points are undone."

"But you don't *have* to die to trigger that power, right?" Len asked, pleading. When Ryan didn't answer, she put a hand on her mouth in horror. "How..."

"How many times?" Ryan shrugged. "Countless."

"How can you say that?" Even with their troubled history, he could see the compassion in Len's gaze. She had remained ever so kind. "The implications... it's horrifying, Riri."

"Well, my first few dozen times were terrifying," Ryan admitted. "I went mad or catatonic from the stress a few times. But past the first thirty or so, it became normal, like taking a cold shower every day. You get used to everything, even death."

It didn't ease up her worries at all. If anything, Len grew even more concerned for him. "But since you exist in two time periods, some conceptual powers, White Genomes, or memory-altering attacks could affect both versions."

"I suspect someone like Cancel, wait, do you know Cancel?" Len nodded. "Cancel would cause my power to unravel if I died in her vicinity. Obviously, I'm not going to tempt her."

"And the stopping time? Did you take..." she stopped herself, the question going unsaid.

Did you take two Elixirs, like my father? Are you a Psycho?

"I only have the save point as my power," Ryan reassured her. "The time stop is an application of it. I cause both of my divided selves to converge, and thus both our reality and the Purple World align. This creates a temporal anomaly where I'm the only one capable of applying force to objects, and my power protects me from the negative side-effects. It's a pretty sweet deal. However, if I keep it up past a ten seconds limit—"

"The two versions of you fuse. You open the cat's box and look inside."

"Which always causes me an early restart, meow," Ryan said, but she didn't smile. "I've spent decades studying the Purple World, trying to see if I could use it to improve my power and make more than one save point."

"Your Chronoradio, that's why you made it?" she guessed, Ryan nodding in confirmation. "Did you succeed in physically entering that dimension?"

Ryan thought of the rabbit plushie. "Not really," he replied, frowning at her. "By the way, how did you hack into the Chronoradio? Or knew I had one?"

She bit her lower lip. "I've... I've been..."

"You've been stalking me?"

"Watching you for a while," Len replied while blushing, which made her look adorable. She immediately changed the subject. "That Purple World, are you the only one who can access it?"

"Some Violet Genomes can tap into its power." That was the only explanation for Acid Rain's abilities. "Maybe all Violet Genomes derive their abilities from it. A human body can't do half the things a Violet Genome can, even while heavily mutated."

Len fidgeted in place. "Riri, how old are you? It must have taken years, decades to figure all of that out."

"I don't know," the courier admitted. He had long lost count. "Maybe I'm five hundred years old, or eight hundred. Maybe more."

"And you've been looking for me all this time?" Now she sounded positively guilty and remorseful.

"You couldn't know," Ryan replied. He could never hold anything against her. "I thought you were dead or out of reach after the first decades, so I just wandered off trying new things. It's only when I got my hands on a piece of your tech that I realized you were somewhere in New Rome."

Len turned away, something appearing at the edge of her eyes.

"Shortie?" Ryan frowned, as he watched her hold back tears, "Len, are you crying?"

"I'm crying for you," Len said, looking at him with clear guilt in her gaze. "You've been... you've spent centuries alone and I..."

"Len, I—" He raised his hand toward her.

She visibly flinched before he could touch her, making Ryan back away.

"I'm sorry," Len repeated, feeling even more crushed.

"Just... just give me time to process all of this. It's... all of this at once, it's too much. It's too much at once, Riri."

"It's okay. We've got all the time in the world."

He instantly regretted it saying that as Len's face darkened even further. Goddammit, why did every word he spoke make things worse?

"Every time you die, everyone forgets you," she said, wiping away the tears. "Over and over again."

"Except you," he replied. "You're the only person who knew me before the time loop. I know that's selfish, but..."

"You thought I was the only one who could make this eternity less lonely." Len glanced at him with compassion. "Is there no way for someone to remember you? To replicate your power?"

"I can only carry my own mind through restarts, and in all these years, I haven't found a technology or Genome capable of copying my power. Maybe I could have gotten more results if I crossed a few lines, but I had to keep some. The consequences don't stay, but the memories do. And if I get used to bloodshed and brutality, I... I'm afraid of what I might become."

"You're afraid you will become like Dad," she guessed, her gaze hollow.

Ryan didn't want to say out loud, but yes, he was. Years around Bloodstream had given him a taste of what sociopathic brutality did to everyone, and how there was no coming back afterward. When you embraced the darkness, it followed you everywhere.

"Why not ask Dynamis?" Len asked, even if she clearly disliked the possibility. "They can copy powers."

"Their knockoffs only get the 'genetic' part of powers, not whatever cosmic physics support them," Ryan replied. That was why their potions were weaker than the original. A Firebrand Elixir allowed someone to produce fire using their own enhanced body's calories, but a true Red Genome had access to a near-infinite power source. "I mean, unless they can somehow access the Purple World, a knockoff Elixir based on my genes won't have any effect."

His friend said nothing for a few seconds, before finally putting her water gun away and crossing her arms. He had already seen her in that position when she entered a Genius fugue state or thought of a new concept.

"It's happening again," Len lamented, as she failed to come up with an invention that might help Ryan's case. "I can make wonders, but nothing that could help right now. Like Dad."

"It's fine." Just the fact she wanted to help him at all made him feel happier. "Nobody can do everything, and you can do a lot already. Even Vulcan admires your work, and she has an ego the size of Saturn."

She smiled, thinly, but it didn't reach the eyes. "If you don't think there is any solution, and that I will forget this conversation," Len said, looking him dead in the eyes. "Why have it at all?"

Ah, the hard question.

"I don't think there's a solution, no, but I want one to exist. Vulcan is making progress on upgrading powers, and Mechron already could." And there was an entire cache full of his technology below the earth. "Hope springs eternal, you know? Even if the chance is slim that I can make people remember me, and that we could make up... I want to try."

She didn't reply, her gaze thoughtful.

"Psyshock will attack this place in two days," Ryan changed the subject.

"Why?" Len asked, more saddened than surprised. She must have expected something like that to happen since Big Fat Adam and his crew moved in.

"There's a bunker full of Mechron tech below the Junkyard, and the Meta are trying to break in." Her head immediately snapped at him in alarm. "I suppose Psyshock will try to collect the children when they run out of cannon fodder to throw at the defenses. And someone at Dynamis supplies them with knockoff Elixirs for a reason that escapes me."

Her skin grew paler the more he spoke. "I'll take care of this," Ryan promised. "I did it before."

"This city..." Len shook her head, glancing at Rust Town and New Rome beyond. "It's never going to improve, no matter how much you try."

"It can."

"It was bad even before the Meta arrived," she replied. "Dynamis, the Augusti, they're all the same. They only care about money and power. I tried to make a difference, to help

people, but... it's just the way things are. This place isn't New Rome, it's the New Babylon."

"It can improve," Ryan insisted, pointing at the stars. "Len, all you see is the dark, but everywhere you look, there's light."

Len didn't believe him. "We already argued about it," she guessed.

"Yeah," the courier admitted. "After our previous talk, I thought I could wipe out the Meta, honor some debts, maybe make the surface good enough that you would want to return."

"You don't have to," she insisted. "Let the Meta and Augusti wipe each other out for all they care."

"Len, we can't let the Meta get their hands on Mechron's weaponry," Ryan argued back. "It will be the Genome Wars all over again."

It would be Bloodstream on a countrywide scale.

"Riri, it's going to destroy you," she argued, a hint of desperation in her voice. "It already did. You... you aren't stable at all, Riri. How many times did you fail?"

"Enough to succeed."

She took his words in but offered none of her own. If anything, she seemed to withdraw even more.

"Well, sorry to burden you with all of this," Ryan apologized, rising up until he stood dangerously close to the edge. One step and it would be a free-fall. "Thanks for listening, Shortie."

“Where are you going?”

“There’s a nice hotel where I stay in the city center,” he replied, putting his mask and hat back on. “I need to go there so events proceed favorably.”

She considered his answer and then said. “No.”

Ryan froze still for a second. “No?”

“You can... you can stay here.” Len breathed long and deep. “It’s not comfortable, but... you can stay here for the night.”

“Len, I can’t. If I don’t go to the hotel, Wyvern and Vulcan won’t—”

“Stay here, Riri,” Len asked, looking up at him. This time, it wasn’t a proposal, but a request. “Please stay. This time.”

Ryan opened his mouth to protest, since it would throw his timing in jeopardy, but... when he looked at her pleading eyes, and the worry in them, his resistance melted away.

“Alright,” Ryan said. “I’ll stay.”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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32: Change of Plans

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Guess who's back? Happy New Year!

Ryan woke up on a terrible mattress, with a cat on his chest.

The animal looked at the courier with its big blue eyes, as he emerged from his deep sleep. The Persian cat had a coat of fur of the purest shade of white, and the lazy expression of a creature sleeping eighteen hours a day without shame.

It was...

It was the perfect Bond Villain cat!

Ryan immediately let out a cry of joy, while the cat looked at him with noble curiosity.

“I’m gonna call you...” Ryan briefly raised the feline above ground to check if it was a male or female, and then let his imagination do the rest. “Eugène-Henry von Schrodinger!”

Eugène-Henry meowed in response.

“The name sucks,” someone complained from the ‘room’ right next to his—another animal cage repurposed into a prison cell. Ryan recognized the voice as Sarah’s. “It sucks hard.”

"Much like many geniuses, I'm way ahead of my time," Ryan replied, scratching Eugène-Henry behind his ears. "You like that name, don't you? You like it, don't you?"

"Is that the white cat?" Sarah peeked into Ryan's private space, finding the courier sitting on his bed sheet, the cat on his lap. The courier promised himself to work on his diabolical mastermind pose, though he needed to get a cashmere suit first. "It has a sixth sense to find suckers willing to feed it. That's why it's so fat."

"Hey, he's not judging you on your appearance!"

"Once, I showed him a rat, like one meter away from his face, and that lazy furball didn't even react."

"Slander!" Ryan defended his new sidekick. "Is there a shower though? I think I caught fleas sleeping on that bed."

"Yes, but the water is muddy. Ma says she will fix it today after she checks your car."

Check his—

"Goddammit, I hope she doesn't find the bodies," Ryan said, rising up from the bed. Eugène-Henry instantly took over his place and moved below the bed sheet, to better protect the mattress from intruders.

"There's a spot for that," Little Sarah said casually. "The druggies call it the *Happy Hole*."

As it turned out, Rust Town did have tourist spots.

Ryan started dressing, but immediately noticed something wrong. Namely, his A-bomb was missing, and some of his

weapons weren't at their place. Someone had clearly checked on his belongings while he was asleep.

Shortie may be willing to help, but she didn't fully trust him yet.

The courier emerged from the orphanage to find Len tinkering with his car, having opened the car hood to look inside. She had put the water gun aside, to her right.

"Comrade Shortie, just because it's an all-American car doesn't give you the right to wreck it," Ryan said. "Find yourself a Lada."

Len turned her head away from the engine, and Ryan's playful demeanor disappeared instantly when she grabbed the water gun. "Riri, what have you done?"

What did he do?

What didn't he do?

Ryan glanced inside the car hood, his old friend keeping her weapon aimed at his head. Unfortunately, Len had found the brain and jumped to the wrong conclusions.

"Riri, have you..." Len clearly didn't want to finish her sentence but forced herself to. "Did you put someone in there?"

"You wouldn't believe how many tries it took before I found the right person." He immediately raised his hands while Len made a mortified face. "Relax, I'm kidding, I'm kidding! It's not even sentient!"

"Riri, don't, *don't* joke about this," she sputtered, keeping her weapon raised.

"Sorry, sorry," he apologized. "I default to humor when I'm stressed, and I didn't have my morning coffee."

Len remained as stiff and grim as ever. "Riri, where did it come from?"

"It's vat-grown, a gift from another Genius." No answer.
"Shortie, I'm not a serial killer, and I don't abduct hobos off the road to experiment on them."

"Riri, I... I want to believe you're not crazy. I really want to." She shook her head. "But you keep a thermo-nuclear device with children nearby."

Oh God, if only she knew about the plushie. "Len, there are no permanent consequences around me."

"But what if you're wrong?" she asked, biting her lower lip.
"What if you jump into another universe every time you die, and leave a nuclear crater behind?"

"That's not how my power works," Ryan reassured her. "I guarantee you I'm not jumping into an alternate universe whenever I die. I checked. I wouldn't do like, half the stuff I pull on a weekly basis if I knew I left a mess behind. My power only affects our universe, and all I do is give it an alcohol blackout."

"That's even scarier," Len said, still struggling to understand his power's full scope. "If what you say is correct, then you can rewrite the entire space-time continuum almost at will. It's not mere time-manipulation, but reality warping."

"Yes, Shortie, some people get water guns for Christmas, while I got a Fat Man," Ryan said, putting a finger on the tip of her gun. "So, can you..."

She hesitated, clearly torn between trusting him and her own fears about him, but eventually lowered the water gun. "You will behave while you stay here," Len said. "I... even if there are no consequences from your point of view, I don't want anything dangerous near the kids."

"Len, they have guns."

"Because they need weapons to defend themselves in this shithole," the Genius replied. "But that nuke, Riri, won't help anyone. It's just death in a can."

"Okay, I will get rid of it." He would hand it over to Vulcan, as a sign of friendship. "Can you give it back then? I swear you will never see that bomb again."

She hesitated for a long, agonizing minute, before searching in her jumpsuit and handing him the bomb. Ryan put a hand on it, their gloves brushing against the other. The courier sensed her reluctance to give the weapon away, but she did it.

Although Len didn't trust him, she wanted to. He wouldn't disappoint her.

"Riri, why did you even put your hands on a weapon like that?" she asked, as the courier put the bomb inside one of his coat's inner pocket.

"You really want to know?" Len nodded, and Ryan sighed. She wouldn't like his answer. "Because I was bored, and I thought it would be fun to have a nuke as a restart button."

"Can't you automatically restart with your time-stop? You said it caused you early restarts."

"No. When I said an early restart, I meant *an early restart*. Have you never wondered why I called myself *Quicksave*?"

She finally caught on. "That's how you 'save.'"

"Yeah." By the time the courier had caught on to this mechanism, he had already burnt a *lot* of bridges. "And since I need to commit suicide to get back in time, I figured I should make it interesting."

The Genius looked at him with a mix of pity, sadness, and compassion. "Do you think your life is worthless?"

"No, of course not, I *love* living." If he had wanted to die for good, he would have picked a fight with someone like Cancel long ago. "As long as I exist, there's always a chance things will improve."

After an uncomfortable silence, Len abruptly changed the subject. "You slept well?"

"Eh, I've slept in way worse places," the courier replied, before shuddering as he remembered one of his worst deaths. "Whatever you do, Len, don't sleep in Monaco."

"Monaco? Why?"

"Shortie, I come from the future. Don't go to Monaco." He glanced at the car, and a flustered Len started putting the engine pieces back in their proper place. "Should I expect a mounted water turret? Please tell me that you added a gadget."

"I was just checking the Chronoradio and its associated parts." Only then did Ryan notice that while she had stopped pointing it at his face, Len kept the gun in hand.

Baby steps.

"Pretty good tech, huh?" Ryan boasted about his car, putting a hand on the hood. "You're the last Genius in a long line to work on this baby."

"I saw that. There's a lot I could work with, actually." Len closed the hood once her work done. "Riri, why did you hook up a miniature particle accelerator to your radio?"

Ah, that was such a long story. Ryan worked many loops and decades on that particular quest.

"The Purple World is something of a crossroad, not only between time and space but between various dimensions," the courier explained. "You know some Violet Genomes summon creatures like that monster from *Alien*? Or gremlins?"

"They're pulling them from these dimensions?"

"Yes. Most of these universes radically differ from our own, but some are alternate histories Earth could have taken. Usually, these histories aren't stable and constantly fluctuate, only becoming 'real' when observed."

"I don't follow you."

"Well, we humans think time is stable, that the past is set in stone, but in truth, it's like the water you love so much, ever changing." Ryan's experience had taught him as much. "I mean, I just have to jump back and poof, it changes."

"Have you never considered..." Len trailed off with a worried frown, unable to say it out loud.

"That I destroy the universe and everyone in it when I die? I try not to think about it." If only because of the horrors involved. It was a rabbit hole of depression, questionable ethics, and self-misery. He preferred to think of it as a universal memory-wipe. "Anyway, I thought the Chronoradio could help me locate a specific reality, and then cross over."

"A timeline where things went well for us," Len guessed.

"Yes," Ryan replied with a sigh, opening his car's door. "But I never found a way to reach an alternate Earth, even with a custom particle accelerator. All I can do with the Chronoradio is listen to what could have been."

"You're going?" she asked with a worried frown. Did she think he would get himself killed? Then again, they were close to the Junkyard. "What about that undead madman in the backseat?"

"I'm supposed to receive a recruitment offer from Wyvern and then Vulcan, but I'm not sure if she will follow through if I'm in Rust Town. After that, I need to have my windshield cleaned, and Bone Daddy will become someone else's problem."

"Wyvern?" Len answered with a deeper frown than before.

"I heard Dynamis jailed you, so I investigated," Ryan admitted. "What happened exactly?"

"They use the citizens of Rust Town as underpaid labor in their factories," Len said with anger. "They pay them for dangerous work with just enough euros to feed themselves, but provide neither healthcare nor safety guidelines. One out of five people gets maimed or killed."

“I don’t think Il Migliore supports these practices.” Even the junior heroes he had met during the seminar seemed more self-obsessed than actively malicious.

“They turn their eyes away from the real problems.” Len shook her head. “Not all criminals wear masks. Most wear suits and ties. Since nobody would stand up for this place, I did.”

“So you attacked one of Dynamis’ installations?”

“The chemical plant,” she gave more details, her face turning grimmer. “But... they caught me. Somebody ratted me out and led the Private Security to my old workshop.”

“One of the people you tried to fight for?” Ryan guessed, his friend nodding. “I’m sorry.”

“I guess... I guess people always try to take the easy way out.” Len shook her head. “Wyvern didn’t bust me out, Vulcan did. And even then, it wasn’t for free. I had to help the Augusti transport their drug, take their blood money.”

“Well, I don’t intend to go to Dynamis this time,” Ryan reassured her. “I see only one way to kill Psyshock permanently, and it’s an Augusti-exclusive option as far as I can tell.”

Len clearly didn’t like the idea. Even if she collaborated with Vulcan, she clearly had no love for her organization. “We could capture him,” she said. “From what you told me, he has to die for his ability to activate.”

“If he’s smart, he will have a suicide button.” Hopefully, it wouldn’t be a thermo-nuclear device. Besides making the world a better place, taking down Psyshock would also prevent him from piloting that Mechron mech later on. “And

while I don't believe it, Vulcan says she can enhance my power. Unless you have another suggestion, they seem like our best option."

Unfortunately, she didn't have any alternative. "I've... I need more time, Riri. Time to figure this out."

"Figure out my power, or *us*?"

"Both," Len replied while looking away. "I want to help you, Riri. I really do. No one else should have to go through what you did."

"Thanks," Ryan said with genuine warmth. "The fact that you want to help at all means a lot to me."

She blushed a little. "But the thing is Riri, even if we succeed in helping you, I... I'm not sure if there will be a *we* after that."

We.

That word had brought back memories of the time when Ryan believed they had a future together. He thought his feelings for Len had changed after so many restarts, moved past the realm of teenage romance. But every time he looked at his old partner, the courier always wondered what could have been.

And what could never be.

"There are things I can't forget, Riri," she admitted. "My father, that stuff with the bomb..."

"You don't feel safe around me," Ryan stated the obvious. *Like Bloodstream.*

Len shook her head sadly, and the courier drove away in silence.

"So, let me get this straight," Shroud joined his fingers, like an evil mastermind. "There is a cache of Mechron technology below the Junkyard, which the Meta-Gang is trying to access. And Dynamis supplies them with knockoff Elixirs, contacts, and weapons."

"Meow, that's right," Ryan replied, keeping Eugène-Henry in his arms, while Ghoul's skull snarled inside a glass box. The courier briefly wondered if it was possible to waterboard on a head without the lungs, but pushed the thought aside.

Shroud remained silent for a moment. "This is concerning."

What an understatement. Ryan tried to top it. "And the *Titanic* had a leak."

The glass Genome turned around and started typing on his computer, various documents appearing on the screen. Ryan recognized them as financial statements, supply run reports, and logistical analyses. Shroud ran a program, apparently noticing a few troubling elements.

"There are some strange gaps between the stated numbers of knockoff Elixirs Dynamis produces, and what's actually sold in their stores," said the hacker. "I thought they were a statistical error margin or thefts, but it could easily disguise off-the-books deliveries to the Meta."

"Could it be disguised by mooks or managers?" Psyshock could have brainwashed a few employees, subverting Dynamis without their knowledge; though the lack of attack on the company's operations made that unlikely.

"Not without complicity from an executive," Mr. Windshield replied. "They keep a tight ship on these potions."

"Maybe Blackthorn then."

"Unlikely," said the SafeLite advertisement. "From what I know, he's clean."

"Have you seen his office and costume?" Ryan asked, Eugène-Henry meowing. "He's obviously a diabolical mastermind."

"What about his office? It looks great." Clearly, he had spied on the place. "Do you know why Blackthorn ended up as Brand Manager and in charge of Il Migliore?"

"Because Hector Manada only trusts his sons."

"Partly, but while Il Migliore's heroes do fight crime in New Rome, they don't wage war against truly dangerous Genome warlords like Augustus or decide Dynamis' future. Their true job is to serve as the company's face and follow directives, not make them. Enrique's position is prestigious, but not one with much power."

"I see where this is going, and not just because you're translucent."

"Enrique Manada was groomed to become Dynamis' vice-president, until he started openly pushing for social reforms and Rust Town's redevelopment," Shroud explained. "The board sacked him, and the chairman decided to select his brother Alphonse as the VP instead. It backfired when Hector had to send Alphonse to wage war in Sicily to avoid a clash with Augustus, but you see my point."

"Well, Blackthorn still looks like a Comic Book villain."

"You're the one looking like a villain with that cat. Why did you bring it here, by the way?"

Because Ryan was a cat person, as Felix could attest. "It's a Schrodinger's Cat, he increases my power twofold."

"Don't you need to use a black box first?" Shroud deadpanned, before turning serious. "Unfortunately, I have no proof except your word on the bunker question."

"Psyshock is going to attack the orphanage soon, you can ask him yourself then. If he survives."

"You think she will show up?" Shroud asked. Clearly, he had mind-reading on top of his glass control. "No, that was a stupid question. Of course she will, it's a golden opportunity to strike at the Meta. *If* the Augusti trust your intel."

"Well, if she doesn't we will have to put Psypsy in an aquarium, like the squid he is." Ryan shrugged. "Any hope we team up to attack the Junkyard? I would do it on my own, but something tells me it will be a blast."

"We won't have the numbers to directly challenge the Meta-Gang for some time," Shroud admitted. This confirmed Ryan's suspicion that he was only the vanguard, with the rest of his team scheduled to arrive later. "But if I confirm your information, then we will have to. Adam getting his hands on Mechron's technology will cause a disaster."

"Just to be sure, Mechron isn't behind everything?"

"No, he's very dead."

"Are you *sure*?"

"Leo was there when he perished," the glass manipulator replied. "Mechron is as dead as they come, and unless he has a hidden clone in storage, he isn't coming back. Not from *that*."

Was that a little unease Ryan detected in his voice? Mechron's demise must have been something disturbing to bother the hardened assassin. "Come on, give me the gory details."

"You will have to ask Leo himself," Invisiboy refused to indulge the courier. "I will hold up our end of the bargain, and help defend the orphanage if you can't get the Augusti onboard. In return, please don't tell them about the Junkyard. If there really is a Mechron bunker beneath New Rome, it should remain buried."

"Afraid Mob Zeus finds a bag of flour inside?"

"Even you must understand it won't end well if he gets his hands on Mechron's technology."

Ryan shrugged and left the meeting with the path ahead clear. He would go to the *Bakuto*, but instead of pretending to look for Len, he would instead tell Zanbato he wanted to fight the Meta-Gang and that he didn't trust Dynamis to do that. With luck, Ryan might secure a big surprise for Psyshock.

However, although he hadn't noticed, Shroud gave the courier a key piece of information that greatly worried him.

"You will have to ask Leo."

Namely, that Leo Hargraves would come to New Rome, probably with the rest of the Carnival in tow. If Ryan cross-referenced that tidbit with information gathered in the

previous loops, then he had three weeks before the Living Sun and Augustus settled their rivalry in blood.

Ryan had better not be in New Rome by then.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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33: Black Swan

It was May 10th. Psyshock would attack the orphanage any minute, and Ryan intended to give the telepath a headache he would never forget.

A shotgun in hand and the *Fisty Brothers* equipped, the courier prowled the orphanage's hallways, where the kids were busy gathering food and toys in travel bags. To his worry though, he found no trace of Len.

"What's happening?" Ryan asked little Giulia, upon crossing paths with her. Unlike her fellow orphans, who had taken food or toys, the little blonde mostly carried books on herself. Meeting this child after learning what Psyshock did to her in a previous loop only reinforced the courier's resolve.

"Mama says she's taking us to the magical place early," she explained, looking down instead of facing the Genome's eyes. She seemed far shyer than Sarah. "So we have to pack our stuff."

Wise. No doubt Hannifat Lecter would attack the place again with larger numbers after his pet squid bit the dust here.

Hopefully, Ryan would receive backup. The courier had informed Jamie of the attack when they met at the *Bakuto*, even giving him the A-bomb as a bribe for Vulcan to sweeten the deal. He provided all the intel necessary, though Ryan couldn't be certain if the information would

pass through the chain of command until the moment of truth.

“Where is she?” the Genome asked. The courier could take out Psypsy and his group on his own easily enough if he cut loose, but he couldn’t prevent the body-jumper from transferring himself.

“She’s in her room. We shouldn’t bother her.”

“Well, I’ve bothered her since the day we met,” Ryan replied, leaving Giulia behind and moving towards Len’s bedroom. From what he had understood, it used to be the office of the shelter’s director, before they left the place to rust.

He knocked on the door, receiving no answer. While it was locked, the courier had long mastered the art of breaking and entering. “Len?” he asked after unlocking the door, finding the bedroom shrouded in thick darkness. “Shortie?”

Only a meowing sound answered him.

Ryan quickly flipped the light switch and found himself facing a giant diver suit. The same one Len wore when she tried to rescue him from Acid Rain.

“Shortie?” Ryan asked, before looking behind the armor. He found Len sitting on a chair next to a mattress, staring at a wall. When he took a step forward, the Genome almost tripped on a medicine box, noticing dozens on the floor.
“Shortie?”

No answer. Len just stared blankly at the wall, while Eugène-Henry von Schrodinger rested on her lap. Her eyes were blackened by sleeplessness and exhaustion.

She looked *dead*.

"Len? Len!" When he received no answer, the courier approached a free hand from her shoulder, intending to shake her back to consciousness.

"Don't!" Her sudden reaction startled both Ryan and the cat on her lap; it was as if she had woken up from a nightmare. Len then put her hands on her ears, as if struggling against a terrible headache. "Don't come closer!"

It reminded Ryan of the first time they met again under the sea, except somehow even worse.

The courier said nothing, glancing at the boxes on the ground. He grabbed one, finding it empty. "Len," Ryan said with dead seriousness, tossing the empty container on the bed. "If you weren't a Genome, you would have overdosed from all these pills."

"If I didn't have powers, I wouldn't need so many of them."

"It's true Genomes had an enhanced metabolism, but still, do you know these medications shouldn't be taken together?"

No answer.

"You aren't following any treatment," Ryan realized, horrified.

"If I don't take them, I don't want to do *anything*," Len snapped. Clearly, her mood had worsened, perhaps due to the wrong drug combination. "If I don't take them, I... I can't talk to you at all. I don't want to do anything except use my power."

She couldn't even interact with others except under heavy medication.

How many did she take under the sea? Did the fact they met in her sanctum make it worse back then? Seeing his friend deteriorating that much horrified Ryan, but he didn't know what to say.

"I... I'm coming," Len finally spoke up, massaging her forehead. "I'll put on the suit. I have to."

"I can take care of Psyshock alone if it's too much for you."

"No, no, can't, can't let you do everything," she replied, struggling to form a complete sentence. "I have to help. I have to."

"Alright, I will keep watch until you're ready then." Ryan left to give her some breathing room, though he did notice something on the bed on his way out. The rough schematics of some kind of sonar, although messy and incomplete. Len must have worked on this new device during the day.

The courier walked outside the orphanage, stopping at the threshold. His car was parked nearby, Ryan remembering how Sarah and her friend had stood at the exact same spot in a previous loop.

However, when he saw Psyshock's black minibus approach, Ryan decided to spice things up a little this time. He raised the shotgun and hit the wheels at the front, causing the Meta's car to spiral around itself in an attempt to avoid a crash.

"Strike!" Ryan gloated for good measure. "It's a strike!"

The driver managed to stabilize the minibus, much to his disappointment. Ryan heard heavy footsteps behind him, Len emerging from the orphanage in her full power armor. She carried a waterthrower as her main weapon, clearly determined to defend the orphans.

As Psyshock stepped out of the minibus, wearing his disguise, Ryan relaxed a bit. The brainjacker had only brought Mosquito and Mongrel with him, like in the previous loop. No heavy hitters in sight.

“Little Cesare,” Psyshock said, removing his sunglasses to reveal his biomechanical eyes. “And is that Little Len too? I could recognize her work anywhere. Is your father joining us from beyond the grave too?”

Len remained eerily silent, radiating a sense of unease. “If you want, I’ve got old times’ slides,” Ryan mocked Psyshock. “Half of them are dedicated to your royal asskicking.”

“You were not so brave during our last encounter when my wires connected to your brain,” Psyshock replied, his tone heavy with menace. “Though we only came for the goblins in that shelter, this is a good day indeed. It is true what they say... you never forget those who got away.”

“So are we killing them or what?” Mosquito asked while Mongrel showed his teeth. “The smell of their blood drives me crazy.”

“No one will die today,” Psyshock replied, his wire tentacles wriggling below his coat. “They are mine, both of them. Always have been.”

Len raised her waterthrower without a word.

“You wish to fight, little girl?” Psyshock mocked them.
“Check your math, you are outnumbered, outmatched.”

“Check yours, Psypsy,” Ryan replied, noticing a white Yamaha motorcycle approaching from behind. “It’s a *ménage-à-trois*.”

A blonde woman rode at the vehicle’s back, without wearing any helmet; though she did carry a Genius-tech staff, like a knight showing up for a jousting tournament. She abruptly stopped her vehicle upon reaching the orphanage’s courtyard, her mere presence changing the Psychos’ mood from confident to tense.

“Hi, guys!” Cancel introduced herself with a winning smile, leaving her bike behind while swinging her weapon. “Nice to meet you!”

Psyshock’s electronic eyes let out a brief flash of light, his cronies flinching in dread.

“Hey, don’t look at her like that,” Ryan said, raising his shotgun. “I wanted *Pluto*, but she declined.”

Psyshock’s power was not so different from the courier’s own ability. A save point allowing them to try again after death. Ergo, they probably shared the same weaknesses.

As he realized the danger, Psyshock did something new and unexpected. Something he had *never* done in the previous loops, no matter how suicidal the situation.

He tried to run away, tearing through his clothes with his tentacles while his cronies attacked Cancel.

Gotcha.

Ryan froze time, raised his shotgun, and blasted Psyshock's tentacles apart. When time resumed, the brainjacker pathetically tripped and fell onto his smug face.

"Don't worry, haven't you looked at the dog shelter sign?" Ryan taunted him. "Euthanasia is free."

Meanwhile, moving with the speed and agility of an Olympic Gymnast, Cancel quickly rushed at Mongrel. The Psycho attempted to incinerate her with his hands, but the flames fizzled out into nothingness at the tip of his fingers. The hitwoman impaled him through the chest with her staff before he could react, the device then letting out a powerful electric shock. Ryan would have likened it to a taser, but a taser didn't fry its victim alive the way Cancel's device did.

Meanwhile, Mosquito attempted to fly away, but Len opened fire at him. A jet of pressurized water came out of her weapon, slicing his left wing clean and causing the overgrown insect to crash; Ryan immediately tossed the shotgun aside and attacked Mosquito with *Fisty*, beating the tar out of him. When the bug attempted to raise his fist to retaliate, Len cut off his arm with her water weapon.

"Shortie, do you have insecticide?" Ryan shouted, pounding Mosquito onto the ground. "My fly swatter isn't working right!"

Len didn't respond. While she was no stranger to brutality and didn't hesitate to use lethal force when needed, the Genius usually retreated into her own mind in a fight. Unlike Ryan, she didn't thrive in chaos.

Meanwhile, having fried Mongrel to death, Cancel immediately moved on to Psyshock. The Psycho attempted to rise back up, but the hitwoman swiftly caught up with him. Her power clearly didn't affect the telepath's physical

mutations, so Ryan supposed it only canceled the esoteric power sources which supported them.

"Look at me," Cancel asked Psyshock, her tone always positive. "Look at me in the eyes. I want to remember your face."

The malevolent Psycho glared at the hitwoman, raising his remaining tentacles in an attempt to hit her skull.

But he didn't react fast enough.

Cancel swiftly impaled Psypsy through the skull with the staff, pounding his head into a smear on the ground. Some of the Psycho's blood ended up on her cheek, her smirk turning downright sadistic while the wires flailed around.

Ryan briefly checked his time-stop and failed to activate it. So far so good. A few seconds later, Mosquito looked like a crushed bug at his feet, still alive, but bleeding to death. Cancel had swiftly murdered the other two.

"Well, that was quick," Ryan noted, slightly disappointed. He guessed Vulcan's absence, the surprise ambush, and having two professionals at his back had made quite the difference.

"You know, I had orders to kill everyone if it turned out to be a trap, but I'm so glad I didn't have to," Greta said with a cheery smile, tossing Psyshock's immobile corpse aside with her staff. His blood was still on her cheek, and she seemed in no hurry to wipe it off. "I've been getting rusty."

"Thank you, but didn't anyone tell you that I was immortal?"

"You're funny," she replied, leaving Psyshock's remains and looking at Mosquito. "He's still alive?"

"Unless he gets medical treatment, he won't last long."

"Please..." Mosquito pleaded.

"Too much work," Cancel replied, stomping on his face with her staff. Len visibly flinched at her casual brutality, catching Greta's attention. "Who are you?"

"I'm..." It was so strange to hear Len's gentle voice come out of the giant armor. "The Underdiver."

"Oh, nice to meet you, I'm Greta." *You already said that before*, Ryan thought. He realized her lines weren't spontaneous at all, but rehearsed. "Is there anyone else to deal with?"

"No, we're good," Ryan replied.

"Alright, I hope we meet again then!"

"Me too, Greta!" Ryan replied with the same cheery smile. "You're the nicest sociopath I've met yet!"

"Thanks! What's a sociopath?"

Ryan answered her question with two thumbs up.

Cancel waved them goodbye and left on her motorcycle as swiftly as she came, leaving the Psychos' corpses to rot. Clearly, she had a lot of experience with casual murder. Ryan wondered what her CV looked like.

"She's hollow inside," Len said when the hitwoman was gone.

Before Ryan could respond, he sensed an invisible pressure on his shoulders; the Land's gaze had suddenly fallen upon

him. The courier waved a hand at the skies, wondering if the Psycho would see him.

The moment lasted only a few seconds, but it made Len almost stumble at the sheer tension. “What was that?”

“Peepers,” Ryan replied. “I suggest we move out before more arrive.”

“Yes, yes,” Len turned towards the orphanage and raised her voice. “Sarah, Giulia—”

All windows in the vicinity, the Plymouth Fury’s windshield included, cracked at once.

“It’s okay, it’s my fault,” Ryan lied before Len could panic. Fortunately, she was used to weird events around him and didn’t question it.

“Sarah, Giulia, gather the others, we’re leaving now!”

“Ma, can we take the doggies?” a little girl shouted back from within.

“I’m sorry sweetie, but no, we can’t. We’ll leave the pens open, so they can go out.” Len turned to Ryan. “Thanks, Riri.”

“No problem. Do you need any help moving them to safety? It’s a long way to the harbor.”

“It’s fine, I keep transporting bathyspheres in the sewers, and there’s an access point in the basement,” she explained. That explained how she could move in and out of the orphanage undetected. “Riri, I...”

"It's okay," the courier reassured her, knowing what would come next. "It's your home, I understand you don't want me in it yet."

Last time had been something of a surprise visit.

Len must have made a guilty face behind her helmet, though Ryan couldn't see through. "I... I think I've found something. For your power."

The courier froze still. "Come again?"

"I... I've been listening through your Chronoradio for a while," she admitted. "Now that I examined it more closely, there's a part of the design where my power can help. The navigation. I—I'm sorry, I need more time to really explore it. I need to focus. It's just an idea in my head right now, and I'm not sure if it will work. If it can work at all. Don't get your hopes up or anythi—"

"Shortie, I've been through so many false hopes, you could make a graveyard out of them." Ryan shook his head. "As I told you before, the mere fact you want to help after everything means the world to me."

Len seemed too flustered beneath her armor to answer. "I guess I will contact you," she said, sounding embarrassed. "S-see you, Riri."

"Len," he said while she turned away to go back inside. "Please be careful with your medicine."

Len stood still for a moment, unsure of what to say. "I will," she said. "Don't worry, I... I can manage."

Ryan couldn't tell if it was a lie, or if she believed it. The courier sighed, watching her disappear inside with a heavy

heart.

"You owe me a new windshield," Ryan said once Len was out of earshot.

"I apologize," Shroud answered next to him, as invisible as ever. "She startled me and I lost control for an instant."

"You're afraid of little girls? I would have said pigeons were your kryptonite."

"I'm looking for someone with the same name," the vigilante explained. "Giulia Costa. But it's not that girl. The age, face, and body don't match. I know she's somewhere in this city, but I have no lead yet."

"What happened to your Giulia?" Ryan asked with curiosity. He also noted that Shroud could apparently see the orphans through the walls.

"Augustus murdered her parents and kidnapped her as a child, to use as a hostage against Leo." A chill went down Ryan's spine. "Whenever you have doubts, remember that *this* is what the Augusti stand for."

"I will look into it," the courier promised. "What does she look like?"

"She should be around fifteen, light brown hair, blue eyes." That was better than nothing, but barely. "You're not really Cesare Sabino, are you? The way you interact with Ms. Sabino isn't very brotherly."

"Oh my, it just took you four years to figure it out? What a detective you are."

"I dare not imagine what went through Bloodstream's head. It must have been harsh." It was more emotion than Ryan had ever heard coming from the invisible man's mouth. "You love her?"

"I did once." But a rift had grown so wide, Ryan would be lucky to end up on speaking terms with Len after his Perfect Run. "But that was a long time ago."

"All men are hopeless fools, a friend once told me. Unfortunately, I don't have any advice to offer. I'm unlucky in love myself."

"I guess they see right through you." Ryan shook his head. "I help because she's a dear friend and she needs it."

He wasn't looking for romance anymore, but for a human connection - *any* connection - that would persist through his endless restarts. The courier felt something on his shoulder, like a brief, sympathetic pat.

"It was well-done," Mr. Looking Glass said. "I thought I might have to intervene, but you had the situation in hand. I will check if Psyshock is truly gone for good, though I would suggest getting away from Rust Town. I get the feeling you threw a wrench in Adam's plans, and he won't like it."

Oh, he didn't. Ryan already noticed acidic clouds expanding from the Junkyard. Perhaps Wyvern's absence had made the Meta-Gang bolder, or Cancel's power had truly prevented Psyshock's body-transfer.

In any case, Ryan was just getting started. "Game on, Moby Dick."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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34: Hit and Run

The current loop might be the calmest yet.

Ryan had finally optimized the Augusti path. He first completed the harbor mission without incident. Fat Adam didn't send anyone for once, and Ryan had previously taken care of Luigi. The truth-teller was scheduled to get out of the hospital on Wednesday, but Ryan intended to score a few goals during the hockey match's second period.

Afterward, Jamie invited the courier to crash at his place, and he received a 'surprise' inspection from Pluto. The Underboss' interrogation had been less thorough this time around, since the intel Ryan provided on Psyshock had earned him some measure of trust. The courier then landed a job as Vulcan's assistant, who had lobbied very hard to recruit him after she got her hands on his A-bomb. She didn't even ask him to trash Wyvern's movie this loop.

Ryan had waited patiently for today's Rust Town raid. He had provided all the necessary information for the Augusti to improve their odds, from the Land's range to the powers of every Psycho he fought so far. He didn't say anything linked to the bunker like the mech, but overall, things looked bright.

Truly, Ryan was pumped for this restart.

"Plasma tor—" Ryan handed Vulcan her tool before she could finish her sentence, the Genius too busy working on

her armor's cannon. “—ch. Wrench.”

Ryan handed her a wrench and a cup of coffee.

“I didn’t ask for a cup,” she said.

“You were about to.”

Vulcan stopped in the middle of her welding, putting her tools aside and raising her iron mask. A short silence took over her workshop, as she examined the courier from head to toe. “Ryan, where have you been hiding all this time?”

“Mostly behind explosions, and sometimes forest fires.”

“I should’ve hired you years ago,” she said without any hint of sarcasm. “You’re the best assistant I could ever hope for; hell, you anticipate my desires as if you read my mind before I spoke. You’re perfect, except for one thing.”

Vulcan pointed a finger at the white cat having taken over her workbench. Eugène-Henry meowed in response. “Why did you bring that furball here?” she asked Ryan.

“I couldn’t leave it at the shelter. It’s a noble cat, it can’t survive in the wild.”

“No, I mean, why did you leave it in my Armory as if he lived there? Now half the guards spend their shift petting it when they think I’m not looking. It’s distracting them.”

“Ki-jung doesn’t want him at the house. I keep telling her Eugène-Henry is too good to hunt rats, but she won’t hear anything.” Ryan grabbed the cat and showed him to Vulcan. “Admit it, you can’t resist him either. Look at him. Look at his big, beautiful eyes.”

The Genius didn't look impressed. "If he causes an accident, I'm taking the repair costs out on your pay," Vulcan said, before grabbing the cat. She put it on her lap and moved her feet on the workbench. "I had a ferret once. He wasn't afraid of anything."

"What happened to him?"

"He wasn't afraid of cars either," Vulcan replied with a morbid face. She liked her comedy pitch black. "Speaking of animals, about that rabbit plushie—"

"No," Ryan interrupted her.

"But—"

"No."

"Do I have to take it at gunpoint?" she threatened, her curiosity too overwhelming.

"You would have an easier time with my virginity, but spoiler warning," Ryan whispered in the Genius' ear, "it's long gone."

Vulcan chuckled, scratching Eugène-Henry between the ears. "I thought you were dating the Underdiver?"

"Oh no, it will be a miracle if we settle into anything." Considering her issues, a long-distance radio friendship sounded more likely. "Though it would take a Genius to steal my wounded heart."

"I would be careful with that smart mouth of yours, Ryan," she replied playfully, his good mood infecting her too. "What's up with you today? Is it the raid?"

“Of course it’s the raid, I can tell it’s going to be *great!*”

Especially now that Psypsy had perished for good.

Within one hour of his demise, dozens of people across New Rome had experienced brain seizures, including some Augusti mooks and Private Security members. The Augusti leadership had tasked Ki-jung to investigate, and from what she told Ryan, most of the victims missed entire days of their life. By nullifying Psyshock’s powers at close-range, Cancel had undone his victim’s brainwashing.

Since that squid hadn’t been sighted since the orphanage ambush, Ryan assumed he had perished for good.

The Meta hadn’t sent Sarin to attack the harbor, and according to Shroud, they hadn’t tried to press-gang Paulie either. This implied Psyshock’s brainwashing was Big Fat Adam’s main source of unpowered foot soldiers, and his demise had cost the Meta a lot of resources.

So yes, Ryan was in an *excellent* mood.

“You’ve got a hate-on for Psychos,” Vulcan mused out loud. “I’ve heard what you told Jamie. That they received knockoffs from Dynamis.”

“And you believe me?” So far most of his acquaintances among the Augusti considered it a conspiracy theory.

She nodded. “Lab Sixty-Six.”

“Hmm?”

“You know the Dynamis HQ, next to Il Migliore’s shiny tower? They make the knockoffs on the sixty-sixth floor. It’s the most defended place in New Rome.”

"Well, that's not ominous at all. Is there a pentacle on the door?"

"No, but the head scientist is a creepy four-eyed maniac who calls himself Dr. Tyrano." Vulcan snickered. "He cloned all the dinosaurs you see at the Colosseum Maximus. It's not even his Genius specialty, he's just obsessed with them; I'm pretty sure he only works at Dynamis because they let him make more of those reptiles. Anyway, you know that bastard Enrique?"

"I'll never know why nobody suspects him to be a supervillain out to take over the world." Ryan shrugged. "I mean, he has *thorn* in his Genome name."

"I said the exact same thing to Wyvern the first time we met him." Finally, someone else saw the *truth!* "Originally, Enrique was supposed to oversee the whole Elixir operation instead of Il Migliore. He visited the lab for two hours, and he immediately asked for a transfer afterward. Never learned why. If you ask me, there's something really shifty about the knockoffs; even Augustus' scientists never found a way to copy them."

Ryan quickly grasped her point. "You think Dynamis uses the Meta as guinea pigs?"

"That's something Hector Manada would do," Vulcan replied with a sharp nod. "Augustus is brutally direct, but Hector, he's slippery and insidious. He always manages to be where the evidence isn't. Unfortunately, I doubt we'll find any proof of his involvement, and the big boss doesn't seem interested in an open conflict yet."

"I'm surprised that the war between them is cold instead of hot, to be honest." Ryan thought an invincible man would be far bolder.

"They fought over Malta a few years ago," Vulcan explained. "Dynamis nuked it in an attempt to kill Augustus, who retaliated by sinking the island. Afterward, the big boss met with Hector Manada, and they hashed out a peace agreement."

If there was a peace agreement, then it meant Dynamis had some kind of leverage over their opposition. Perhaps they threatened Augustus' family or inner circle. Ryan had faced the same tactic while he lived under Bloodstream's clutches; even near-invincible Genomes had emotional weaknesses.

"The party is on Thursday night, right?" Vulcan asked while changing the subject, though her question was purely rhetorical. "If the assault on the Meta's base goes well, I think I will attend. Should be fun."

"Shame I'm too old for that now." Like the first time Ryan met him, Mortimer attempted to startle the courier from behind and utterly failed. "I would have killed it on the dance floor."

"I'm sure you will catch up on Halloween," Ryan replied by turning around, pointing a finger at the hitman's skull mask.

"Nobody gives poor Mortimer candies," Mr. Wall Pass replied, saddened by the lack of reaction. "He doesn't spook anyone nowadays."

"You're early," Vulcan noted with a frown. "Did something happen?"

"Well, there are fires coming out of Rust Town, chief. I thought you should know."

As it turned out, the Meta had set the Junkyard on fire.

Ryan stopped his Plymouth Fury right in front of the fence. Mr. Wall Pass sat on the front seat, Fortuna, and Cancel at the back. “Oh my,” Mortimer said. “They don’t half-ass things, these Psychos.”

No kidding!

Ryan could only see flames everywhere he looked. The Meta had set alight the trash mountains with gasoline, turning them into candles, while clouds of smoke darkened the skies. Although the blazing inferno remained localized inside the junkyard, it might soon spread to the rest of Rust Town if left unchecked.

Vulcan landed in full power armor next to Ryan’s vehicle, just as shocked as everyone else. Their troops had surrounded the area without meeting any resistance, either from unpowered gunmen or Psychos.

What the hell happened?

“I checked what a sociopath was,” Cancel told Ryan, completely unconcerned by the giant bonfire. “That was mean.”

“But was it wrong?” Ryan asked back, his eyes focused on the flames. Did they blow up the bunker or something?

“No, but it was mean.”

*“Sparrow, report,” Vulcan ordered through the intercom.
“Any sign of the Meta?”*

“Our lookouts told me Adam, Frank, Sarin and a few others are driving north on the old highway. Apparently, they’re

skipping town.”

“They’re fleeing?” Cancel asked, immediately disappointed. “But we only killed three of them!”

“No fun, I wanted those sweet bounties for my mortgage,” Mortimer complained.

“Told you it would be a piece of cake,” Fortuna replied, too busy typing on her phone to pay attention.

“I can’t believe it,” Vulcan said. “They’re leaving? Why?”

Ryan couldn’t understand either. He didn’t believe for a second that Hannifat Lecter had truly given up, but why leave the bunker behind and make a show of destroying the Junkyard? Was there another entrance—

The submarine.

“That cunning bastard,” Ryan muttered to himself. The bunker had a hidden sea access route, so the Meta could easily hide below ground and resupply while abandoning the surface. As long as the bunker’s existence remained a secret, the Psychos could credibly stay under the radar until they unlocked Mechron’s tech.

Fat Adam would leave through the front door, and sneak back in through the back one.

Still, the fact that they pulled this stunt at all reeked of desperation. Psyshock must have been more important to their plans than Ryan thought, for his demise to shake things up that much.

“Something to say, Quicksave?” Vulcan asked him, having eavesdropped on his outburst.

"Maybe this is an elaborate ploy and they have secretly retreated to an underground base below the city," Ryan said. "I'm sure they have a doomsday weapon, like a moon-defacing laser."

"Or maybe they have a base on the moon," Fortuna chuckled.

"I went to the moon once," Mortimer said. "It was made of lead."

Ryan didn't clear things up. The current matter made him feel conflicted.

While he shamelessly flirted with her, Vulcan did try to murder him a previous loop while fully expecting to get away with it. Augustus had a reputation for brutality, and if Shroud's story was true, then nothing good would come out of him discovering the bunker. Even if the Meta getting their hands on Mechron's tech remained the worst scenario, he was wary of letting the Augusti do the same until he knew more.

Well, he could always inform them and reload later.

However, the second the thought crossed his mind, Ryan immediately thought of Len. He was finally making progress in renewing their friendship, and he was afraid of falling back into his old patterns. If he continued on the path of the Perfect Run, then he would have to repeat these meetings again and again, until they lost all meaning.

Should he save and commit? But if he did that, then he condemned all the people the Meta threw at the bunker's defenses. The face of that terrified prisoner, carried around by Adam like a sandwich, still haunted the courier; mostly because it reminded him of his own while he was

Bloodstream's pet. Ryan still had enough empathy to feel bad about that part.

So while he hadn't told Len, there was a strong possibility he would have to restart anyway to keep the kill count at a minimum. But he had confessed everything, and she would forget again if he returned to the past.

Argh, indecision paralysis!

"Consequences suck!" Ryan shouted out of nowhere, drawing a few gazes. "It's not fun! It's not fun at all!"

"I'm so disappointed too," Cancel complained, sharing his frustration at not being able to kick the Meta's butt. "I didn't think killing three of them would scare them away."

"When you murder junkies are done whining, maybe we could call this a day and leave?" Fortuna asked. "I've got a date, and I'm sure he's the one."

"You say that every time," Sparrow pointed out, although she said it with a hint of jealousy. *"You go through boyfriends like kleenexes."*

"It's different this time," Fortuna insisted. "My power keeps forcing us to meet. He shows up to help after that gas leak almost destroys my apartment, I drop my books and he helps me gather them back, it starts raining and we have to stay under the same bus stop... he's the one, I tell you."

"You just say that because you had to pester him five times until he caved in, and you can't stand being ignored," Mortimer mocked her.

"Morty! Wait, how did you know I asked five times? Did you spy on me?"

“Your pain is nectar for my wizened soul.”

Ryan ignored them, trying to puzzle a way out of the situation, but the indecision paralyzed him. A suboptimal route for New Rome might allow him to keep his friendship with Len real, but a Perfect Run would save dozens of lives, if not hundreds. Should he risk letting the Meta access Mechron’s bunker in the hope of a better alternative to appear, or should he trust the Augusti to be responsible? Should he inform Wyvern?

For the first time in centuries, Ryan faced mutually-exclusive consequences, and it frustrated him. He needed more time to figure this out.

“Vulcan, do we give pursuit?” Sparrow cut through the chit chat.

“I’m torn,” Vulcan admitted. “I’m itching to test my new armor, but It could be a feint to lead us into a trap, and our job was to retake Rust Town. Which we did.”

“If the Meta are wise enough not to get in our way, let them cower,” Fortuna said, clearly determined to do as little as possible.

“Not even a little wedgie, for old time’s sake?” Ryan asked, calming down. No matter the eventual fate of this loop, the Meta had to die for the good of everyone else. “I could settle for killing, say, half of them.”

“It’s the respect and territory that matter, Quicksave,” Vulcan replied.

“They will come back later if you let them go,” Ryan argued. He had seen what underestimating the Meta had cost them

in the previous loops. “Trust someone who has fought Big Whalie before, that bonfire is a mere smokescreen.”

Vulcan listened to his words carefully. *“You think this is a ploy to lull us into a false sense of security? And that if we let Adam go, he will come back to fuck us harder?”*

“And he won’t be gentle.”

“That’s a bit paranoid,” Mortimer replied with a shrug. “If you ask my poor old me, they bit more than they could chew and chickened out.”

“Quicksave’s intel has been spotless so far,” Sparrow came to Ryan’s defense. “I don’t think Adam the Ogre will give up so easily either. The Meta clearly came to New Rome to fight us, perhaps as mercenary work from our rivals. If they’re switching from territory grab to hit-and-run tactics, they might remain a problem for months.”

Vulcan considered the various viewpoints, before coming to a decision. *“Sparrow, you and your men give pursuit; I want to know the Meta-Gang’s location at all times. I will join you to harass them from a safe distance with long-range weaponry.”*

“Understood,” Sparrow replied.

“The rest of you kids will deal with the fire before it spreads to the rest of Rust Town,” Vulcan told the Genomes in the Plymouth Fury. “We can’t do business there if all our clients burn to death, so I will direct you to the nearest fire hydrants. Mortimer, make sure the Meta didn’t leave any booby traps behind.”

“What?” Fortuna looked up from her phone. “Why do we have to do it? Don’t they have firefighters?”

"I start fires, I don't extinguish them," Ryan protested. "It's against my religion."

"Too bad, God doesn't sign your paychecks, I do," Vulcan replied, before flying away. *"Get to work."*

"How brazen of you to say that."

Everyone groaned at Ryan's joke, much to his silent amusement.

He hoped he hadn't made the wrong choice.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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35: Pre-Party

Ryan loved Genome parties. They always involved a lot of property damage.

He had attended a few elsewhere in Italy, usually when he joined a group. However, this one looked like it would be the biggest yet; and since tomorrow would mark Quicksave's first week in New Rome, the courier intended to cap it off with a bang.

Well, he had probably spent two months or so in the city across various loops, but still! This party might be something entirely new and surprising.

"How many people will come?" Ryan asked, having traded his usual trench coat, hat, and mask for a classy, dark purple suit. While Ki-jung had insisted he could dress casually, the Genome would settle for nothing less than the best outfit in the room.

You couldn't half-ass *elegance*.

"Oh, no more than one-hundred," Ki-jung replied, her fingers fidgeting in anxiety. She had traded her glasses for contact lenses, and her modest clothes for a sleeveless black dress. Her boyfriend meanwhile wore a simple blue shirt and black pants.

"Do you want more tuna pizzas?" Lanka asked while on the sofa while typing on a phone. That tasteless black sheep

alone hadn't made *any* effort to dress well. "We still got enough party funds for four more."

"Add a few vegan ones for Fortuna," Ki-jung said, before checking the kitchen for the fifth time in the past hour. Jamie had gathered an impressive array of alcohol bottles on the counter. "Will that be enough?"

"They're the strongest liquors I could find," Jamie replied, intending to work as the barman and already busy making cocktails. Since Genomes had a more efficient metabolism than normal humans, they needed ten times the usual dose to even feel the effects of alcohol.

"I've got Genome-only stuff in my car," Ryan said. "But you will start shining in the dark and see invisible things."

"Don't worry," Jamie said quickly. "Fortuna is bringing strong stuff, and, I quote, '*party pills*.'"

"No Bliss?" Ki-jung asked, her face tensing up.

"No Bliss," her boyfriend reassured her, while someone hit the doorbell. "Come in!"

The first guests opened the door, Ki-jung anxiously standing straight next to Ryan while they walked inside. Night had fallen outside, and while the party was scheduled to start at eight, most guests would be fashionably late.

"Hello everyone!" Fortuna entered the house, followed by her boyfriend and a younger girl around fifteen. Lucky Lady wore a golden dress even more scandalously lavish than usual; whereas the teenage girl dressed so tastelessly, that Ryan couldn't look at her without fighting the urge to drag her to a tailor's shop.

Fortuna's date was around Ryan's physical age, with short well-groomed brown hair, blue eyes, and an elegant all black formal suit. He looked rather plain when compared to his girlfriend, but the courier felt an *intense* vibe coming from him.

In fact, he seemed vaguely familiar.

The mystery boy immediately singled out the courier, who waved a hand at him. "Hi, I'm Ryan. I would say I'm immortal, but you probably know that already."

"Mathias," the man replied, shaking Ryan's hand with a small smile. "Mathias Martel."

The way he moved, his aura, the slight inflection in the voice... "I know, we've met," Ryan replied cheerfully, testing the waters.

"You did?" Fortuna asked while Mathias' smile strained a bit. Since he hadn't cut that lucky woman's hair this time around, she seemed a lot more well-disposed towards Ryan. "Matt, why didn't you tell me?"

"Yeah, you're usually a very transparent kind of guy, Matt." Ryan winked at him. "I hope you don't hide anything else."

Matt's poker face remained ironclad while he answered his date's question. "It didn't seem important at the time."

"Fortuna, you brought your sister?" Ki-jung asked the blonde bombshell, although her eyes remained focused on the teenage girl. "Isn't she too young for this kind of party?"

"I'm almost fifteen!" The younger girl pouted. While she was no top model like her sister, she would probably grow into

an attractive woman in time. She had short, light brown hair, ocean blue eyes, and a heart-shaped face.

“Fourteen and a half,” Fortuna teased her, her younger sister pinching her in the arm.

“Hi, I’m Narcinia, Narcinia Veran.” The teen smiled brightly at everyone. “Alias Ceres.”

“I still can’t believe Augustus gave you an Olympian name before me,” Fortuna complained, her boyfriend glancing away. “If only Felix hadn’t gone crazy, we could have become Diana and Apollo.”

“Has he answered your messages?” Ki-jung asked, a look of concern on her face.

“I wish!” Fortuna complained, crossing her arms angrily. “I swear when he comes back—”

“If he comes back,” Narcinia replied with a depressed face.

“Maybe he got hit by a car,” Ryan said, the others glaring at him. “Well, he is a cat. Or was that too soon?”

“He will come back,” Fortuna insisted, though she looked at Jamie and Ki-jung. “Can’t you help? Give him a call?”

The couple exchanged an embarrassed glance, one heavy with regrets. “He didn’t leave the house on the best terms,” Jamie said stoically. “Felix... Felix needs time to figure himself out.”

“But—”

Mathias put a hand on his girlfriend’s arm before she could insist. He seemed more insightful than her, though that

wasn't hard.

Having talked with Atom Cat on the Dynamis path, Ryan quickly put two and two together. He had a pretty good idea of what caused his feline friend to leave the Augusti, namely, Ki-jung's situation.

Something else also bothered Ryan. Felix the Cat said his sister Narcinia was adopted, and she matched a certain description... Could it be?

This party already promised a lot of surprises.

"Luigi isn't here?" Fortuna asked as she scanned the room.
"He's usually early when there are girls."

"No, the Hockey Killer attacked him again when his bodyguard took a bathroom break," Jamie replied with a frown. "The attacker also forced Luigi to eat a salami."

"Hockey Killer?" Ryan asked at the same time a shocked Fortuna said, "A *salami*?"

"That's probably the same maniac who attacked Luigi before," Jamie replied with a sigh. "And yes, a salami. Don't ask me why. They say the city is safer with the Meta gone, but if you ask me, it has enough madmen already."

"It could be a vigilante," Ryan said. "Some handsome fellow possessing a strange sense of justice, fighting crime with a hockey stick in one hand and a sausage in the other."

"Why has he only attacked Luigi then?" Lanka pointed out from the sofa, too lazy to leave her spot. "Nah, blabbermouth, it's just petty revenge. If you ask me, the jackass deserved it, always asking the wrong questions."

"Whatever the case, this Hockey Killer will get what he deserves," Jamie said firmly, glancing at Fortuna. "Now that the Meta-Gang has left New Rome, will you look into it?"

"Vulcan hasn't released us yet," Fortuna complained. "Though we cleaned up Rust Town and Sparrow chased those Psychos off to the ends of the Earth."

Well, Ryan wouldn't say they had cleaned up Rust Town. They had prevented a large fire, but the Junkyard had transformed into a pile of molten trash conveniently hiding the bunker's entrance. Vulcan had tasked the group to patrol the area in case the Meta returned, while she left with Sparrow to hunt them down. Ryan hadn't received any news since, though he heard both women would attend the party.

Truthfully, the time-traveler hadn't yet figured out what to do about Mechron's bunker, and Len hadn't contacted him again either. He hoped the party would help him destress and clear his mind.

"Should we discuss this while..." Ki-jung cleared her throat while looking at Mathias. "I'm sorry, but..."

"Don't worry, he has seen right through us," Ryan said with a smirk, delighting at making Martel more and more uncomfortable.

"Yeah, I'm sure one of you is the Hockey Killer," the man replied with the same mirthful face. "I hope I didn't blow your cover."

Everyone took it as a joke and laughed, none louder than Ryan himself. Touché. "It's okay, Chitter, I vouch for my Mathias," Fortuna said, putting her head on her man's shoulder. "He's the one."

“I only agreed to a second date,” Mathias replied with a stoic expression.

“It’s going to happen whether you like it or not.”

“How did the two of you meet?” Ki-jung asked.

“You know that time when my third apartment had a gas leak last week?” Fortuna asked. “I narrowly avoided death by falling off the window, and Mathias rescued me.”

“No, your power rescued you,” Mathias corrected her with a deadpan face. “I didn’t expect you to fall on me from the third floor. That was completely unexpected.”

“It was love at first sight,” Fortuna declared.

“It wasn’t,” her boyfriend protested. “I checked if you were alright, and when I tried to leave because I had other stuff planned, you started shouting at me.”

“Well, of course I was furious,” Fortuna protested, while the others chuckled. “The world’s most beautiful woman falls on your lap and asks you to spoil her because she’s distressed, and you dare refuse?”

“Yes,” Mathias replied bluntly. Clearly, he was immune to Fortuna’s charm and she couldn’t stand it. “What, my world should have stopped for you?”

“Yes, it should have!” And she said it without any hint of sarcasm whatsoever. “When I look at boys, they drop at my feet, but you, Matt? You walked away!”

“When does the music start?” Narcinia finally spoke up. She seemed a bit shy in the presence of so many older people,

but grew more confident as the group exchanged pleasantries. “It’s too silent.”

Jamie glanced at Ryan, who showed them the DJ: a brain in a jar hooked to the TV and loudspeakers, surrounded by Ki-jung’s rats.

“You use a Genius-made cyber-brain as a DJ?” Narcinia asked, though unlike the others she seemed more excited than bothered. “So cool.”

“I shouldn’t have asked you to take care of the playlist,” Ki-jung told Ryan with a regretful sigh.

“Remorse is for those who don’t know what they want!” Ryan replied, activating DJ Brain. “Now watch.”

The brain started playing music, and as it did, a light shone from inside its tank. As the liquid protecting the grey matter changed color, creating a nightclub ambiance with the appropriate music.

“Catchy,” Lanka admitted, nodding to herself to the tune of the music.

“I don’t recognize the artist,” Ki-jung said, while her rats started breakdancing around the TV.

“It’s a *Grand Theft Auto* remix,” Mathias said, much to Ryan’s surprise. “A pretty good one too.”

“Mathias is a game designer,” Fortuna said since he was clearly too modest to boast for himself. “He’s super talented.”

“To be precise, I’m a programmer and I make indie games on the side,” her date replied with a sheepish grin, the most

emotion Ryan had seen him emote so far. “Mostly RPGs and Metroidvania.”

Nobody understood the jargon, except Ryan, who had stars in his eyes. However, he decided to test that man’s knowledge first, before getting his hopes up. “Have you played *Metroid Fusion*? ”

“Yes, but I prefer *Super Metroid*, ” Mathias replied. “More open-ended.”

“Best Square RPG?”

“*Final Fantasy VII*, but *VI* holds a special place in my heart.”

“There’s another gamer alive on this God-forsaken planet!” Ryan was almost brought to tears at finding a soulmate. “I can die happy now!”

“Do you have powers, Nerd 2? ” Lanka asked Mathias, raising her head above the sofa with a beer can in hand. “Name’s Lanka by the way.”

The programmer nodded. “One of the bedrooms, yours I presume, is painted brown, with thirty beer cans in a corner and a motorcycle magazine—”

“Oh great, a Blue,” Lanka shrugged before he could finish. “If you tell anyone what’s below the bed, I’m killing you.”

“Mathias can see anything within a short radius,” Fortuna replied with pride, putting an arm around his. He seemed much more uncomfortable about open displays of affection than his girlfriend. Ryan got the feeling she had more or less dragged him to the party.

“Pff, that’s nothing.” Narcinia grabbed a knife from the kitchen and then raised it at her thumb. “Look.”

She cut her thumb before anyone could react, a drop of blood falling on the parquet. The liquid quickly expanded into a bubble while taking a green coloration, before changing shape. The strange mixture grew horns, legs, fur...

Five seconds later, the group looked at a cute white goat.

“It’s adorable,” Ki-jung said in amazement, while Jamie smiled warmly.

“I can create life from my blood,” Narcinia boasted, her new pet letting out a cry. “Nothing too complicated or too big, but I can make any kind of animal, plant, even chimeras!”

“You can make *any* kind of goat?” Ryan asked, now *extremely* interested.

“Of course! Why?”

The courier looked at this pure-hearted girl deep in her big eyes, and then whispered two words that would corrupt her forever.

“Goat fights.”

Narcinia looked at Ryan as if he were a genius, which he *was*, and then made a second goat. A black-furred born-fighter, with golden eyes. “Which one do you take, Ryan?” she asked, as the two goats glared at each other.

“The black one.”

He could already see the untapped market.

Narcinia ended up making eight goats, as new guests decided to participate. She granted each of them a different color and held a tournament while the house slowly filled up with people. A few had formed a circle around the sofa, to watch the final battle.

“Go, *ma biquette!*” Ryan cheered up his champion half in French, half in English. She locked horns with her rival, ready to claim her rightful place as the competition’s winner. “You can do it, Shub-Niggurath!”

“You gave it a name, blabbermouth?” Lanka asked, having bet on a golden goat, and grown strangely invested in the fight. “Kick her ass!”

Unfortunately, her animal couldn’t stand long against Shub-Niggurath’s implacable ferocity. The black goat managed to toss her rival to the side, who joined the other defeated contestants in shameful exile.

“Yes, yes!” Ryan instantly petted his black goat, who raised her head with smug confidence. The spectators applauded, though none as loudly as Narcinia. “You did it! You did it!”

“I’m sure you cheated by stopping time,” Lanka grumbled while finishing her current smoke. With the spectacle finished, most guests dispersed to talk in a corner or grab a drink.

“Would you say that if she were white?” Ryan accused her, stroking Shub-Niggurath’s ear. Actually, he did cheat once, but only against Fortuna. Considering her insane luck, he had to level the playing field somehow.

Anyway, Lucky Girl proved to be a sore loser and left the competition with her *beau*. The couple had moved to the kitchen-bar, with Fortuna spending her time advertising her

boyfriend to everyone who would listen. Jamie, ever the peoples' person, engaged Mathias in a friendly conversation while mixing cocktails, though the programmer remained guarded. Ki-jung welcomed every new guest as they arrived, growing more anxious by the second.

All of the guests were Genomes, and most of them advertised. A telekinetic whom Ryan recognized as one of Renesco's customers helped Jamie with the bar by moving drinks around, while a fire manipulator showed off to a girl by creating burning shapes out of thin air.

Knowing Genomes, Ryan would be disappointed if the party didn't end up with one or two explosions.

"Are you accusing me of *goat racism*?" Lanka brought him back to the conversation.

"What do we do with the goats now though?" Narcinia asked. Her creations had started playing with Ki-jung's rats, the rodents climbing on top of the larger goats. Most of the guests looked at them with amusement, and some with hunger.

"You make a wolf, to eat them," Ryan suggested, his goat champion looking up at him. "Only the losers, Shub-Niggurath. Only the losers."

"And how do we get rid of the wolf afterward?" Lanka asked the hard question, expecting to corner him.

Ryan stated the simple solution. "You make a bear, to eat the wolf."

"I can't make a bear," Narcinia replied with a giggle, sitting on the sofa with Lanka. "Too fat."

"Then we call the Panda. Who will win between him and a wolf?"

"The wolf, it's not even a contest," Lanka said, before offering a beer can to Narcinia. "Want some, Overgoat?"

"Mom and Dad said I could go if I didn't drink," Narcinia replied while joining her fingers. "And Father Torque told me alcohol is poison for the soul."

"Do you see your parents or a priest around here? Trust me, it would take ten times more before it poisons anything." Lanka shoved the can in a surprised Narcinia's hands, who looked at it with clear hesitation. "Do you see any pretty boys around, blabbermouth? I'm hungry."

"That depends, do I include myself?" Ryan joked. "Because everyone else will feel like a huge disappointment in comparison."

"You aren't my type, blabbermouth. I prefer the strong silent type, and you talk too fucking much." Lanka glanced at the entrance. "Though the cavalry is coming to rescue you."

Greta and Sparrow had arrived through the front gate, the first dressing casually, the latter wearing a red gown. A third woman accompanied them, a drop-dead gorgeous redhead in a stunning green dress. She kept her hair in a bun and tried to look dignified, but Ryan noticed an undercurrent of playful, foxlike cruelty in her emerald gaze. Clearly one of the Killer Seven.

It took Ryan a second to realize that all three of the assassins escorted a young woman in her early twenties; a stunning, queenlike lady with long platinum hair, almost silver. Unlike her companions, she dressed very conservatively and all in black, highlighting her pale skin.

That stoic woman scanned the room, an apathetic look in her blue eyes. Her expression was one of pure, absolute *boredom*.

Quicksave was halfway tempted to approach her, but when he got a good look at her emotionless face, he backed off.

She looked a bit too much like a younger Pluto for his comfort.

Greta noticed him though and gave him her usual fake smile, while the pale lady muttered a few words to Sparrow and the redhead. She didn't seem interested in social interaction, moving towards the bar to drink in a corner.

"Vamp," Lanka said, indicating the redhead with her chin. "She's a bitch and she drains her partners dry, so don't approach her. Obviously, you've met Nash and Greta already."

Nash? Nice nickname for a Sparrow. "And the platinum—"

"Don't," Lanka said, her voice no longer playful. "Seriously, don't get near her."

"But—"

"It's Livia," Narcinia said as if it explained everything.

"I ain't cleaning your bloody corpse, Blabbermouth, so follow some social distancing guidelines," Lanka said, starting her fourth smoke of the night. "Vamp will kill you while you fuck, but you won't get that far with Livia."

"What, she can turn me to stone with a glance?" Ryan asked.

"It's not Livia you should fear," Lanka replied ominously, "it's her father."

"And she dated my brother," Narcinia told Ryan.

"So she's a cat person?"

Narcinia pinched him in the arm. "That was stupid," she said with a smirk. Teenagers. "Don't you want to date my sister, Ryan? We could have goat fights every weekend!"

"I'm pretty sure she's already taken," Lanka snickered while reviewing the guests, before letting out a sigh. Apparently, she hadn't found anyone to her liking yet.

"But I don't like that guy!" Narcinia complained, snapping the beer can open. "He stares at me sometimes, it's creepy. I hope my sister gets bored of him soon."

"I'll settle that right now." Ryan glanced at the stoic game designer and started shouting at him. "Hey, Matty!"

Mathias Martel looked at him, clearly at his wits' end.

"Wanna grab me a drink and talk pop culture outside? You still owe me one!"

The game designer exchanged a few words with his girlfriend. A few seconds later, Fortuna glared at the courier while Mathias grabbed two glasses off the counter.

"Protect the goats, my Green friend," Ryan told Narcinia. "We may need to sacrifice them for your wish to happen."

"You aren't a satanist right?" the teen asked, suddenly worried.

"Nah, he's way worse," Lanka said, while Ryan already moved towards the terrace.

"The big fire below's got nothing on those I started," the courier replied playfully.

"I-I was kidding!" Narcinia pleaded, Shub-Niggurath letting out small cries. "I was kidding!"

Ryan winked at her over his shoulder, before being joined by Mathias. A few Genomes had taken over the infinity pool, but for now, most remained inside. The courier grabbed a drink offered to him, then sat on the ramp, an inch from falling into the void below. He looked up upon hearing noise, watching Vulcan's mech pass over the house and land in the garden outside.

Good, Ryan would interrogate her about how her hunt of the Meta-Gang had gone. "I thought you were unlucky in love?" he asked Mathias.

"I am, she's a job," he replied, confirming Ryan's suspicions about his identity. "One that backfired spectacularly, I should add. Her power is busted."

"That's pretty cold."

"Says the pot calling the kettle black." The programmer sipped his glass and glared at the courier. "You're a colossal *dick*, Quicksave."

"I know, and you love me for it."

"Good call for Luigi though," he replied, low enough that no one else would overhear. "I was going to take care of him, but you acted quicker."

"I'm sorry my hatred of truthsayers got in the way of your cold-hearted assassination attempt." Ryan glanced at Narcinia. She and Lanka moved the sofa aside, clearing out the living room to turn it into a dance floor. The rave party would begin soon. "So, it's her?"

Mathias Martel didn't look at him, instead staring at the Veran sisters. For a moment, the mask slipped, and the real person beneath spoke through.

"Yeah," Shroud replied, a dangerous look in his eyes as he observed Narcinia. "It's her."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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36: Color Rave

“When is the sound coming?” Lanka asked Ryan for the third time, an elbow on the loudspeaker.

“When you find me another brain,” Ryan replied, tinkering with the device. A few people had already taken over the dance floor, but the house’s equipment couldn’t support a true rave party. Seriously, Ki-jung needed to stop buying Dynamis home products. They were barely a cut above pre-Wars Chinese imports.

Actually, did buying the enemy’s products count as collaboration?

“Stop distracting him,” Narcinia told Lanka, defending Ryan with such zeal that he considered making her his sidekick. The Green Genome was busy cultivating strange, phosphorescent mushrooms on the ground. She had promised it would help with the rave, and the courier let her run wild with her imagination.

Quicksave glanced at Mathias, who was talking with Fortuna and other members of the Killer Seven. Half an hour had passed since their conversation, and the house was now filled to the brim with guests.

“So, you’re adopted?” Ryan bluntly asked Narcinia. “Did you ever learn who your birth parents were?”

“Ryan!” Lanka snapped at him.

"They were raiders," Narcinia replied, almost casually. "Father Torque said they were killers and rapists, and that Augustus punished them because it was divine justice."

Ryan could have sworn the TV's screen threatened to crack for a brief second. He glanced up at Mathias, whose smile contrasted with the icy look in his eyes.

"Sorry," Lanka said, glaring at the courier. Thankfully, the power outburst had been subtle enough for her to miss it. "Blabbermouth has no tact at all."

"It's okay!" Narcinia replied with a cute smile. "My real family is the one that raised me. My mom and dad are awesome, and my siblings even more so."

"I was adopted too, but it sucked," Ryan said with a shrug. "Well, half of it."

"Really?" Narcinia's head perked up in interest, while Lanka listened in silence.

"My parents died when bandits wiped out our community to steal our supplies," Ryan said. It had been so long ago, it had lost almost all emotional effect. "I was... eleven I think? Maybe twelve. And I turned out great!"

"Ryan." Lanka's voice had lost all playfulness. "Did these bandits..."

Ryan glanced at the snake tattoo on her arm, that of her former gang. "You weren't among them and they're all dead," the courier replied with a shrug. "I'm over it."

Lanka fell silent with a thoughtful look on her face, while Narcinia looked between them in confusion. Thankfully, a

newcomer interrupted them before the mood turned even more awkward.

Ryan almost didn't recognize Vulcan at first sight, because the Genius had cleaned herself up; she had traded her usual clothes for a black halter-top and pants, and let her hair fall down on her shoulders. While she was no head-turning beauty, the Augusti Capo looked great.

He really had a thing for Geniuses shorter than him.

"Ceres, Sphere." Vulcan smirked upon seeing the courier.
"Ryan."

"Hey, my favorite arms dealer," Ryan rejoiced, raising a screwdriver. "Your arrival is just *perfect*."

"Always," she replied, a hand on her waist. "Tell me something I don't know."

"Do you have anything to boost the sound?" Ryan asked.
"I'm trying to jury-rig the loudspeakers, but I need more juice."

"Now you're talking my language," Vulcan said, searching inside her pocket and tossing him some kind of mouse-sized battery. "It's a mini-generator."

"Why do you carry that in your pocket?" Lanka asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Cause my phone has less autonomy than a sloth," the Genius replied with a shrug, before grabbing a beer can from Lanka's personal reserve. "It's been an exhausting day."

"Did you kill the Meta?" Narcinia asked before Ryan could.

"Almost, but Dynamis got to them first. Fucking kill stealers."

"What, they tried to buy them off?" Lanka snickered.

"With bullets and lasers," Vulcan replied. "They sent three armored squadrons, plus heavy hitters like Devilry and that bitch Wyvern. Those vultures fell on the Meta and opened fire on sight."

Oh, was there gas in their alliance? "Well, I guess it was time to clean up loose ends," Ryan said.

"Adam didn't look surprised. He sacrificed a few men, but he managed to escape on a goddamn submarine."

"A *submarine*?" Narcinia immediately asked, unable to resist the lure of undersea adventures.

"Yeah, a freaking submarine with Mechron's emblem on it."

The dreaded Genius' name instantly killed the playful mood. Lanka toyed with her smoke, a frown forming on her face.

"Well, that doesn't sound good."

"I get the feeling the situation is more complicated than it looks." Vulcan sipped her beer while glancing at Ryan. "I called the Underdiver to investigate since she's a specialist for underwater hunts."

The thought of calling Len had crossed Ryan's mind, but he was wary of involving her now. She was probably busy with all the orphans, no need to add more pressure on her shoulders.

Anyway, thanks to Vulcan's gadget, he completed his design and amplified the sound, turning the modest loudspeaker

into a weapon of mass destruction. As if to answer his success, Narcinia's mushrooms unleashed a faint colored mist onto the dance floor, instantly grabbing everyone's attention.

Trading his screwdriver for his drink, Ryan cleared his throat.

"Boys and girls!" the courier shouted while raising his glass, his voice reverberating through the loudspeaker. "With great power, comes ZERO RESPONSIBILITY!"

Cheers answered his declaration, while Lanka created multiple colored spheres above the dance floor, one for each Elixir type. They floated near the ceiling and pulsated with energy, slowly shrinking while they provided a solid light show.

"How long do they last?" Vulcan asked Lanka, more people started taking over the dance floor while the music switched to a catchy *Synthwave* song.

"Around an hour if nobody touches them," Lanka said, before turning to Narcinia. "Nice trick with the mushrooms. What's your job again?"

"I work on Ischia island," the teenager replied. "I help Father Torque open the path to heaven."

"That kind of heaven?" Ryan asked, immediately interested. "Are you an angel?"

Narcinia's smile faltered a bit. "Sorry Ryan, I'm not supposed to say anything about it."

"I'm just saying, I've always wanted to sell drugs for a living," Ryan declared, pumping his fist. "Building a South American cartel has always been my dream. If you need a

drug wizard, I know all the good recipes. Meth, cocaine, heroin, opium, doesn't matter, just give me a truck and I'll start cooking."

"You know how to make drugs?" Lanka asked, finishing her sixth cancer stick. "Good to know."

Well, Ryan had spent... twenty years? At least twenty years trying every addictive substance on the planet except Elixirs, and when he ran out, he learned how to create his own supply. His drug cartel phase had been quite enjoyable actually, even if the last overdose sucked.

"I'm afraid you will have to abandon that childhood dream, Ryan." Vulcan brazenly put an arm around his shoulder. "You've got an exclusive work contract with me."

"Can't we settle on an open relationship?" Ryan replied while brazenly putting his hand around her waist. Lanka looked at him as if expecting the courier to lose that arm very soon.

"I ain't finding anyone half as good as you are," Vulcan replied, without pushing his hand away. "So it's 'til death do us part."

"Are you talking about work or something else?" Lanka joked.

"He could visit," Narcinia said, clearly eager to meet Ryan again. "Father Torque says the equipment needs an update. Especially the defenses."

"Bacchus doesn't know jack shit about tech," Vulcan replied, her amusement turning into frustration. "Besides, you've got a freaking *ghost* guarding your precious island."

"Mr. Geist says he can't be everywhere at once, and that he may ascend to Heaven anytime."

"Pretty please?" Ryan asked Vulcan, doing his best impersonation of a kitten's cute stare.

"Don't start." Vulcan rolled her eyes, before glancing at the dance floor. "You know how to dance?"

"If I say I'm amazing, then I'm being modest."

"Let's put that boast to the test, shall we?"

Both put the drinks aside and moved to the dance floor alongside other couples. It quickly became apparent that Vulcan didn't have much experience, but Ryan had mastered every dance under the sun, so he guided them through. Mathias also danced with Fortuna, and the glass manipulator seemed to enjoy it a bit more than he would like to admit.

"Is there anything you *aren't* good at?" Vulcan asked Ryan. He could feel her sweat on his fingers, her breath accelerating.

"Ice-skating." Vulcan chuckled in response, and Ryan may have smiled, if not for the unpleasant sensation of someone watching him from afar. A quick glance quickly told him whom.

Livia observed him from the bar, her gaze first one of surprise, then confusion. She started asking questions to Sparrow nearby, and while Ryan could read lips, the lighting didn't help him understand anything.

He did capture the mysterious woman's attention though. It must have been his magnetic personality.

“Fuck off!”

Ryan and Vulcan interrupted their wild dancing when they heard Jamie’s voice cut through the noise. The swordsman had grabbed a fire-manipulator whom Ryan had sighted earlier during the party by the shirt, and looked ready to murder him. The guest carried a broken inhaler in his hands, full of a bluish, almost phosphorescent liquid.

It seemed one idiot had ignored Jamie’s rules and brought *Bliss* to the party. And Ki-jung...

Chitter looked at the drug with a pale face, shaking. She seemed paralyzed and unable to say anything; a former addict faced with her personal poison.

Bliss could be taken either in liquid or gas form, and it was powerful enough to affect Genomes. It was also incredibly addictive, which Ryan could personally attest. He could never finish a run after trying it, and while he had only ever found one way to cure the addiction, it was horribly painful.

Not to mention the hidden, long-term side-effects...

The idiot tried to protest, even while Jamie looked murderous. It was not a pretty sight, since the Made Man was a tall brawler built like a bear. While he hadn’t manifested any laser weapons from his hands, the scowl of black fury on his face made it clear he was barely restraining himself. The contrast with his usual kindness made it all the more jarring.

In fact, Ryan had only ever seen him this angry when Luigi had exposed his infiltration in some loops.

“But—”

“Fuck off!” Jamie snarled before throwing the Genomes backward, his tone turning venomous. “Don’t bother ever coming back.”

The guest looked around, surrounded by glares from other guests, and moved towards the door with a cowed face and his inhaler. “It’s okay?” Jamie immediately asked his girlfriend, his frightful face softening back into a kind one.

“Yes,” Ki-jung said, although she clearly didn’t mean it. “It’s fine. It’s fine.”

Jamie put his hands around her waist in a protective manner and then turned to Ryan when he and Vulcan approached the couple. “Sorry for the mess,” Zanbato apologized.

“Your house, your rules,” Vulcan replied, glancing at the house’s entrance. “I’ll discipline that idiot, Zanbato. You got my word on this.”

“Thank you.” Jamie looked at his troubled girlfriend, then back at Ryan. “I think we will retire early. Can you and Lanka take care of the guests in our absence?”

“Sure,” the courier said.

“Can I trust you not to do anything stupid?” Jamie asked, an eyebrow raised.

“I swear I will not start any fires under this roof.”

“That’s oddly specific,” he noted but had more pressing matters on his mind. “Don’t burn down the house.”

Ryan raised a thumb up with one hand and crossed his fingers behind his back with the other. Jamie and Ki-jung moved upstairs, leaving the ground and main room to the

guests. “I didn’t know Chitter was a recovering addict,” Vulcan noted, showing surprising insight. “I’m glad I never took that stuff.”

“Don’t get high on your own supply,” Ryan replied.

“*Scarface?*” She smirked at his surprised face. “I watch movies too. Maybe I’ll show you a few, one day.”

Sparrow approached the duo before they could return to the dance floor. “Quicksave.” The bodyguard cleared her throat. “Ms. Livia wants to talk to you.”

“About what?” Vulcan asked, her tone shifting from flirtatious to serious.

“I don’t know,” Sparrow replied. “But you can come if you want.”

Ryan and Vulcan exchanged a glance, and while the Genius clearly wasn’t happy about it, she didn’t seem willing to deny the request either. That Livia clearly had sway in the organization, or at least her father did.

Livia awaited them at the counter, playing with a cocktail. Greta and the Vamp formed a security cordon around her, giving her a safe space among the crowd. Her eyes remained set on Ryan with a mix of curiosity and interest.

“Are you there?” Livia asked Ryan, her voice radiating quiet confidence.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Ryan replied. “Can we ever be sure that we truly exist?”

“As in, are you physically there, or are you a hallucination?”

"Well, true hallucinations don't ask if they're real," Ryan said. "That's how I tell them apart."

Livia chuckled in response, but Vulcan's face remained an unreadable mask as she asked a question of her own.
"Shouldn't you know that already, princess?"

"I would, if my power worked on him," Livia replied. She sounded oddly pleased about it. "It doesn't. As far as it can tell, the man in front of me does not exist."

Vulcan frowned. "You mean, you can't see him in *any* alternate universe?"

Huh?

"No, which should be impossible," Livia continued, studying Ryan with clear curiosity. "My name is Livia Augusti or Minerva. Are you a Blue? Perhaps a White?"

"No, I'm not a smurf. I'm closer to magenta."

"A Violet? Oh, then you must be Quicksave. My aunt spoke of you."

"You know I'm immortal?" Ryan asked her, happy to have become famous. "I didn't tell anyone before."

"I'm sure of it," she replied with a bright smile that made Ryan strangely uneasy.

Wait, Livia *Augusti*? As in the core family? She was Pluto's niece, and Lanka had said he should fear her father...

Ryan's heart skipped a beat. "Who's your daddy?" he asked for confirmation.

The young woman's smile widened, and she glanced through the windows, and at Mount Augustus beyond it.

...

Shit, Augustus can reproduce!

"I can see and interact with alternate realities," Livia explained. "I won't give you all the boring details, but I can see the different ways a situation can play out; even a human being. But for some reason, my power simply fails to take you into account."

If so, then no wonder she had looked so bored beforehand. If that mafia princess could observe multiple realities, she probably knew how the party would turn out before it even began.

Until Ryan himself entered the picture. "Interesting," he said, noting that information for later.

"You said you overlap with your alternate selves," Vulcan told her dance partner. "Maybe that's why. Your powers interfere with each other."

Well, except he lied about that part, and Ryan couldn't tell them his own theory without revealing his bluff.

"I can't suppress my curiosity," Livia admitted. "Even Greta only prevents me from seeing anything when using her power on me, otherwise I can see her just fine. This situation is truly a first for me."

"The orange is in the hen house."

Both Vulcan and Livia frowned at Ryan. "I'm sorry?" the mafia princess asked.

"If you remember that sentence, then it means everything is fine," Ryan said while grabbing a drink off the counter.

"I will be sure to remember it then," Livia replied with amusement. The more they talked, the more delighted she looked. "I would be interested in examining how our powers interact if you don't mind. I'm still figuring out my limits."

"How about a wager then?"

Livia put a hand on her cheek, considering the courier's proposal. "A wager?"

"I thought of something to cap the party." Ryan raised an index finger, sipping the cocktail. "Something so daring, so risky, so mad, that I promise you will *never* have seen it in any alternate universe. Something which will piss off Wyvern something fierce."

Livia raised an amused eyebrow, while Vulcan looked ready to take the bait. "I'm listening," the mafia princess said.

Ryan smirked.

Two hours later, Ryan hid from lasers behind a desk on the twentieth floor of Dynamis' HQ. He wore a new purple suit on his person, while an armored Vulcan was engaged in a firefight with the Private Security.

"Romano." Enrique Manada pointed a gun at the courier, while furious vines moved to surround him. "Drop that cashmere suit!"

The things he did for his wardrobe...

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37: The War of the Suit

A few minutes before the shootout, Ryan was sitting behind Vulcan inside her mech, both partners in crime observing Dynamis' HQ through a computer screen. The tower looked like some game's final dungeon, with increasingly dangerous enemies guarding each floor with the boss at the very top. It almost made Ryan wish for a suicide run, but that would be for another time.

His suit awaited him.

"Should you be drinking while driving?" the courier asked Vulcan, who just finished a bottle of vodka.

"I haven't taken enough to feel any effects," she replied, opening a hidden compartment and putting the empty bottle there. Ryan noticed a few other bottles inside, including a *Bordeaux* wine and a few other delicacies. Vulcan immediately rose up further in the courier's esteem for showing such exquisite tastes.

"You have a minibar?"

"I'm a Genius," she replied with a smirk. "Maybe I will put one in your power armor when I get around to making it. I'm thinking of something sleek, optimized for close combat."

"I would prefer a Megazord honestly." Maybe it could have a panda-themed animal mode?

“From those Japanese-American shows?” She made a disdainful face. “They’re campy as hell!”

“Hey, don’t spit on my childhood,” Ryan complained, before squinting. “Wait, you watched them too?”

“I looked into many sci-fi TV series for inspiration,” Vulcan admitted with a look of brief embarrassment, before changing the subject. “Anyway, I finished scanning the area, and we’re good.”

“So we’re going in?”

Vulcan looked over her shoulder, with Ryan leaning on her back due to the cockpit’s lack of space.

That may have come out a bit dirty.

“I studied their defenses,” Vulcan told him before focusing back on the screen. “Been itching to test my stealth system on Dynamis, but never got the occasion. I still can’t believe Livia gave her blessing, especially if she doesn’t know how it will end.”

“She gave her blessing because she doesn’t know,” Ryan pointed out. The mafia princess seemed as desperate as he was for new and unexpected entertainment. “Thanks for helping.”

“I wouldn’t try that if Alphonse Manada was in town, even for your pretty face,” Vulcan admitted. “That ruthless mofo is everything his brother isn’t. Even without him nearby, we have minutes before they send heavy hitters after us, after which we’re toast. Grab the suit and don’t play around.”

“Not even a little?”

"Don't play around, Ryan," Vulcan replied firmly, pointing at the building right next to Dynamis' HQ, namely the II Migliore tower. "Their best can take on *our* best, and it's their territory. They will move to reinforce the strategic areas like the labs once the alarm is sounded, but confusion will only buy us so much time. Now hold on to me."

Ryan sighed but consoled himself with the thought of finally getting a cashmere wool suit.

In preparation for this fateful moment, the courier had left most of his clothes behind at Jamie's place, except for his pants, shirt, mask and hat. The only thing he carried with him was the plushie, too dangerous to be left without supervision; Vulcan put it in a compartment inside the mech, sealing its evil away.

Vulcan had her mech fly off its current spot and above New Rome, shrouding its metal hide with some kind of camouflage. It might trick Dynamis' radars and drone defenses, at least until impact.

Vulcan's mech quickly accelerated, the g-force increasing until Ryan had no choice but to hold on to the pilot to avoid being thrown backward. He could see Dynamis' building get closer and closer on the computer screen, wing-shaped drones flying around the perimeter. The combination of speed, low altitude, and stealth hid the power armor from their gaze.

And then, the mech hit the building like a missile, shattering the twentieth floor's windows and most of its ceiling. Vulcan powered through furniture, assembly lines, and wardrobes before finally stopping.

"Go, go, go!" Vulcan shouted at Ryan while the cockpit opened, the courier immediately emerging from the mech.

Dynamis' wool factory was a sanitized floor lacking anything resembling warmth or color, with mechanical arms replacing humans as part of the assembly line. Only a few desks oversaw the production lines, and since they each housed a computer, they probably belonged to engineers. Two elevators and stairways linked the floor to the rest of the building south of the duo's current position.

Alarms started resonating across the floor, metal panels closing the windows outside and security cameras immediately focusing on the intruders.

Ryan didn't pay it any attention. A Gregorian song in his head drowned all noise outside, his attention entirely focused on something straight out of his wildest dream.

The freshly made cashmere wool suits were gathered in a wardrobe near his position, each one a different color. Among them was a purple-dyed one, with pants included.

The perfect suit had been waiting for him all along.

No man would have been insensible to such a sight, and Ryan was no exception. He carefully touched this luxury cloth with his bare hands, feeling the texture, the warmth, the weight of the thousand euros spent on making this vision of heaven. He took this snazzy suit away from the wardrobe, basking in its glory.

Suddenly, Ryan decided that existence wasn't meaningless. All the conflicts in mankind's history had been worth it, for they led to the creation of this suit.

"Ryan!" Vulcan shouted at him from inside her mech, growing tense and impatient. The machine had to lower itself not to hit the ceiling. "What the fuck are you waiting for?"

“I’m sorry...” Ryan had to suppress tears of joy. “This... this is the meaning of life!”

Unfortunately, newcomers decided to interrupt his divine revelation.

A six-man squadron in white power armor stepped out of the two elevators, escorting Blackthorn. The Dynamis executive finished adjusting his suit as if preparing for a meeting rather than a fight.

“Mr. Romano, Miss. Sharif,” Enrique Manada said, always dryly polite. “If you wished to make a late-night appointment, we had a receptionist downstairs.”

His soldiers pointed their weapons, powerful laser rifles, at the two Augusti Genomes. Vulcan raised her own cannon-arm at them, both groups facing each other in a tense standoff. “I don’t take appointments,” the Genius declared, trying to sound badass, “I force them.”

Ryan groaned at her lack of wit. She needed some coaching on that front.

“Your attack is bound to fail,” Enrique said with icy confidence. “The labs are secure, Don Hector is in another location, and our heroes will be there any minute. I don’t understand what you’re trying to do here, but this was suicide to even try.”

“Oh, a minute is fine,” Ryan replied, walking towards Vulcan’s mech. “We just finished our shopping and we will be on our way.”

“You won’t get—” Blackthorn suddenly stopped, his composure disturbed by something for the first time in the

conversation. “Wait, what do you mean by shopping? I don’t understand.”

Ryan pointed a thumb at his shirt.

“Good.”

Ryan stopped time, and when it resumed, he had stripped down to his underwear. He kept only his mask, hat and boxers on, the rest of his clothes on the floor.

Six laser rifles were instantly pointed at him: five at his head, and one at his crotch, by far his most powerful weapon. “Behind me, sir, he’s going to flash you!” a soldier said, moving in front of a speechless Enrique Manada.

Ryan ignored the jab, even as the entire squadron seemed ready to blast him to death at a moment’s notice. He slowly put on the suit, pants last, ignoring the pervading tension in the room. No one dared interrupt him, his sheer moxie and the absurdity of the situation commanding everyone’s full attention.

“Better.”

Once he had put on the suit, Ryan started closing its buttons.

Slowly.

Methodically.

Lovingly.

Finally, once he had finished dressing up, Ryan put his hands on his waist. The suit’s colors mixed perfectly with his

mask and hat, making him look fabulous. The way any Genome's costume should.

“Perfect.”

For a moment, nobody dared utter a word.

Enrique Manada looked at the courier, left speechless by the time-manipulator's overwhelming glamour. Il Migliore's manager glanced at the suit, then at Vulcan, and finally at his men; they rolled their shoulders in confusion, so he looked back at Quicksave.

“You... you broke into our HQ... threatened to start a war... for a suit...” Enrique seemed unable to make a full sentence, interrupting himself whenever he said more than five words. He kept raising and lowering his hand as if trying to point out something, but unable to finish his action. “Not for the Elixirs... or Don Hector... but for a suit...”

The Brand Manager turned as stiff and lifeless as a Dynamis ad.

“Sir?” One of the armored soldiers turned to Enrique, keeping his rifle pointed at Quicksave's crotch. “Sir, what do we do? Sir?”

“You can't possibly... this has to be a diversion... can't possibly be that stupid...”

“I think you made his brain bug the hell out, Quicksave,” Vulcan mused out loud, her cannon arm still pointed at Dynamis' squadron.

“I'm...” Enrique shook his head, still unable to regain his composure. “I'm trying to process the sheer stupidity involved.”

“Oh,” Ryan said, “and here I thought you were the smart one.”

The taunt snapped Blackthorn into action. The rose on his business suit grew to the size of a small cannon and fired a volley of sharp thorns at Quicksave, who dodged with a combination of time-stop and hiding behind the closest desk.

Vulcan immediately opened fire back with her weaponry, only for an armored soldier to shield Enrique with his body. The power armor resisted an artillery shell, although it made the bodyguard stumble. The rest of the squadron retaliated with lasers, targeting Vulcan first.

“Shoot them!” Enrique ordered while grabbing a Beretta hidden inside his suit, a hint of anger breaking through his composure. His rose fell off his costume and started growing to colossal size, turning into an abomination of thorny vines.

Ryan peeked over the desk only to quickly hide back behind it, a laser barely missing his head and incinerating his beloved hat instead. The situation had devolved into an open shootout, lasers and artillery shells flying in all directions. The ceiling started crumbling above them, chairs and office supplies falling through growing holes.

“Romano!” Enrique Manada pointed his gun at the courier, while furious vines moved to surround him. “Drop that cashmere suit!”

“Stay back!” Ryan shouted from his hiding spot, noticing a few pencils and a suit’s sketch on the desk. “I’ve got a bottle of Roundup, and I’m not afraid to use it!”

“You people have gone too far this time,” Enrique snarled, his pride wounded. “You think this is a game? Are you high?”

“Naturally so!” Ryan stopped time as vines lunged at him from all directions, leaping over the desk and grabbing the pencils while at it. When time resumed, Blackthorn’s mutant rose crushed the spot where the courier used to hide.

Enrique reacted by pointing his gun at the time-traveler’s chest. Ryan threw the pencils at the manager’s hand with near-superhuman accuracy, forcing him to drop his weapon. However, before the courier could reach Blackthorn, rope-sized roots broke through the ceiling and attempted to grab him by the neck like a noose.

Ouch, so Il Migliore’s manager could not only control plants in a large radius but boost their growth too.

“I guess you should have called yourself Greenhand,” Ryan mocked Enrique but was forced to run away to avoid the deadly plants. The courier rushed at Vulcan’s mech, managing to grab his old clothes on the ground while a laser barely missed his shoulder.

“Get i—” Vulcan ordered, the cockpit opening. Ryan froze time again, climbed on the mech’s back, and then slipped inside, “—n!”

Without a pause, Vulcan closed the cockpit and activated the propellers. The mech flew straight through the metal panels covering the windows, shrugging off lasers and thick vines. The vegetal abominations couldn’t catch up with the mech once it escaped the building, Enrique glaring at it through the window’s hole.

Flying Dynamis drones immediately gave chase and fired at Vulcan, who responded by accelerating. Ryan had to grab the Genius by the waist to avoid being thrown back by the sheer g-force involved, as the mech flew away towards the Mediterranean Sea.

Vulcan kept increasing the speed and lowered her altitude until her mech all but touched the waters, distancing the drones. After a five minutes chase, the mech lost its pursuers and decelerated.

Once safe, Vulcan and Ryan looked at each other while still high on adrenaline, then erupted into shouts and victory cries.

“That was amazing!” Vulcan laughed, beaming with joy.

“Yeah, right! It’s comfy and classy!” Ryan examined his new suit. “As if it were made for me!”

“I can’t wait to see the news tomorrow morning and the Dynamis press release!” Vulcan grinned ears to ears. “It will have been worth it just to see that Manada ass’ face while trying to explain this! He can’t even cover it up!”

“So we win the bet, chief?” Ryan asked mirthfully.

“Oh yes, we do!” Vulcan replied with a chuckle. “Handily.”

“I hope there’s a prize,” Ryan deadpanned, seeing a notification on the screen. “Looks like we’re getting a call.”

“It’s the defunct channel from my old Dynamis days,” Vulcan said, picking up the call.

“Sharif, do you even understand what you have done?”
Enrique spoke on the other side of the radio. *“You vandalized our HQ to steal a cashmere suit? You think you are above consequences?”*

“You should thank us for testing your defenses,” Vulcan replied with a grin.

“Dynamis won’t take this lying down,” Enrique replied, his tone laced with menace. *“This time, you’ve pissed into a volcano.”*

Vulcan responded by shutting off the channel. “So what next, chief?” Ryan asked. “I mean, you’re the designated driver there.”

“Jasmine. You can call me Jasmine when there’s no one around.” She looked through the screens, checking if anyone followed them so far, but her stealth device worked perfectly. “We’re going home.”

“Uh, Jamie’s house is the other way.”

Jasmine looked over her shoulder, looking at him as if he were the biggest idiot she had ever met. “We’re going to my home.”

Oh.

Ryan took in her proposal, and while he was *short* on words for a moment, something quickly came to mind.

“Is Wyvern the safe word?”

Vulcan’s hand lunged for Ryan’s hair, grabbed it, and forced his head to move within an inch of her own. “Yes it is, smartass,” the Genius said, showing the courier her bare teeth, “but spoiler warning.”

Vulcan whispered into his ear.

“I won’t be listening.”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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damien, Jeb, Jeb, Sebin Paul, Andrew Kahn, 白酒鬼,
Trevor Sales, Calvin Miner, Rory, PbookR, Glader, John
Carroll, Quentin, Andrew Parsadayan, Igor Mikulik,
RepossessedSoul, James Walsh, Athra, Chris M, Jim of
Trades, Koen Hertenberg, Enaz the Great, Alex Pruitt,
Saul Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc
Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.**

38: The Olympians

It ended as well as expected.

With Ryan naked and shackled to a bed, a maniacal Vulcan in a black nightgown on one side, and the plushie on another.

“It was all a trap,” the courier accused the mad Genius, straining against the shackles. “You only cared about the plushie!”

“Very good, Ryan,” Jasmine said, playing with her knife. The inactive plushie looked on while sitting on a chair. “Now, tell me everything you know about it.”

“I would, but I look down on short people.”

“If you won’t talk,” Jasmine put the knife against his chin, and her free hand on his chest, “I will make you *squeal*.”

“Don’t look,” Ryan told the inactive plushie, trying to avert its gaze. “Please don’t look!”

A phone called in the other room, interrupting the roleplay.

Jasmine let out a heavy sigh. “Gimme a sec,” she said, stepping over an empty condom box before searching for her cellphone among their clothes on the ground. Ryan whistled while she moved out of the bedroom to answer the call.

As it turned out, Vulcan didn't live in a luxurious villa, but inside her own foundry. She had repurposed the upper echelons of the area into a spacious, soundproof apartment in an elegant steampunk style. Brass pipes and tin gears formed the main decoration, although Vulcan had also embedded a plasma TV in the bedroom's wall facing the bed. It was rather cozy and she even included a litter for Eugène-Henry, although Vulcan clearly didn't clean up the place often.

Jasmine eventually returned, rolling her eyes. "Was it Mr. Monsanto again?" Ryan asked.

"Neptune. He's pissed about last night and wants to call a meeting because he's a pussy." She let her nightgown fall on the ground, raised the bedsheet, and slipped below. Her naked skin brushed against the courier's own, though she didn't undo his shackles. "Ryan."

"Yes?"

"Don't ever call me short again."

"Come on, Jasmine, be the bigger person."

Her knife hit the wall behind the bed, a few inches away from the courier's face. Ryan didn't even blink; by now, he had learned that her bark was worse than her bite. Though bite him she did...

"You're lucky to be good in the sack, so you get to live another day," Vulcan said, resting her head against his shoulder. "How many women have you had?"

"I lost count," he replied. Practice made perfect.

"I figured as much. I didn't know you could do *that* with a tongue." Jasmine glanced at the rabbit watching them.
"Actually, what is that plushie? Some pieces just don't make sense, and I don't know what to make of the energy readings."

"I tried to use it as a probe to explore a higher dimension," Ryan admitted.

"And?" Jasmine asked, not even questioning the sanity of it.
"It worked?"

"Not really. All it did was allow *something* from the other side to hitch a free ride to our dimension. Now it won't leave."

"Wait, you're saying that your rabbit is haunted?" Ryan nodded, and much to his horror, it made Jasmine even more curious. "That dimension, can you describe it?"

"It's an area beyond space and time, but I haven't been able to observe it much." He frowned. "Why?"

"You know that Red Genomes can manipulate energy? From lightning to wavelengths?" Ryan nodded. "Well, Red Genomes, real Red Genomes, actually emit an energy field around them. Like radiation. This ambient energy, this '*Red Flux*' can be captured, stockpiled, and then refined to make batteries. That's how Dynamis makes laser weapons."

"And you think this energy comes from another dimension?" Ryan asked, suddenly very curious.

"I think so, and Dynamis does too," she replied with a nod.
"The Firebrand knockoff Elixir alters genes so a Genome could perform pyrokinesis, but doesn't create a link to the

Red Dimension. So the body only uses the energy available, that of the human body.”

“That’s how your Fireman armor enhances their pyrokinesis,” Ryan guessed. “You take the batteries meant for laser weapons, and you transfer this Red Flux energy to the Genome’s body.”

“They become just as powerful as the original pyrokinetic Genome the knockoffs are based on, at least as long as the battery juice keeps flowing,” Jasmine said with pride.

“Dynamis has been wasting fortunes in an attempt to create a bridge towards that hypothetical Red Dimension, though they haven’t managed to do so yet.”

“That Flux, do you think Genomes with other colors produce variants?”

“I suppose, but I haven’t been able to observe them. Red is energy, so it’s easy to measure it, and since almost all Red Genomes have offensive applications, my power has an easy time with them. But how do you measure *life*, like with Green Genomes?” She gave him a knowing smile. “Though, if you told me the truth about your power, we could work on it together.”

Ryan let out a shocked gasp. “You know about my true, *true* power?”

“Look, that bullshit you told Pluto? About how your power really works?” She looked into his eyes. “You were just pulling our legs.”

“I thought we did that this morning.” She chuckled. “Why didn’t you call my bluff?”

“Because I’m curious,” Jasmine replied, stroking his cheek. “You’re smart, funny, and the perfect gentleman, yet I can tell you’ve got your own agenda.”

“I’m just trying to help a friend in need, and find happiness.”

“I don’t think that’s all there is,” Jasmine said. “You joined this organization as a stepping stone for something else. It’s fine, I’m not particularly loyal to Augustus either. But I’m pretty sure your power is something world-changing. I don’t see why you would be afraid to reveal its true extent to Pluto otherwise.”

Ryan shrugged it off. “I think it’s a bit too early to talk about that.”

Vulcan sat on his chest, one leg on each side. “Then what will we be, Ryan?”

“I dunno, a summer fling?” Ryan needed to blow off steam after his last encounters with Len and the Meta-Gang, in more ways than one. “I don’t want to get too attached, and you’re probably going to forget me soon anyway.”

“You aren’t going to forget me, Ryan. I can promise you that.” Vulcan stroked the courier’s cheek. If only she knew. “I’m fine with a summer fling, but as I told you before, it’s an exclusive contract. Cheat on me and I’ll fucking kill you.”

“If you can do the fucking before the kill, I would appreciate it.” She lightly slapped him in response. “Hey!”

“You’ve got an attitude problem, but I’ll tame you, Ryan. I’ll tame you straight.” She put both her hands on his ears and ferociously kissed him on the lips, like a lioness marking her territory. “You know how to cook?”

“Yep.”

“Good, because I don’t. We’ve got enough time for one more round and breakfast before the meeting.”

“It’s Jamie who’s going to be unhappy,” Ryan pointed out. “I was supposed to help them clean up the house in the morning.”

“Well, I’m higher in the hierarchy, so that’s an order. Entertain me, minion.”

Ryan stopped time in response.

When it resumed, Jasmine was the one shackled to the bed, the two having switched positions. “Fuck,” she said. “You can actually stop time.”

“You are going to tell me everything about Ischia Island, Miss Sharif,” Ryan said, his body towering above her. “We have ways of slipping past your defenses...”

“Narcinia is fourteen,” Jasmine smirked at him. “She’s too old for you.”

“In this case, I will have to pump you for information.”

Vulcan tried to keep a straight face, but ended up bursting out laughing.

She was kinda cute that way.

After dressing up and eating a delicious breakfast, Vulcan carried the duo all the way to Mount Augustus with her mech. Obviously, Ryan had put on the cashmere suit, delighting in its glamour and softness.

Augustus' estate had looked enormous from afar, but it was even more impressive from above; Ryan estimated it to be around fifty hectares. Located atop a heavily-defended hill, the complex included a vast amount of monuments, the most impressive being a copy of the Parthenon to the east. An enormous, multi-floor Roman-themed villa covered roughly a third of the area, a marble palace worthy of a Roman emperor.

Most of the land, however, had been repurposed into a vast park, including Roman-theme sculptures, flower gardens, Versailles-styled fountains, and even a freaking zoo. "They have *giraffes*," Ryan said in ecstasy.

The sheer luxury of the place awed even the jaded time-traveler.

Vulcan ended up landing near a swimming pool close to the villa, though a private sea might have been a better term. The enormous body of water was separated into smaller basins, some with fish, some without.

A group awaited them on a marble terrace, relaxing under the sun. Livia was among them, sunbathing in a one-piece swimsuit next to Narcinia. Augustus' daughter immediately raised her eyes at Ryan and Vulcan when they emerged from the mech, welcoming them with a warm smile.

Pluto was reading a novel on a folding beach chair near her niece, keeping a mummified head on a small table nearby. She looked oddly peaceful for a mass murderer, though the head's eyes moving on their own made the sight look quite macabre.

Finally, a group of older people discussed around a table near the villa, drinks in hands. One was a priest in his fifties, with a receding grey hairline and a gaunt face. He was so

Lanky Ryan could see the bones below the skin, but his black eyes oozed a frightening, almost maddened intensity. His every movement was carefully calculated, and he drank water rather than cocktails.

The priest, whom Ryan suspected to be Bacchus, was talking with a man entirely covered in thick armor. His equipment was heavily inspired by a Roman centurion's dress, though it covered every part of the body and included a crimson cloak. The helmet included a metal face mask, and the time-traveler couldn't see the eyes beneath.

The only woman of the group was a blonde woman in her forties, straight out of a playboy magazine; she kept her hair in a bun and wore an ancient Rome-styled dress adorned with gemstones. Though he could see only the lower part of her face and sapphire eyes due to a gold-plated masquerade mask, Ryan noted a family resemblance with Fortuna in that woman's jawline. She was probably the lucky girl's mother, keeping her arm around the red centurion's.

The last man around the table was clearly the oldest, somewhere in his sixties. He had dyed his hair and thick long beard blue, which complemented his eyes. He wore no mask except a golden diadem and dressed in an elegant navy blue business suit including seashells as part of the design.

The old man instantly glared at Ryan and Vulcan upon seeing them, leaving the table with a dark look on his face; much like Pluto and Minerva, the family resemblance was unmistakable.

"That's Neptune," Jasmine pointed out the obvious.

"I could tell," Ryan replied, waves starting to form out of nowhere in the swimming pool. Clearly, he was jealous of

the courier's better suit. "Can he drain the water within us with a thought?"

"Thankfully not." His girlfriend smirked. "He's an Orange, so organic matter interferes with his power. Besides, he is a *macro* hydrokinetic. The bigger the water volume, the greater his control. The priest is Bacchus, the couple is Mars and Venus, and the mummified head is Mercury."

"I imagined him taller."

"Mercury is a paranoid loon who doesn't leave his home," Vulcan snickered. "He can reanimate corpses and command them, so he sends them on missions."

"Ryan, Vulcan!" Narcinia waved a hand at the couple upon noticing them.

"Welcome to Mount Augustus," Livia said, though she didn't rise up from her longchair. A true queen. "We were just discussing yesterday's events. I admit you were right, I couldn't anticipate anything like it."

"Did we win a prize?" Ryan asked. "Personally, I would settle for a statue in my honor."

"Marble or gold?" Livia replied with a wink, examining his suit. "I love it. It's classy."

"Ooh, I could add a few flowers if you want!" Narcinia told Ryan.

"Nah, I used all my weed killer on Blackthorn," Ryan said, Jasmine smirking.

The banter was interrupted by a very furious Neptune. "You little, irresponsible brats!" he snarled, pointing a finger at

Jasmine and Ryan. "I should drown the both of you right now!"

"Can you do it in Coca-Cola?" Ryan asked innocently. Much to his surprise, Vulcan didn't smash his foot to silence him, and instead bantered back.

"It's like being drowned in acid," Jasmine told him.
"Diabetes acid."

"Yes, so my death will be quicker."

"Do you have any idea what you did?" Neptune thundered.
"Vulcan, you and your soldier could have sparked an all-out war!"

"Uncle, they did it on my orders," Livia spoke up calmly. "I will take full responsibility for this."

"It was still stupid," Neptune snarled. "Blackthorn labeled your prank as a terrorist attack, promising retaliation."

"Enrique must have suppressed the part where I undressed and put on the suit," Ryan said.

Pluto, who had listened to the conversation, clearly struggled to contain her laughter, much to Ryan's shock. Neptune glared at her. "Am I the only one here having a problem with this fiasco?"

"We were young too, Silvio," Pluto replied, more amused than anything. "What's wrong with letting them indulge a little?"

"I strongly suspect Hector Manada to have hired the Meta-Gang to harass us," Livia said, all business. "This was a calculated attempt to put them back in their place."

“By stealing a suit?” her uncle asked with heavy sarcasm, clearly not believing his niece.

“Did you summon us to bitch about it?” Jasmine asked with a shrug. “Cause we got important work to do.”

“There is also the matter of Mercury’s replacement,” Livia explained.

“As we discussed in our previous meeting, I stand by my decision to retire,” the mummified head spoke with an old, weary voice, startling Ryan. “I’ve grown too old for this.”

“Marco, last time I met you in the flesh you were lively for someone past pushing ninety.” Ryan turned towards the speaker, Mars. The Roman cosplayer had risen from his table to meet the group, his wife holding his arm. Bacchus followed his hands behind his back. “You’re still one of our best.”

“I personally know someone older than you with a youthful attitude,” Pluto said while giving Ryan a knowing smile.

“I’ve lived through three generations of the Camorra, children, yours included,” the talking head said. “I’m weary, I’ve earned more money than I could ever use, and I have no family left. I believe it’s time I buy a private island and spend the rest of my days drinking margaritas on the beach.”

“This will wait until after their punishment,” Neptune said, still glaring at Vulcan and Quicksave.

“For what, giving Dynamis their due?” Venus spoke up, greeting Ryan and Jasmine with a nod. “Did you see Felix during your attack, Vulcan?”

Vulcan shook her head. “No, only Blackthorn. They didn’t react fast enough to send heroes after us.”

“A shame,” the centurion greeted Ryan before shaking his hand. “Greetings, I’m Mars, though you can call me Luca. I appreciate you looking for my daughter at that party.”

“We had goat fights,” Narcinia said innocently.

“Oh by the way, what happened to Shub-Niggurath?” Ryan asked with concern. “Is she alright?”

“A guy and his girlfriend took her home,” Narcinia said. “They said they would put her to good use, but when I asked which one, they just put a hand on my head and smiled.”

Mars burst out laughing, while Venus glared at her husband. “I’ve got enough with a cat,” Jasmine whispered into Ryan’s ear. “I’m not taking a goat.”

“Well, I admit I’m torn,” Ryan whispered back, shuddering. “I don’t know where she has loitered...”

“Back to the important subject,” Neptune cut through the chit-chat. “Tensions with Dynamis are at an all-time high and they can’t tolerate a direct attack on their HQ. They will strike back, if only to keep face.”

“War now would be a tragedy,” Bacchus said, his voice soft and soothing like honey. He had remained silent for a while, listening to everyone. “Thanks to Ceres, we are on the verge of achieving Heaven. A conflict with Dynamis will interfere with that.”

“You and your ‘Heaven,’” Venus rolled her eyes.

“He is right though, war is bad for business,” Mercury said.

"It's not always about the money, old man," Pluto replied icily. "Sometimes, it's about *respect*."

"Do you want Alphonse Manada back in town?" Neptune sneered at his sister. "Because they will recall that madman if we push them too far, and then there will be blood in the streets."

Ryan didn't say anything while they argued, trying to assess how every member of the Augusti high command fit in. They were clearly divided into a moderate, business-minded faction and more brutal warmongers. Narcinia said nothing, too young to assert herself, but her presence at this gathering implied that she served a key role in the organization. And Livia oversaw the group discussion like a lioness observing her pack.

Though in the end, Ryan's main quest was to destroy the lab and settle his deal with Shroud. "So, how did a priest end up making drugs?" he asked Bacchus. "I don't think that's very Catholic."

"God works in mysterious ways," the priest replied calmly. "All sins are forgiven, if done to reach Heaven."

"I don't think that's how religion works, Father."

"Ryan!" Narcinia nagged him, before turning to the priest. "He doesn't know what he says, Father Torque!"

"It is fine," the priest replied, his eyes peering into Ryan's own with disturbing intensity. The courier suddenly realized this man hadn't blinked once in the entire conversation.

"You may not believe in God, but I assure you, It does exist. I've seen It with my own eyes, in all of Its divine glory."

"It?" Ryan asked with a frown, while Jasmine rolled her eyes.

"Don't get him started with this," Venus interrupted them. "As for the Manada, we should have wiped them out years ago. That clan has been nothing but a thorn in our collective foot."

"Honey..." Mars tried to calm his wife.

"They took our son!" she complained. "In the old days, we would have slaughtered them for less!"

"Felix is just having a rebellious phase." Ironically, for a god of war, Mars seemed rather laid-back. "He is a naive boy transitioning into a mature man. He will come back into the fold, eventually."

Livia's eyes turned to cold steel upon hearing this. She grabbed a towel to cover her shoulders and rose from her longchair. "He won't, and there will be no punishment for yesterday night."

"Livia—" Neptune began.

"That is for Father to decide," she interrupted her uncle, "and you know he will see things my way."

Neptune flinched. "You called him?"

Livia nodded slowly, while the air grew oppressive. An electrical tension spread through the atmosphere, like during a thunderstorm's approach. Everyone tensed up except for Livia herself.

The villa's doors slowly opened, everyone staring at them in utter silence. Even Ryan, who was usually unflappable, remained still.

A towering, shining figure stepped through the threshold. A faint halo of crimson electricity surrounded his body, making it difficult for people to look directly at him. When he focused though, Ryan began to distinguish the shape of an aging man wearing a toga beneath the electrical shroud.

But when the courier looked into this man's cold gaze, he realized that age hadn't dimmed his brutality one bit.

"My daughter," Augustus said, his voice echoing with the sound of booming thunder. "Why have you called me?"

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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Hertenberg, Enaz the Great, Alex Pruitt, Saul
Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc Claude
Louis Durand, Drekin.**

39: Court of the Lightning King

The entire Augusti high command had gathered around a table near the villa, and none of its members dared to speak.

Allowed to sit between Vulcan and Livia at the mafia princess' behest, Ryan kept his arms crossed as he observed the scene. The various 'Olympians' formed a circle, all of them eyeing their leader warily. Mercury's mummified head had been placed at the edge near Pluto, while Narcinia sat with her parents. Mars kept an arm behind his chair, clearly the most relaxed of all people present.

And Bacchus...

The man made Ryan curious. The priest never blinked or betrayed any facial micro-expression. And instead of looking at Augustus like the rest, his focus remained entirely on Livia.

Augustus listened to his brother Neptune retelling him the events of last night, his body shrouded in a halo of lightning. It made it impossible to clearly distinguish his face, and the man radiated power in more ways than one. Ryan couldn't shake the pervading aura of dread around the table, as if everyone worried they might get punished for a minor offense.

Even Ryan didn't crack a joke. He didn't know the limits of Augustus' invulnerability except that most powers failed to work on him. For all he knew, the lightning emperor might be a White interfering with other abilities the way Cancel did; and unlike Vulcan, Augustus struck the courier as someone who killed at the slightest provocation.

Mob Zeus joined his hands, once the tale finished. Obviously, Neptune had presented the attack as an irresponsible prank instead of a carefully prepared suit-rescue mission, but his brother didn't seem to care. "You summoned me for something this trivial?"

"Dynamis will retaliate," Neptune pointed out. "The incident was public."

"They dared to take our son," Venus spoke up, her wiser husband immediately putting a hand on her arm to dissuade her to speak; all in vain. "This is simply retaliati—"

"His parentage is the *only* reason Felix's head isn't in a bag right now." The cold certainty in Augustus' voice made Atom Cat's entire family flinch. Narcinia, in particular, looked at her feet to avoid facing Mob Zeus. "Abandoning his duties is one thing, but I cannot stand rats."

"He is your godson, Janus," Mars said with the familiarity of a trusted lieutenant. He alone didn't seem to fear Augustus, with the exception of the mob boss' close family members; enough to use the man's real name.

"He is a traitor who broke my daughter's heart," the lightning emperor of Italy replied, Livia's face a stone mask. "To think I once expected to call him my son-in-law one day..."

"Just give us time," Mars argued, unabated. "We will reason with him."

"I shall show mercy to Felix, due to the strong bond between our respective families," Augustus replied. "But I never want to see him again, and if he takes arms against us, there *will* be consequences."

A tense silence fell on the table, Mob Zeus turning his head towards Ryan and Vulcan. While she remained outwardly strong, the courier sensed the Genius clench her fists below the table. The courier took her hand with his own, helping her relax a little.

"You," Augustus told Ryan, suddenly noticing the Genome's existence. "Who are you?"

"Quicksave, sir," the courier said. "I'm immortal, but don't tell anyone."

"Gods and men are only equal in one thing, and that is death." Mob Zeus examined Ryan closely. "You do not fear me as much as you should."

Ryan waited briefly, in case it was rhetorical, before realizing that Lightning Butt wanted an answer. Augustus did sound a lot less threatening when the courier called him that in his head. "Well, sir, with all due respect," the Genome said, "I've seen far worse than you."

Augustus observed him without a word, and it started to hurt just looking at this thunder elemental. The silence grew more and more oppressive until Lightning Butt turned his deadly attention to Vulcan, as Ryan's superior. "What is his power?"

"Alternate reality jumping," Vulcan lied.

“Lies.”

Augustus said that without raising his tone, but the electrical tension in the air increased tenfold. All gazes turned at Vulcan, while Pluto eyed Ryan sharply.

“What is his power?” Augustus repeated, the crimson aura around him growing in intensity.

“I don’t know,” Vulcan admitted. “I don’t understand it yet.”

Augustus let the silence set in, until Jasmine had to look away to avoid eye damage from the light. The mere unspoken threat of violence cowed the proud Genius. “The wise woman admits her own ignorance, Vulcan,” Lightning Butt said while trying to sound profound, before asking the other Capos, “Who is he?”

“Ryan Romano, real name Cesare Sabino,” Mercury said through the mummified skull. “Son of Freddie Sabino, alias Bloodstream. A blood-controlling Psycho killed by the Carnival four years ago.”

It took everything for Ryan not to make a face of pure disgust, cursing all the times Bloodstream had introduced him to strangers using that name. He had believed in that delusion so much, that he convinced everyone else it was the truth.

Strangely though, he did notice Livia’s face softening when Mercury mentioned the Carnival. She glanced at Ryan with what the courier took for a look of sympathy. Augustus’ halo, meanwhile, flashed brighter for a second before returning to normal.

“Bloodstream...” Mars spoke up, remembering something. “Yeah, I remember him. That body-jacking maniac whacked

a few of our guys back in the day.”

Jasmine’s eyes widened as if she reached a eureka moment.
“Wait, she’s your *sister*?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Ryan replied dryly.

“And all that time I thought you wanted to...” Jasmine caught her breath. “Nevermind.”

Augustus kept his attention focused on Ryan. “What is your power?”

“I told you, sir,” the courier replied. “I’m immortal.”

“Quicksave is a Violet who can affect alternate universes, usually to avoid death,” Livia spoke up on Ryan’s behalf.
“His abilities will help me develop mine.”

The emperor joined his fingers together. “You will vouch for him, my daughter?”

“Yes.”

Lightning Butt nodded to himself, before turning to his sister. “I marked him,” Pluto said, smoking her cigarette.
“He provided valuable services so far, but if he steps out of line, I’ll whack him.”

After one last cursory glance at the courier, Augustus dropped the subject and turned to Livia next. “My daughter, you approved of this attack?”

“Yes, I did,” Livia replied calmly.

“Then why are we talking about it?”

“Janus,” Neptune cleared his throat. “This is serious.”

"Minerva is my heir and speaks with my voice," Lightning Butt replied with disdain. "Your role is to advise and mentor her, not to question her orders."

Neptune joined his hands, clearly unhappy with this turn of events. "Then what, we prepare for war? Even if we win, it won't be without heavy casualties."

"There will be no war," Livia said with absolute confidence. "The Manada will retaliate in a public manner, yes, but Hector will rein in his sons before things degenerate. He is just as afraid of a prolonged conflict as you are, Uncle. Which is why he hired Adam the Ogre to attack us while maintaining plausible deniability."

"Do you have any proof of that?" Mercury spoke up. "I could not find any evidence, and from what Vulcan told us, Dynamis tried to wipe out the Psycho trash after she drove them out of Rust Town."

"Yes, I am certain," Livia said. "I believe that either Adam double-crossed his corporate masters to pursue his own agenda, or Hector decided to erase the evidence."

"What do we do about the Meta-Gang, brother?" Pluto asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Wipe them out," Augustus declared. "I want them all dead, to the last man."

"Is it worth it?" Venus asked. "They ran away."

"You leave your enemies alive, and they will return to torment you," Augustus replied, his voice chilling. "I will not take the risk. No man, no problem. Don't care about the resources needed, don't care how long it takes, don't care if it is disproportionate. Kill them all."

And like that, Lightning Butt signed the entire Meta-Gang's death warrant. Pluto exchanged a glance with her niece and Vulcan, and Ryan could tell that they had already decided to cooperate to make that judgment a reality.

"What next?" Augustus asked abruptly.

"My retirement," Mercury spoke through the mummified head.

"That's a shame," the lightning elemental said, a hint of emotion breaking through his unflappable demeanor. "Your departure diminishes us all."

"Eh, it's about time I pass the torch too," Mercury replied. "I have the perfect candidate to take over my division."

"Jamie Cutter," Mars guessed, Ryan immediately glancing at him. "Zanbato. Good soldier."

"Jamie has been nothing but loyal and competent since we introduced him into our organization," Mercury said with pride. "Men respect him, he's trustworthy, and he gets results."

Most Capos around the table voiced their agreements, Vulcan included... though with one lone exception. "I am against his ascension." Bacchus opened his mouth for the first time, his soothing voice somehow cutting through the noisy discussion. "His opinions on *Bliss* worry me, and my division relies on supply runs from Mercury's."

"I was against selling narcotics too at first," Mercury said with what appeared to be a shrug. "But I knew my place, and so will the boy."

"Zanbato's loyalty to our organization will always trump his personal values," Livia voiced her opinion. "We made him who he is in more ways than one, and he will never forget that. I validate his candidacy."

Augustus listened without a word, before reaching a decision. "Very well, my old friend," he told the mummified head. "Zanbato shall take your place as the new Mercury, and you shall be released from service. My home will always remain open to you."

"Zanbato's power does not fit the theme though," Pluto mused out loud with an amused smile. "Perhaps he should take another name? Hercules maybe?"

"That will annoy Dynamis," Venus said with a smirk, both women exchanging a chuckle.

"No, the name stays," Augustus quickly decided. "But he will change his costume. Vulcan."

"Yes?" Jasmine quickly spoke up.

"You will build Zanbato equipment worthy of his new divine station," Lightning Butt ordered. "Costs are not an issue."

"I will." She nodded hurriedly, eager to make the invincible man forget the previous incident.

"What else?" Augustus asked, immediately moving on.

"We are close to a breakthrough with *Bliss*," Bacchus spoke up, Narcinia shifting on her seat. "I can feel it. A strain pure enough to speak with God."

"Your obsession with refining this product worries me," Venus said, glancing at Narcinia. "You overwork my

daughter for a pipe dream.”

“It’s fine, Mom,” Narcinia replied with a bright smile. “We are making something wonderful.”

“Indeed,” the priest said with a sharp nod. Ryan realized that he only participated when it impacted the matter of *Bliss*, and ignored everything else. “This tribulation will soon reach its end. However, I worry about theft. Geist sensed strangers testing our defenses lately.”

“Strangers?” Pluto asked with a frown. “The Meta? Dynamis?”

“He couldn’t tell.” Bacchus looked at Vulcan. “You would have my full gratitude if you could take time to improve our sanctuary’s defensive perimeter.”

Jasmine made a frustrated face. “The defenses I set are already perfect.”

“I am not so certain, unfortunately,” Livia said. “The odds of an attack on Ischia have been increasing lately.”

“Dynamis, the Meta, they can attack that island all they want,” Vulcan snickered. “They won’t get in.”

“I still wish that we review them together,” Livia said with a calm smile. The princess voiced it like a request, but Jasmine knew it was anything but. The Genius breathed inwardly and said nothing.

“Do you need our assistance, Minerva?” Mars spoke up, his wife stiffening at his side. “If anything endangers Narcinia...”

"I do not think your presence will be necessary, at least at this stage," the mafia princess said, a smile on her lips. "We can handle ourselves."

Augustus didn't seem interested in the subject, and the discussion moved on to a boring activity report.

As he listened, Ryan learned more about which Capo oversaw which part of the organization. Bacchus controlled the drug division, which involved Narcinia in its production; Vulcan managed the weapon trafficking, while Mercury handled gambling, casinos, and money laundering activities; Mars and Venus managed the prostitution and pornography wing of the organization; finally, Pluto, meanwhile, handled hits, assassinations, and 'alternative protection services,' while Neptune oversaw most of the organization's legitimate front businesses.

Augustus didn't say much during the entire conversation, letting his daughter speak in his place. Livia discussed the *Bliss* production, the organization's revenues, where to invest, and so on. All in all, Mob Zeus seemed completely uninterested in the logistics of his own empire. He only cared about his family's authority and those who dared challenge it.

He was a warlord, not a king.

"I think we are finished," Neptune said upon finishing his own report.

"We are." Augustus rose to his feet once he had heard enough. Clearly, he was not one to waste time with pleasantries. "Livia will take care of the rest. Do not bother me again."

The lightning emperor quickly vanished inside the villa without a sound, the crimson halo disappearing with the man himself. Pluto and Neptune exchanged silent glances with Livia as if exchanging a silent message.

Ryan couldn't explain why, but he had the intuition something was at work there.

"Narcinia, we're going home," Venus told her daughter, as she and her husband left the table. Mercury's mummified head had lost all semblance of life, the necromancer behind the line having ended the 'call.' "We'll pick up your sister on the way."

"I thought she was at Zanbato's house?" Mars asked, a little surprised.

"No, she stayed at her boyfriend's place, and wants to present him to us." Venus shook her head. "She is moving too fast if you ask me."

"I hope he has powers," Mars said, with the same tone of a racist father saying '*I hope he's white.*'

"See you soon!" Narcinia waved a hand at Ryan and Livia. The family politely saluted the other people present, before leaving through the park.

"I will take my leave too," Bacchus declared, turning to Livia. "Will you test the refined strain, Minerva?"

"I doubt so," the mafia princess replied with a distant gaze. "I cannot see what happens in alternate realities after I take your bliss strain. The risk is too great."

"Please give it thought," the priest argued. "A Blue of your power might be the key to a divine revelation."

Augustus' daughter dismissed him without an answer, and the priest responded with a formal bow. "Vulcan, Quicksave," he nodded at the two before leaving, "I will see you on Ischia island."

Neptune looked at Vulcan and Ryan with a frustrated gaze, before raising his hands in surrender and leaving for the villa. Pluto moved to her spot near the swimming pool and continued her book where she had left it. "Quicksave," she said while picking up her novel.

"Yes, Cruella?"

"My niece's mercy is the only reason you still draw breath," Pluto replied while flipping her book's pages. "Never forget that."

Such nice, friendly people.

"You look adorable together," Livia told Ryan and Jasmine with a warm smile, once everyone had left the gathering. "It's another surprise."

Once almost everyone had left the gathering, Jasmine realized she hadn't let Ryan's hand go, and quickly broke contact. "I don't need help," she told him, glancing away. "It was nice, but I don't need help."

"Sure, I will adopt a hands-off policy then."

The Genius chuckled. "Your jokes aren't good, Ryan... but you are, I will give you that."

"My, but thank you." The courier winked back, before turning to Livia. "Did you know how everything at this meeting would turn out?"

"Yes, with one exception," she said with apathy. "When my father turned to look at you. Everything afterward was completely unplanned."

So she couldn't read the time-traveler at all. Good. Ryan didn't know how he could handle someone capable of predicting his actions before he even thought of them.

Still, he felt some sympathy for that girl. Her situation was not so different from his own, living in a rehearsed reality while desperate for new stimuli. And she had probably talked her father out of murdering him on the spot.

"I would appreciate it if you announce to Zanbato the news of his promotion," Livia said with formal dignity. "I believe he will be less embarrassed if it comes from a friend rather than a direct superior."

"Sure, that will make more drinks for us when we celebrate," Ryan replied, though he couldn't suppress his curiosity. "What did you mean when you say that you made him?"

"We have a war chest of Elixirs," Livia explained. "Originals that we collected before they could be used, or knockoffs we 'requisitioned' from our corporate competition. When unpowered foot soldiers prove themselves worthy of ascension through merit and loyalty, they are granted a potion. Jamie was among them."

"And about your father? Can I call him Lightning Dad?"

"Not to his face," Livia chuckled, while Jasmine rolled her eyes. "Rome had co-emperors, one elder Augustus, and a junior Caesar groomed to take his place. He is giving me more leeway as time goes on. I apologize for... well, how he

treated the both of you. My father thrived in more violent times.”

“At least he gets shit done,” Vulcan replied, having recovered enough to snicker. “Unlike the suits on the other side of town.”

“I still don’t get why you spoke on my behalf though,” Ryan admitted.

“Call me a good judge of character, but I can tell you are a great friend if treated with respect,” Livia said, a hint of sadness breaking through her composure. “And I can tell you are in great pain, deep within.”

Ryan’s mood turned sour. “Do you want it?” he asked Livia, finding the current situation a little too familiar to his liking. “To follow in your father’s footsteps?”

The mafia princess had an excellent poker face, but the courier had mastered the art of reading micro-expressions over his endless wandering. She was good, but couldn’t quite hide the unease beneath.

“Careful, Ryan.” Livia gave him a strained smile. “Here be dragons.”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Next time, a *Mechron's Last Stand* two-parts interlude.

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40: Past Fragment: Mechron's Last Stand

- *Ruins of Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina; October 2014.*

Constructed inside a valley surrounded by five mountains, Sarajevo had once been a beautiful place. A perfect mix of small, pastoral houses and tall modern buildings, the city had housed events such as the 1984 Winter Olympic Games, survived the Yugoslavian wars, and thrived in the aftermath.

But that was long ago.

Today, Sarajevo was a vision of hell. A steel graveyard ruled by a madman, its skies dark even during the brightest days.

Only decaying ruins remained of the old city, consumed by a noxious purple cloud. The other buildings were factories, weapon-development facilities, turrets, and fearsome towers of black steel. The tallest structure was Mechron's fortress located in Sarajevo's center, an infinity symbol-shaped fusion between a military base and a particle accelerator. Finally, pylons on the valley's mountains projected a red forcefield around the city, one powerful enough to shrug off NATO's ICBMs.

This miasma covering the city was a bioplague created to kill humans, leaving only machines unharmed. Robots prowled the streets, from futuristic automated tanks to

humanoid, two-meters tall cyclops, while flying drones occupied the skies. Some of these machines were cyborgs, half-rotten corpses partly reanimated with tech when Mechron ran out of rare ore. The machine army stood there, organized into defensive formations, waiting for the battle to start without wasting any ounce of energy. Even the river Miljacka which once crossed the city had been dried up.

When he looked at this tragedy from the heavens above, Leonard Hargraves could only feel sadness. The Genome Wars had started here nine years ago; and one way or another, they would end today.

Even long after he caused the end of the world, Mechron remained a mystery. Pythia pieced together that he was a survivor of the Bosnian genocide and the Siege of Sarajevo in the mid-nineties, an electric engineer by trade. His first act upon gaining his Elixir had been a terrorist attack against the *International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia* for its perceived softness on war criminals, before escalating to waging war on Serbia. Things quickly erupted into a European conflict, and then finally a nuclear exchange.

Mechron had spent the entirety of the Genome Wars bunkering in Sarajevo, letting his machines and Genome allies fight for him. The Anti-Mechron Front had slowly destroyed his major bases and killed his lieutenants over the last six years, and today, they finally gathered enough heroes to end the conflict once and for all.

“We’re ready?” Leo spoke.

“Yes.” The voice of Alice Martel, alias Pythia, answered through telepathy. “*Shining Knight and Nidhogg’s groups are in position.*”

While he was proud to fight alongside the Shining Knight, Nidhogg's involvement left a sour taste in Leo's mouth. Though he kept to his territory and didn't cause troubles unless provoked, that man was a villain, plain and simple. His followers had taken over a large part of Denmark and allowed their Geniuses to run some *questionable* medical experiments there.

Unfortunately, the Anti-Mechron Front couldn't take Sarajevo without assistance, and the war had called for moral compromises. Nidhogg was willing to help when so many wouldn't, even crossing half a continent to offer support. While he acted out of self-preservation, this Green Genome understood Mechron was an existential threat to all of mankind, and that he had to be stopped at all costs.

So while they might end up enemies one day, Leo would cut him some slack and they would part ways amicably.

The living sun gave one last glance at the iron city from his current high altitude before flying back to base at the speed of a fighter-jet. Leonard's human body had been transmuted into a living star, a mass of solar plasma only held together by a heart core and his own gravitational forces. Though he didn't age in his sun form, the Genome usually returned to his human self while not on missions, as he felt less like himself the longer he stayed transformed. His thoughts changed from human to that of a star, wishing to burn bright and illuminate the cosmos. It was a constant mental effort for Leo to contain his radiance and avoid burning everything around him. Sometimes, he felt like he lived in a world of matchboxes.

Today would be a rare opportunity to go all-out. Maybe his last one.

In total, more than five hundred Genomes had gathered in three camps around Sarajevo. Normal humans couldn't survive Mechron's bio-plague, nor stand against his machines, and so did not apply.

Leonard flew over the camp, where everyone was gearing up for war. The plague doctor Stitch finished inoculating the soldiers with additional protections against bio-plagues; the Cossack had put on his white, knight-themed power armor, a cannon mounted on his right shoulder and a forcefield shield on the other; Kresnik and Kudlak, the werewolf siblings, had transformed into giant humanoid wolves the size of polar bears, one white, the other black. A Violet summoned warbeasts from alien planets to serve as shock troops, while Orange Genomes transformed into beings of metal and stone.

Alice was networking people near the camp's center, with Sidekick standing nearby to boost her power. A beautiful blonde woman with blue eyes, Alice was a powerful seer with the ability to create telepathic links between people upon touching them; those she 'networked' worked intuitively together like a hive mind, much like Mechron's robot army formed a superorganism spread through countless bodies.

Besides increasing teamwork, Pythia's power could also be used for precognitive purposes; the more people she networked with, the more she could anticipate the future. In many ways, she had been the driving force behind this alliance. Today's battle would be the culmination of her chess match with Mechron, and the heroes would be her pieces.

Sidekick, meanwhile, was an average-looking youth with brown hair and amber eyes. He belonged to Shining Knight's

group, being a White enhancing the power of other Genomes so long as they remained within ten meters of his person. The trio would soon be rejoined by Calculator, a Genius with the ability to calculate probabilities to the point of precognition.

Pythia, Calculator, and many other Blue Genomes had debated the plan of attack; from nuking Sarajevo to a guerilla battle, everything had been considered. Leo didn't know what made them decide on a conventional invasion, besides mentions of a 'dead hand system,' but he trusted their judgment.

Some, like Pythia, were members of Leo's Carnival. Others were hero warbands or vigilantes like the Cossack, who answered the call to war. Dynamis hadn't sent anyone, though they did provide equipment.

They were too busy dealing with Augustus in Italy.

The mere thought of his nemesis infuriated Leonard, reminding him of that dreadful day he returned to the Costa farm, only to find all its inhabitants murdered. He had sworn to bring their killer to justice, and once Mechron was dealt with, he would do exactly that.

The living sun—though he disliked that nickname—landed near Alice, toning down his body heat to prevent her from catching fire. "Leonard," she said with a warm smile. Unlike the Genomes making up the army, she dressed casually. "Ready?"

"Like the day I was born." Even before the apocalypse, Leonard had been a full-time firefighter in the London Fire Brigade; quite ironic considering his main power. He liked to think he still put out fires threatening the innocents, even if

some could shoot lightning from their eyes. “How much time do we have?”

“Enough for one last speech, if you’re up for it.”

She tried humor, but Leonard didn’t hide his concern for his old ally. “You’re sure you want to do this?” he asked her. “You have never networked so many people at once, even with help from Sidekick.”

“We can’t out-think a combat AI without the use of powers,” Pythia replied. “Mechron’s armies are so effective because they fight as one. They have us outnumbered more than one thousand to one; even if we have superpowers on our side, we need all advantages possible.”

“I’m just saying the risks are great.” She often suffered from dangerous headaches when she directed a large group, and never one this big. “Unlike me, you still have a husband and son at home.”

“It’s precisely for them that I’m willing to risk everything.”

Leonard couldn’t argue with that.

As if on cue, the various fighters gathered around them. Most were veterans of a dozen battles, others were new recruits. Leonard noticed a few of his other teammates among them. The teleporter Ace, a freckled young woman with long auburn hair, dressed like a rogue with high boots, a red coat, and feathered hat; and Mr. Wave, a creature of pure energy wavelengths held together in a fancy purple suit.

Every set of eyes was on Leo.

"I'm not one for speeches," the Red Genome declared. Shining Knight and Nidhogg were probably speaking with their troops, miles away. "So I will be short and to the point. This is it. This is the final battle. Mechron is exhausted. His facilities, those which we could locate, have been destroyed. His last Genome lieutenant, Asmodeus, has been slain. He's low on troops, low on weapons, low on options. This is his last stand, and he knows it. The news should be a relief, for all of us have lost something to this madman. Family. Friends. Home. But as they say, a cornered rat—"

"Will bite a cat," Ace mused, a few people chuckling among the audience. "We know, you say that all the time."

"But this time, the rat may very well kill the cat," Leo rolled with the metaphor.

At Pythia's behest, a light-manipulating Genome projected the image of two massive war machines behind Leonard. Enormous satellites equipped with solar sails and enormous laser cannons.

"These are the *Kujata* and the *Bahamut*, orbital satellites with the power to devastate entire countries," Leonard explained. "Mechron's previous orbital weapons remained in low Earth orbit, where they could be destroyed. The new ones, though, will fly deep into space, and even I won't be able to reach them. In a few hours, maybe minutes, Mechron will attempt to launch them and wipe us all out."

Whispers spread through the crowd, as the grim reality of the situation settled among them.

"I know some of you, myself included, were a bit apprehensive with the help we enlisted to wage this war. But this is not a battle between nations, or between heroes and villains. This is a battle between *life* and *death*. And

more than ever, this is a battle against time. Our goals are twofold: to destroy these satellites before they can be activated, and to defeat Mechron once and for all. Over the past few months, we have methodically cut off his escape routes. Today, we fight to the death."

"Good," Cossack said, his tone dangerous. "Mechron's death."

"Yes," Leonard agreed. "Mechron surrendered his humanity long ago. He desires to destroy all that makes us human; to replace our hearts with metal, and our souls with technology. He is a despot who believes men should be his slaves because he only sees the worst in us. But he is wrong."

The living sun raised his hand, the satellites beyond him collapsing in a flash of bright light.

"Humans are not slaves!" he shouted. "Mechron chose to see the worst, but we chose to see the best! That humans are capable of compassion! Of art and kindness! Of greatness! And together, we shall end this decade-long nightmare once and for all! Today, we take back our planet!"

His declaration was met with a cacophony of shouts and war cries.

Immediately afterward, Leonard flew across the skies, followed by dozens of flyers. The Cossack's armor activated the powerful propellers in its back; a chrome humanoid flew by his will alone. The ground forces moved towards the shield aboard assault vehicles or carried by teleporters.

"Now, the moment of truth." Leonard flew above the clouds, facing the shield. He built up the energy inside his core, preparing to go supernova.

And then, he set the world ablaze.

His heart core unleashed a focused ray of light that burnt the skies. The ionized laser hit the crimson forcefield and the mountain supporting one of the pylons, melting the stone. The forcefield undulated like water as it took the blast, an unstoppable force facing an immovable object.

And then... one of them gave up.

The forcefield around Sarajevo shorted out, and Leo's beam vaporized the pylon supporting it. The blast continued its course towards the city, setting an entire street ablaze in a cataclysmic detonation.

The shield collapsed all around the city, and Mechron's army woke up.

Spherical drones instantly spread across the skies like a bug swarm, opening fire on the heroes with lasers. Holes opened all over the metal towers, revealing hundreds of beam turrets, while the robots and vehicles on the ground opened with an artillery bombardment.

Leo's flying allies moved to intercept the drone swarm, while the fire Genome recovered from his effort. While he could draw on an enormous power reserve, it needed time to replenish itself.

With the shield down, the other groups moved to action. A flash of green light illuminated the darkness to the east, Nidhogg undergoing his transformation. The Green Genome metamorphosed into a colossal, kilometers long serpent with human skulls for scales; the monster slithered towards the city, his venom melting stone while his own forces followed. Purple blinking lights popped up all over Sarajevo, as Ace teleported small groups across the city.

Explosions shook Sarajevo to the west, the Shining Knight having entered the city. While no heavy hitter, the charismatic leader of men led her troops personally in battle, her heavy green armor shrugging lasers while she cut robots with her bright energy sword. Her contingent was by far the largest, providing almost half of the Genomes participating; most were the defenders of a democratic state rising from Germany's ashes, the New Republic of Bavaria.

Mechron had destroyed their home once, and now they would see justice done.

Having recovered, Leo flew into the city, followed by the Cossack and some caped fellow. Their allies had cleared a path ahead, engaging the drone swarms, but faced heavy resistance. The towers unleashed hundreds of lasers in all directions, cutting Genomes and buildings alike, while artillery bombardments from the defensive turrets destroyed almost every ruined building still standing.

And of course, Mr. Wave couldn't help but brag. The show-off had moved in the middle of a robot-crowded street, hands raised. "Can you feel fear, robots?" The robots had opened fire midspeech, but lasers and bullets harmlessly phased through the Red Genome. "Because Mr. Wave feeds on tears!"

Mr. Wave vanished, his wavelength body turning into a deadly laser moving at lightspeed. Before Leo knew it, his teammate had carved a path through the robots, cutting the machines in half merely by moving through them. Meanwhile, the werewolf siblings were busy tearing apart a tank with their bare claws, leading a pack of monsters.

The caped fellow charged at one of the metal towers and brought it down by going through it. The other flyers spread to support the ground forces, while Leonard and Cossack moved towards Mechron's fortress.

The enormous base's walls opened, waves of jetpack-powered robots flying towards them armed with heavy rifles. They immediately fired a volley of black projectiles at the duo, forcing them to spread out. Though they moved slowly, the robots' bullets powered through any matter, absorbing anything close to them.

Gravity rifles. Leonard had faced a few in previous engagements, and one had almost torn his core apart. He suspected Mechron had specifically designed the weapon to kill energy-based Genomes like him.

Leonard retaliated with plasma beams, while the Cossack hit the machines with his shoulder-cannon. Both sides aimed with deadly accuracy and moved around with grace; the machines dodged with inhuman dexterity and reflexes, while the Genomes had speed on their side.

Guided by Pythia's network, Leonard entered some kind of trance, his body moving on its own. It was as if a primal instinct had taken over, shutting down his conscious mind and leaving only a battle program. He became no different than the machines he fought.

No, Leo realized. He *was* different from these machines. Pythia's network let each individual keep their free-will, yet allowed people from different backgrounds and who had nothing in common, to cooperate for a common cause. Their army was united in its diversity, while Mechron's machines were mindless copies; soulless slaves to a despot who

considered free will as a disease, rather than something to be cherished.

And at some point, Pythia's network began to outperform Mechron's robotic hive mind. Leonard hit one robot, then two, then three. The numbers kept climbing, but the Genome's view had been reduced to blasts, black bullets, and burning metal.

Fifty, seventy...

"When will they learn?" the Cossack asked, bombarding drones with his shoulder-cannon. Leo assisted him with plasma blasts, the two wingmates coordinating their assault with perfect synchronization; Pythia's network even allowed them to hear each other over the explosions, as astonishing as it sounded.

And yet, in spite of their impressive resistance, more robots kept coming.

There was something terrifying in fighting these machines. Humans and animals could feel fear, fleeing lost battles, often hesitating before attacking, or attempted to communicate. But not Mechron's robots. They felt no remorse, didn't make a sound and never retreated.

Leo fought an unrelenting tide of steel that just wanted him *dead*.

Still, the battle seemed to be going well for them. The Shining Knight's troops held the line on the western side, while Nidhogg had reached the city, toppling buildings and crushing a laser tower under his sheer weight. The corpses of Mechron's undead cyborgs were absorbed by the giant reptile on contact, regenerating his biomass lost to the enemies' energy weaponry.

Once transformed, Nidhogg was almost unstoppable. A juggernaut fueled by death. His troops followed in his wake, Genomes modified with cybernetic or biological implants; like remoras supporting a larger shark, they mostly stuck to defending their leader from smaller drones threatening to swarm him.

The plan was to have the reptilian titan destroy the defensive towers and then breach Mechron's fortress with his acid spit, though the rogue Genius might have a trick up his sleeve.

As it turned out, he had two.

The Red Genome noticed movement near Mechron's fortress, holes opening inside the two circles making up the base's infinity shape. Two enormous rockets the size of skyscrapers emerged from the ground, flying towards the heavens at incredible speed.

The *Kujata* and the *Bahamut* had been launched.

Leo immediately raced after them, unleashing a plasma beam at the *Kujata*. A force-field around the rocket negated his attack, and though it briefly shorted out, the two orbital weapons continued their ascent.

“If they get too far...” Leonard couldn't finish his sentence, blasting a path through the flying robots. They weren't even fighting to win, but to delay.

“If,” the Cossack replied with laconic wit, flying after the *Kujata* at full speed. The g-force involved would have crushed any normal pilot, but the vigilante powered through, catching up to the satellite. He was a man who believed in actions over words.

Leonard pursued the *Bahamut*, intending to crash into it and bypass its force-field, when a roar echoed from behind him.

The Red Genome turned around, as a monster emerged from the fortress.

The creature looked like some kind of biomechanical European dragon. The ten meters tall reptile had wings similar to solar sails, its red scales mixed with black machinery covering the chest, the head, and the claws. Its yellow, reptilian eyes glared at the Red Genome, betraying a hint of intellect.

What the hell was that, a biomechanical war machine? Leonard didn't have time to fight it, or the *Bahamut* may escape Earth's orbit.

As if to answer his thoughts, the dragon pointed at Leonard with both its hands, the claws shining with crimson energy.

A crushing force took over the living sun and forced him down. Much to his surprise, Leonard ended up crashing towards the ground, an invisible hand dragging him away from the *Bahamut*.

Though he was more skilled with plasma and fire, Leonard could manipulate his own gravity. While he mostly used it to fly, he had learned a few other tricks. Manipulating his gravity-field, he managed to collapse the effect bringing him down, returning to the fight.

"What was that?" Leonard asked out loud, pursuing the dragon. "A gravity well?"

"*Gravity-control*," Pythia said as the dragon roared back.
"It's a Red."

Leonard thought he had misheard for a moment. “What? But only humans—”

“Until now.”

Mechron’s power covered multi-agent systems, from artificial intelligences to nanotech constructs. His MO was to create AI dedicated to the creation of new technologies, allowing him to make breakthroughs in specialties outside his own. Mechron was the most dangerous kind of Genius; the one who could make *more*.

But to think he had uncovered the secret of Elixirs...

The rogue Genius couldn’t be allowed to escape. No matter what.

Gathering up plasma in his core, Leonard fired a deadly beam at the creature. Though it moved at supersonic speed, the monster couldn’t outspeed light.

But as it turned out, it didn’t need to. Instead, it turned its own gravity crush ability on empty air, creating a miniature black hole the size of a fist. The phenomenon absorbed the dragon into itself before disappearing, the ion beam hitting nothing but air.

Damn, did it use gravity to create a wormhole or something?

Whatever the case, it had fulfilled its mission in delaying Leonard. The Cossack had somehow managed to bring down the *Kujata*, the satellite’s wreckage crashing on Sarajevo’s streets, but the *Bahamut* had become a faint light point in the skies.

“Shit!”

"Seventy-three percent chance that the Bahamut opens fire on Sarajevo once online, according to Calculator," Pythia warned. *"Increasing by one point every ten minutes."*

Had Mechron grown desperate enough to fire at his own base?

It wasn't about winning anymore.

Leonard turned towards the heavens, ready to pursue the satellite even into the dark reaches of space if needed when Pythia's voice interrupted him. *"No, don't. Hit the fortress and reach Mechron. Kill him before he pulls the switch. The odds are better."*

"But the satellite will—"

"Something worse is coming."

Leonard froze. "What do you mean?"

"If his fortress isn't annihilated soon, Mechron will somehow kill everyone in Sarajevo," Pythia said, her composure breaking into genuine fear. *"Destroy the bunker at all costs."*

"What's waiting for me inside?"

"I don't know." Her words turned haunting. *"I only see black. It's all black."*

Leo braced himself for battle and flew at mach-speed through the fortress' metal walls.

Mechron was waiting, deep down.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

This interlude was chosen by my patrons on Patreon. There may be a few alternate versions of my other works' characters in there ;) The second half will be published on Saturday.

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41: Past Fragment: The Darkness Beyond

Where could Mechron be hiding?

Smashing through blast doors and steel walls, Leonard Hargraves felt something wrong in the atmosphere. Space itself bending and twisting. Something created powerful magnetic fields inside the base, tearing apart the very fabric of reality.

As he had thought, Mechron's fortress also counted as a particle accelerator. Did the Genius activate it? For what purpose? How could it help repel the army at his door?

"Pythia, where do I go?" Leonard asked, but he only 'heard' psychic static. Whatever happened inside the fortress interfered with the telepathic contact.

He was on his own.

Leonard eventually made his way into the fortress' collider, a closed circuit of steel inside which particles moved at an astonishing speed. A stream of unknown, blue energy raced through the superstructure, the Red Genome entering it like a fish swimming inside a river. He didn't identify the particles inside the collider; perhaps they were undiscovered by modern science, or not native to Earth's reality.

Much to his surprise, Leo started to see things inside the stream. Bluish phantoms of strange, inhuman figures composed of raw data, blinking in and out of existence. These mirages never settled in one shape, constantly changing.

What was going on?

The living sun could tell the ambient energy focused in one place at the facility's center; the point where the two loops making up the infinity symbol joined. He followed the blue stream towards its endpoint, eventually crashing through more steel walls. The blue stream leaked out behind him, dispersing into fine particles.

Leo's crash course ended at the very core of the fortress, a command center straight out of H. R. Giger's nightmares. The entire room looked like a gothic cathedral of steel, whose walls were alive; veins of metal coursed through them, pumping the building with thick black oil. The structure seemed capable of breathing, while coiled tin spines formed the pillars keeping the roof. Eye-like screens projected images of the battle outside, while loudspeakers screamed warnings.

Six giant, biomechanical brains the size of elephants formed a circle around a tiny blue spot floating in the midst of an energy pillar; the focal point of the entire superstructure. Each of the brains were protected from the outside world by reinforced glass tanks, and connected by thick wires. Leo guessed they were biomechanical supercomputers, housing the AIs piloting their master's entire war effort.

Mechron was there, standing on a platform below the blue spot. The wizened old man wore nothing but simple white clothes and needed a black cane to walk. He was the only

creature of flesh in this ghastly iron heart, giving orders to his AI servants in Bosnian.

"Transfer all data to the back-up base." Mechron's voice sounded so calm, so small. So *human*. "Activate all remaining units outside, and open the gate."

"Data transfer initiated." A robotic voice answered through loudspeakers. *"Warning: dimensional coordinates incomplete. High-degree of instability expec—"*

"Don't care if we destroy Sarajevo! Open the gate!"

Mechron suddenly noticed Leonard, who had his palm raised at the man.

Now that he could take a good look at the Genius' face, the living sun realized that the battle had taken its toll on him too. Already past his seventies, Mechron seemed like he hadn't slept in days. His eyes were blackened by fatigue, his hands shaking with stress.

He looked so... so normal. He didn't wear a costume, nor was he a larger-than-life, charismatic dark lord. Mechron was a mere man, straight out of a retirement home; one who had killed millions, perhaps billions.

And yet... he looked so very tired of it all. Broken by a decade of endless warfare.

The living sun's hand wavered.

"Make your shot count," Mechron said, glaring bitterly at Leonard. "You won't get another."

Instead of blasting him, Leonard Hargraves stared at the hateful dictator straight in the eyes. "Are you happy,

Mechron?" he asked in Bosnian.

The question took the Genius aback.

"Are you happy living like this?" Leonard asked. While he didn't unleash any plasma blast, he kept his hand raised. Pythia would flay him alive if she knew. "Alone in a bunker, surrounded by machines, killing people left and right? Was that your wish? Are you happy living like this?"

The fortress shook, while the Genius mulled the question over. He looked away, before focusing back on Leonard.

"No," Mechron admitted, sounding exhausted. "No, I'm not."

"Then why won't you stop?"

"Why do you care?" the Genius snapped back.

"Because... because I want to believe human life should be cherished. Even yours. I will kill you if I must, but call me naive... if there is the slightest chance of ending this by the book, I want to try it." Leonard paused, trying to find his words. "I don't know what made you what you are, but you must realize deep down that hurting other people won't help."

He did. Leonard could see it painted all over his face.

"Please surrender peacefully," the living sun asked. "Tell your machines to stand down, and we will give you a fair hearing. Nobody else has to die; not even you. You started this, and you can end it."

Mechron's expression suddenly morphed from sadness to wrath.

"I didn't start anything," the man snarled, his voice dripping with venom. Anger bottled up for years roared to the surface. "You did. The Serbians murdered my sons at Srebrenica and you people... you people just *watched!* If you want this war to end, then stop getting in my way!"

Leonard got his answer in the man's intense, hateful gaze.

He would never stop. It didn't matter how many had to die to fuel the fire burning within him; it was an inferno that could never be extinguished. This bitter, hateful man would never stop until he had brought the whole world to its knees.

A demon born of war.

Leonard regretfully opened fire.

A crimson force field activated around the rogue Genius, deflecting a stream of plasma. Metal and electrical devices around Mechron melted, but the warlord remained completely unharmed. Similar fields protected the giant brains, protecting them from danger. Leonard flew towards the Genius, intending to smash through the forcefield and end Mechron's life.

A roar echoed at his left, a wormhole opening. The biomechanical dragon from last time emerged from it, claws raised at the living sun.

A powerful gravitational force pushed Leonard against a steel wall, sending him crashing against mechanical panels. The dragon kept the gravitational force active, attempting to break the Red Genome's heart-core apart.

"It could have been beautiful! A new Eden!" Mechron's face twitched in anger. "I could have eradicated diseases, solved

world hunger, brought peace! Increased life expectancy, everything automated! Everything would have been perfect!"

The rogue Genius raised his cane at Leonard, gritting his teeth in impotent rage.

"If it hadn't been for you..." He hit the ground with his cane, his hands shaking. "If it hadn't been for people like you, I could have saved the world!"

"Look through your window, Mechron!" Leo replied angrily, trying to break free of the battle-beast's gravitational field. "You didn't save the world, you killed it! You're living among the dead!"

The Genius visibly flinched, his fingers clenching around his cane. By now, he was so furious he couldn't make coherent sentences. "If politicians had any imagination, I wouldn't have... I wouldn't have fed all the killing data! Had to make them stop! They never listened! Couldn't *understand!*"

Leonard ignored that maniac and blasted the biomechanical dragon with plasma. The creature's scales and flesh melted away, leaving only mechanical implants and seared bones. Yet astonishingly, it kept moving and didn't release the pressure.

Meanwhile, the blue sphere started expanding inside the energy pillar, turning into some kind of energy lens. A spatial anomaly leading into a place of bright blue light. When Leonard looked at this reality tear, he felt something brush against his mind. He thought it was Pythia for a second, before realizing the telepathic signal came from the spatial anomaly.

Images formed inside the living sun's mind, like in the blue stream. Vivid pictures of his childhood in Hackney, surrounded by criminality; of his first day in the London Fire Department, helping a family evacuate from a burning building; of finding the strange box in the mail, and the crimson potion within; of the day he and Alice founded the Carnival...

"What is this?" Leonard asked, mesmerized by the portal and the images it sent him. Even the burned dragon stopped attacking, entranced by whatever power came from beyond this blue wormhole.

"The Akashic Records..." Mechron muttered, his eyes widening in triumph. "The universal compendium. All data, all information, all knowledge, all intent, and emotions, it all comes from this place. The source of Blue powers, of all Geniuses' knowledge... a Blue World of pure intellect."

Mechron raised his cane at the portal, his fury replaced with excitement.

"It's all here! All the world's secrets, everything that can fix it! It's all here!" He turned his back on the Red Genome, chuckling to himself. "Even you must see its beauty!"

The mental stream of image continued, but instead of showing pictures of Leo's own life, they shifted to stranger sights. Of alien worlds covered in massive oceans, ruled by fishlike creatures; of supernovas illuminating the darkness of space.

"With it, I can begin again!" Mechron boasted. "Fix everything! Once I get there, I will know everything!"

Leonard looked at the blue with divine fascination, until he spotted a tiny taint of blackness.

The telepathic signal instantly ended, the pictures turning black. The screens in the facility turned red, and the loudspeakers changed their tune. *“Warning: anomaly detected. Warning: anomaly detected. Warning: unknown dimension converging.”*

The blue hole seemed consumed from within by darkness. Black spots slowly grew from within the blue portal, tainting it entirely. The room seemed to freeze over, the temperature dropping at an alarming rate.

Even Mechron had no idea what was happening. “It’s... it’s not the blue world... it’s somewhere else... it’s...”

Within seconds, the blue star had turned into a black hole, a sphere of darkness from which no light could escape. It wasn’t a door to a dimension of pure information, but one of void and nothingness.

“It’s all black,” Mechron muttered, gazing into the abyss.

And then...

The abyss gazed back.

A pulse of darkness erupted from the portal, vaporizing the dragon, the artificial brains, and most of the room. Mechron barely had the time to scream as his forcefield vanished, and the void devoured him.

Leonard felt the dragon’s gravitational field disappear, only to have his own overwhelmed by darkness too. An alien force threatened to consume him, the way a black hole ate a star.

Something was looking at them from the other side.

The dark gaze was peeling Mechron layer by layer, like an onion. Skin, flesh, bones, and then working its ways down. Within the seconds, the Genius had been erased from existence, his atoms torn asunder and annihilated.

Without his heart-core keeping his body whole through a powerful gravitational field, Leonard would have suffered the same fate. Even now he felt the outer layers of his solar body disintegrating, its molecules annihilated into nothingness. The sustained gaze of this thing would tear him apart in minutes, destroying his heart-core as it did with Mechron.

His human mind simply couldn't comprehend what he was looking at. A shape vaguely reminding Leo of an eye, surrounded by a cloud of dark, empty space; a sentient hole in reality, a living darkness that devoured light instead of being banished by it. A colossal entity, so powerful, so almighty, that it destroyed their reality simply by looking at it.

And it was trying to get in.

The black portal slowly widened, the radius of the baleful gaze increasing. The entity behind the gate kept looking, unaware, or perhaps uncaring, of the damage it caused. If the particle accelerator continued expanding the portal...

"Mechron will somehow kill everyone in Sarajevo."

As Pythia's words came to mind, Leonard immediately unleashed a stream of plasma at the portal. Flames as searing as a nuclear detonation.

They quickly stopped to exist.

They weren't absorbed by the hole or extinguished. They disappeared, leaving neither heat nor smoke behind. The dark force on the other side of the portal hadn't even noticed Leonard's counterattack; its mere presence erased his flames.

Compared to this entity, the living sun looked like an ant trying to attack an elephant.

If he couldn't destroy the portal directly, what could Leonard do? If he did nothing, this thing would erase him from existing within minutes, and then do the same with the fortress. The particle accelerator's destruction would probably cause the portal to implode, but Sarajevo would be wiped out.

The particle accelerator's destruction...

If Leonard could sufficiently damage the fortress, he could collapse the portal before it could grow larger. But the explosion needed... it might cost him his life.

Leonard thought about the hundreds of people outside. Heroes fighting to make a difference in this bleak, devastated world. Friends like Pythia, with families at home; soldiers trying to rebuild a kind, democratic civilization. Good people.

Leonard didn't hesitate.

He gathered all his remaining energy, calling upon whatever power fueled his heart-core, and caused his heart-core to implode on itself. His body turned white, his radiance incinerating the room. The black hole absorbed most of the heat, but not all of it.

"As they say..." he muttered, staring defiantly at the darkness beyond. "Better to go out with a bang, rather than a whimper!"

His last thought towards his comrades outside, the Living Sun went supernova.

Leonard's light consumed the world in a cataclysmic explosion, and the darkness returned from whence it came.

Darkness.

It was all darkness. A pitch-black nothingness. He couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't smell, couldn't taste. He could barely think.

He felt cold.

He felt numb.

And more than anything, he felt alone.

Was this... was this death? Had the darkness beyond that portal been the afterlife? Or maybe it was all a hallucination, his brain's last hurrah before the final end?

He had never truly believed in any god or afterlife. He thought he would just vanish, cease to exist. Compared to an eternity in the dark, it would have been a mercy.

He had always lived through others, as far as he could remember. He might have looked like the sun, but he never felt warm when alone. So he had filled the void with his fellow human beings, their happiness becoming his own. Loneliness had always scared him more than death.

Now, he was alone with his thoughts. Alone with his regrets.

He would never have a wife, never have children. He hadn't written that urban fantasy book he always said he would. He would never return to London and see the people he left behind. He would never get to make up with certain friends, whom he had parted with on bad terms; he would never avenge the Costas or bring Augustus to justice. He would never know if his sacrifice had made a difference.

So many things left unfinished.

But...

He was okay with it.

He had tried.

He had done his best.

He saw light in the darkness. He felt like driving a car to the end of a long tunnel, though he couldn't see what was beyond the exit. Was it Heaven? Was it the last door? Were the Christians right, or the Muslims? The Hindus or the Buddhists? All of them, or none at all?

He didn't know, but whatever awaited him beyond... he could live with it.

He entered the light.

Leonard opened his eyes.

Instead of facing angels, he could only see a white ceiling.

He had returned to his frail human form, though with some changes. His black skin was somehow hairless now, and all

his muscles felt sore. His dark eyes struggled to adapt to the light, though he noticed two people looking over him.

"Easy, Leo." The roguish teleporter Ace smiled down on her friend. "You come back from Hell itself."

"Good to see you awake, sir," Stitch said. This strange Genome always wore a plague doctor outfit, to the point Leonard had never seen how he looked underneath. "You had us worried."

"Where..." The living sun's eyes acclimated enough to allow him to see. He seemed to be in some kind of hospital, laying on a bed and hooked to machinery.

Clearly, death hadn't claimed him yet.

"Visoko," Stitch answered. "A few dozen kilometers from Sarajevo. We evacuated here after the battle."

"We won!" Ace beamed with happiness. "We won, Leo! We fucking won!"

"How long was I..." Leonard struggled to form words. His throat felt dry and sore. "How long was I out?"

"Three days," Stitch answered.

"And Mechron's fortress..."

"It's all gone, a crater of molten steel and glass." Ace smiled at him, happy to see her friend alive. "You blew up that place good."

"Truth be told, we believed that you had perished in the explosion," Stitch said dryly.

"Me too," Leo replied with the same tone.

Ace elbowed the plague doctor for his insensitivity, before looking back at Leo. “We found your core in the wreckage, reduced to a white sphere the size of a hand. It took days for your power to recreate your body, even with Sidekick’s help.”

“Sarajevo has been taken, though the city lies in ruins,” Stitch explained. “Shining Knight and her group are busy destroying the last surviving robots, but the production factories have been dismantled. The Genome Wars have ended.”

It was the end.

The words took a weight off Leonard’s shoulder. He had originally co-founded the Carnival with Pythia to fight dangerous Genomes and help mankind recover from the Wars. Mechron had been the greatest threat to all of humanity, and now... now he was gone. It had taken almost ten years, but maybe mankind would finally rise back from the old world’s ashes.

And through some miracle, Leo had lived through it all.

Maybe... maybe he should reconsider some of his beliefs. After having seen that creature beyond the portal and his near-death experience, he wondered if religions were onto something.

Stitch cleared his throat. “However...”

“However?” Leo repeated.

“The *Bahamut* is now in orbit deep in space, far beyond our reach,” the plague doctor said. “The Cossack tried to bring it down, even breaking half his bones from the g-force, but he wasn’t fast enough.”

"Who cares?" Ace asked, far more optimistic. "There's no one left to activate it."

"Some of Mechron's bases remain," Stitch replied with pessimism. "And while our foe and his allies are all dead, there's no guarantee nobody else could find a way to hack into the satellite. I believe we will live to regret that failure."

"The evil that men do lives after them," Leonard quoted, looking back at the white, lifeless ceiling. Was the *Bahamut* looking down on them, far above their heads? *"The good is oft interred with their bones."*

"Was that from Shakespeare, sir?"

"I don't know," Leo admitted. "I only ever memorized the famous quotes. I thought it would make me sound smarter."

"It doesn't," Ace chuckled, though her smile didn't reach her eyes. Something weighed on her mind. "By the way, he's dead right? As in, no last-minute escape, or a clone hidden somewhere? Mechron is really dead?"

The memory of the Genius' disintegration flashed in Leonard's mind, much to his unease. "Yes," he said grimly, though his allies let out a relieved sigh. "He is dead for good, and I don't think he will come back from *that*."

The memory still sent shivers down Leonard's spine. There had been no malice or benevolence in this entity's actions; only curiosity. That godlike being had simply noticed the breach and looked through, the same way a child did through a keyhole. Leo could have just easily switched places with Mechron, had he been less lucky.

No, he shouldn't think like that. He had been given a new chance at life, and he would spend it looking forward, rather

than back.

Though, if creatures so powerful were out there, waiting...

"How many casualties?" Leonard asked, trying to fend off the existential dread with down-to-earth news.

"One out of four," Stitch replied. "It was a good day."

"Jesse died," Ace replied with a frown, much less optimistic. "Her brother is heartbroken. I think he'll retire."

The news saddened Leonard Hargraves. Due to regularly picking fights with the most dangerous Genomes, the Carnival experienced a lot of turnovers, losing people in almost every engagement. Leonard had buried far too many good people. "Mr. Wave? Pythia?"

"Mr. Wave is... well, you know him. He's boasting about his *Killer Robot Killcount* to everyone who will listen." Ace's expression harshened. "Pythia though..."

She glanced at another hospital bed, Leo following her gaze. His eyes widened in horror at what he found.

Alice was in a bed near his own, heavily sedated and linked to intravenous medical devices. Her skin had turned pale as death, and her gaze was empty.

Lifeless.

"Alice!" Leonard attempted to rise from his bed but lacked the strength to lift himself up. Ace put a hand on his chest with a frown, to force him back to his bed. "Shit!"

"Hey calm down," Ace said with a frown. "You're still sick, and you can't do anything for her."

"She's been like this since the battle's end, sir," Stitch explained with clinical coldness. "Her symptoms fit those of extreme brain damage."

"She overtaxed her power," Leo realized with sadness. He had warned her, but she had been willing to risk it all.

Maybe she had always known it would end this way.

The plague doctor nodded. "Nidhogg could cure her if given time. He said that considering her pivotal role in today's victory, it was only natural he helped her recover."

Leonard shivered. "Considering the man's methods, we need to warn her husband and son. It's their choice, not ours."

"I already called them." Ace shook her head. "Poor Mathias."

"Miss Martel left something for you, sir," Stitch handed Leonard a USB key. "I apologize for the indiscretion, but we already took a look."

"What does it contain?" Leonard asked with a frown.

"Precognitive analysis of the next few years," Stitch explained, "Calculator and her compiled a database of the greatest threats to human civilization before the battle. I believed Pythia anticipated her fate and wished to help us beyond that point."

"I suppose Augustus is on the list?" Leonard asked, his tone turning venomous. He had been given a second chance to see justice done, and he wouldn't waste it.

"Yes," Ace nodded, her expression turning grim. "But someone else has taken the top spot."

This surprised Leonard. Who could be more dangerous than an invincible, megalomaniacal warlord? “Who?”

“Some Psycho called Bloodstream,” Stitch explained.
“According to the data, there is a high chance that he will cause an extinction event in 2017 if not slain beforehand.”

“Something about his daughter dying, I think,” Ace added with a frown. “You will have to wait for Augustus, Leo. That Psycho comes with a time-limit.”

Leonard looked at the USB key, wondering what grim prophecies it held.

“Bloodstream...”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

I'm devoted to keeping the story on a street-level and as Ryan's personal journey, but as you can see, he only inhabits a small part of a bigger universe.

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42: Progress Made

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

I ended up making a Genome generator for the Perfect Run, with a dedicated channel on the Discord server. Have fun:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_R5e8gJ2qpFFkNmaLuMnC_Of0PYoAUpGGoJ8lc8oER4/edit?usp=sharing

Genome parties were always fun, but the aftermath sucked.

When he returned home to Jamie's place, Ryan found it in ruins. The floor had been buried underneath beer bottles, pizza boxes, trash, and stuff best left forgotten. Someone had drenched the sofa in a suspicious fluid, and while DJ Brain had survived the apocalypse, a partygoer drew a smiley face on the vat's surface. Even with repeated time-stop, it was a struggle to clean up the mess.

Ryan was still working on it by the evening.

"Faster, slave!" Ryan's cruel taskmaster, Lanka, sat on a chair while he cleaned up the sofa with a mop. Ki-jung's rats looked at the both of them, like viewers watching a comedy movie. "I want to see this sofa shine enough to sit my ass upon."

"Do you want me to clean your royal butt too while I'm at it, Your Majesty?" Ryan deadpanned.

"No, thank you, I already did my part," she replied. "You're the one who skipped town all morning."

“You’re just mad I was invited to the big guys’ table,” he mocked her back, before hearing his cellphone bleep in his pocket. He took a break from his dirty work to check a message from Jasmine.

JasLove: How do you want your armor?

Ryan started typing his answer.

PlushieTamer: Have you played Fallout?

JasLove: Fallout 1, Fallout 2, Tactics, or Van Buren?

PlushieTamer: You didn’t mention Brotherhood of Steel.

JasLove: That game never existed, and I’ll kill anyone who says otherwise.

PlushieTamer: Good answer. Fallout 2, America for the Enclave.

JasLove: Figured. You’re going to look great killing muties.

PlushieTamer: You and I, and my big plasma cannon...

JasLove: Keep it loaded. Might give it a good polish if you behave.

“You’re texting your girlfriend during work, Blabbermouth?” Lanka said while looking over his shoulder, grinning upon seeing the sender. “Wait, wait, wait, it’s Vulcan’s number!”

“Jealous?” Ryan asked before putting the cellphone in his pocket.

"I'm glad you didn't commit suicide by going after Livia, but Vulcan? Mad respect. She's totally going to shoot you one day, but your bravery shall be remembered."

Technically, she already did shoot him. "Well, I had to work for both of us, since you couldn't get a date."

Lanka grinned, sipping a beer. "Where do you think these fluids came from?"

Ryan looked at the sofa, then at the mop, and finally at Lanka, whose grin grew wider. "You know what, I paid my debt to society," he said, tossing the mop at his flatmate's face. "Clean your mess yourself."

"Hey, you lazy ass, get back here!" she complained, trying to get the sticky mop off her face.

Ryan ignored her, moving towards the stereo to unplug his brain in a jar. Ki-jung's rats left for the kitchen and trailed a towel back to the sofa with their mouths, intending to clean it up themselves. Their mistress was still holed up in her room with her boyfriend, but she might emerge from their lair sometime soon.

Jamie hadn't believed he had been promoted at first until Livia herself called him to confirm it. After a moment of silence, the swordsman had retired to his room with Ki-jung to 'discuss' it, but they had been alone for three hours by now. Ryan was pretty sure there wasn't a lot of talking involved in this private celebration.

When Jamie and Ki-jung returned to the living room, the rats had cleaned the sofa enough for Lanka to slouch on it. The couple was so close they were almost touching, and Chitter had recovered from yesterday's breakdown. In fact, she

looked so happy that Ryan thought she might ascend to heaven on the spot.

“Something big happened,” the courier said, as he separated the loudspeakers from the brain in a jar. “I can tell.”

“What’s up?” Lanka asked with an eyebrow raised. “Besides changing your names to Mr. and Miss Mercury?”

Ki-jung exchanged a glance with her man, who nodded slowly. “Jamie finally proposed,” she told Lanka, giddy with joy.

Her friend blinked. “No way!”

“Congratulations!” Ryan said with a thumb up, while the rats clapped with their tiny hands. “You should tell everyone!”

“And you accepted?” Lanka asked Ki-jung a stupid question.

“Of course I said yes!” she chuckled. “I want you to be the bridesmaid, Lanka.”

“Me?” For the first time since Ryan met her, the ex-marauder looked speechless and flustered. “But I don’t know shit about weddings!”

“You will do well,” Ki-jung replied with a warm smile, though it wavered a little. “Felix would have been Jamie’s best man, but I don’t think he will come.”

“I will ask Mercury to be the best man,” Jamie declared. “I owe my whole life to him. If he hadn’t raised me up, I would still be some pisspoor orphan selling scraps. Now... I will do my best to honor his name.”

"Yeah, I'm gonna have to call you boss now," Lanka said with a wide grin. "If anyone deserves that job, it's you, Jamie."

"I still can't believe it's happening," Zanbato replied, torn between joy, pride, and anxiety. He looked so adorable when unsure of himself. "Me, a street rat, ascending to the rank of an Olympian? Becoming a Caporegime?"

"It's impostor syndrome," Ryan told the swordsman. "It's like sanity, fake it until you make it."

"Yeah, I suppose," Jamie replied, though he clearly had a long way to go. "Still, it's so big... beyond all the responsibilities and sitting at the Olympians' table, I will have all the division's resources to call upon. Millions, billions in cash."

"You still plan to invest in soccer games?" Lanka asked.

"We haven't had a national cup since the Genome Wars," Jamie replied, his voice brimming with passion. "Dynamis keeps a tight grip on sports with their Dynacup, but the slums have so many talented people. Nobody will give them a chance but us. I'm sure one of them can be the new Maradona."

"You should give to charity, develop detox centers, hospitals..." Ki-jung looked at Ryan. "Even rebuild that orphanage the Meta-Gang trashed."

"You should start with all of Rust Town." Ryan shrugged. "That place is the most miserable I've seen, and that includes radioactive wastelands."

Much to his surprise, Jamie actually seemed to take his suggestion to heart. "That's not a bad idea," he admitted,

looking at Ki-jung. “What do you think?”

“You should know,” she replied, before glancing at Ryan. “You have seen the Olympians. Do you think they would mind?”

Ryan gave the question some thought.

At the end of the day, Lightning Butt didn’t seem to care about money. He only craved power and respect. As long as Jamie followed orders and didn’t interfere with the other divisions, Augustus probably wouldn’t give a damn if he used funds to create orphanages or charities. Neptune and Livia seemed more interested in developing the family’s empire, and they would probably approve the initiative if only to develop goodwill. As for Mars and Venus, he didn’t get much of a read on them.

Bacchus however...

“I think they would be open to the idea,” Ryan admitted, with a caveat. “As long as it doesn’t interfere with the *Bliss* business.”

That was the real problem. The couple’s mood instantly worsened, and they exchanged a silent glance. Ki-jung didn’t give up though. “If you could talk to Livia about it...”

“*Moi?*” Ryan replied, a little surprised.

“She seems to hold you in high esteem, from what I’ve heard,” Jamie said. News traveled fast. “But be careful around her. She’s the apple of her father’s eye, and he doesn’t take disrespect lightly.”

“Don’t worry, Vulcan got to him first,” Lanka said, laughing when Ryan glared at her.

"You ratted me out!" He glanced at the mice in the room.
"Sorry. Some of my best friends are tiny rodents."

"I had a feeling something would happen between you two," Ki-jung smiled warmly. "The tension was palpable."

"I'm so glad you found someone," Jamie declared, warmly putting a hand on Ryan's shoulder. "I don't know if it will last, but I hope she can make you happy."

"Well, I will retire before you give me diabetes," the courier replied, carrying his brain in a jar to the garage. When he left the main room, the trio were discussing the wedding's date and logistics.

Thankfully, the garage had been locked up during the party, and Ryan's car was spared from the guests' attention. If Lanka had used his backseat for her vile, sticky deed, the time-traveler might have gone on a suicide run out of rage.

Thirty minutes later, the courier had plugged back the brain in its place. He opened the door and sat at the driver's seat, putting on the Chronoradio.

Instead of funny alternate universe songs, a faint voice came out of it.

"Hi, Riri."

Ryan remained still, checked if the garage door was closed, and finally increased the sound. "Len? Is that you?"

"Y-yes, it's me. I don't bother you?"

"No, no, it's fine, I just had to confirm it." He had to ask since it was unlike her to make the first move. "We haven't spoken for days."

“Yes, umm...” She stopped, not sure what to say. The awkwardness was almost palpable.

Ryan decided to spare her further embarrassment. “How are the kids?”

“They’re still getting used to the place, but they love it. We... we played games. Board games.” She marked a short pause, trying to find her words. *“Sarah said you would love them.”*

“Are you inviting me?”

“I... maybe.”

Well, that was a big leap forward. Maybe their friendship wasn’t wrecked beyond repair, or the kids’ presence helped Len recover from her self-imposed isolation.

“Vulcan contacted me about the Meta-Gang,” Len changed the subject, *“I think you should know. I followed their submarine to a hidden tunnel, leading below the city.”*

“Towards the bunker.” Ryan put his hands on the wheel.
“Have you told Vulcan?”

“No, I thought I should tell you first. Riri, is this true what I heard on the news? You attacked Dynamis with Vulcan?”

“To borrow one of their suits,” Ryan replied, putting his hands on the warm, soft cashmere sleeves. “It was a date, sort of.”

Len didn’t answer. The line turned into static, with Ryan wondering if she was shocked, sad, or just lost the connection. “Shortie?”

"I'm... I'm happy for you. She's better than the others."
Another pause. *"You deserve to find happiness."*

Something in her voice broke Ryan's heart. "Shortie?"

"Does she know?"

"No, I didn't tell her." He glanced out of the window, and at the garage's cold walls. "It always ends the same way."

While he genuinely enjoyed Jasmine's company, Ryan wouldn't hesitate to stand against the Augusti to achieve his Perfect Run. Though she didn't seem loyal to Augustus, Vulcan also had a fiery temper, enough to try murdering the courier in a previous loop. In spite of his best intentions, they might end up on opposite sides.

And almost all his relationships ended up undone at the end of a loop. Getting too attached would only make the inevitable end more heartbreakingly.

"I... I see," Len said, clearing her throat. *"But maybe not this time."*

Ryan's head perked up in interest. "You've found a solution?"

"I think so," she said, before asking him questions. *"You create your time-stop by aligning your two selves, right? So for the ten seconds duration, both time periods interact."*

"I see where this is going," the courier said, his mood deflating. "I've thought of using that period to send stuff in the past, but you can't send anything physical. Even cats. I've checked."

Physical time-travel seemed to break some of the underlying laws of their universe, even by Genome standards. Or if it could be done, you needed a unique, undiscovered Violet power that Ryan couldn't replicate.

"But you can send signals. Information, like the Chronoradio does."

"What are you getting at, Shortie?"

"Psyshock, he can overwrite minds, even transfer his own, without physically changing the brain. He alters the brainwaves and neural signals. Ergo, the physical storing space matters less than all the electrical reactions taking place every second. If we make a snapshot, and send that information back to a perfectly compatible vessel... like their own nervous system..."

Ryan pondered her words. "You want to send someone's consciousness back in time."

"The way you do, yes."

"It's a good idea, but besides the fact brains aren't exactly your area of expertise, how do you plan to copy a whole human mind, guide it through a temporal anomaly, and then have it transferred to their past self? A human brain had more than one million billion connections, collectively sending a quadrillion signals per second."

"Yes, it's..." She let out a sigh. "I can only do one small part of the design, the navigation to guide the signal through the anomaly. You will need resources I don't have to complete it. Other Geniuses, more processing power. More time to figure it out."

Of that, Ryan had aplenty. "But you think it can be done?"

"I can upgrade your Chronoradio to send signals back to a target," she said. *"I already wrote the design down. I can send the plans to you. It's... it's not that different from communicating through water or in hostile environments. It's harder. But it can be done."*

"Do you think it can be completed in this loop?" Ryan asked.
"Before everyone forgets?"

Len's silence was an answer all of its own.

"There..." she cleared her throat. *"There's one place that may have the tech."*

Mechron's bunker.

"The Meta-Gang will be there." With their current resources and intel, Ryan doubted he could defeat all the Psychos in the base. He still hadn't figured out a way to get rid of Frank in particular, and Hannifat Lecter would certainly use hostages like last time.

"I can help," Len argued. *"You helped me defend the orphanage, so the least I can do is return the favor."*

"If you die in front of me again—"

"I can take care of myself," she replied with annoyance, before noticing something. "Again?"

Ryan didn't respond. His thoughts turned to his Dynamis loop, and how Acid Rain had blown them up to kingdom come.

"Maybe you can ask the Augusti?" Len proposed, running out of solutions.

Ryan hesitated, considering the odds, before reaching a decision. “No,” he said. “No, absolutely not.”

And after seeing Lightning Butt in the flesh, Ryan couldn’t give him access to Mechron’s armory. The organization had good members, but the man at the top was a colossal *dick*. If he found Mechron’s technology, Augustus would probably use it to sow death; he barely resisted the urge to kill with his current resources, and Mechron’s weapons would only make him nastier.

“I don’t like them, but once you have the design...”

“I will have to restart afterward to avoid a disaster,” Ryan replied, “and you will forget me again.”

“Don’t think about me, Riri.” Another pause. *“I don’t want to be a burden.”*

Not again, was left unsaid.

Ryan sighed. “Just give me time to figure it out,” he pleaded. Maybe Vulcan’s armor would boost his power, or a better option might present itself. “Don’t say anything about the Meta or the bunker yet.”

“Alright. I... I’m here if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Shortie.”

Len didn’t answer. Instead, the Chronoradio put on some melodramatic cyberpunk tunes.

Len didn’t fully understand the responsibility on Ryan’s shoulder. He could spare everyone, find the perfect scenario with the best results. If he saved while on a suboptimal route, even to preserve their friendship, then all the

consequences would be on him. Lives taken would be forever lost. The time-traveler would have no excuse since he could have preserved them, had he tried hard enough.

And after giving the present situation some thought, Ryan had to admit the truth to himself.

This loop was good. Very good.

But it wouldn't be perfect.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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43: The Ghost of Drug Island

Sitting around Vulcan's workbench in the depths of her lair, two Genomes brainstormed around a sketch. For the past hour, they had struggled to solve one of the world's most important questions; some would say, the only question worth answering.

How many guns could you fit into one power armor?

"It'll be better with rocket launchers," Ryan said, discussing his armor's design. Vulcan had chosen a design that fit the courier's body rather than an enormous mech; an exoskeleton rather than a tank. "Two hidden switchblades below the arms, a big chest blaster, mounted turrets..."

"The goal is to increase your power, not blow up half of Rome," Jasmine told him with a grin.

"Personally, I can settle for the Dynamis HQ."

"In that case, you will need a bigger laser." Vulcan scribbled on the design. "Nuclear-powered."

"Let's call it the Chernobyl," Ryan said with a deadpan face. "You think some of their Genomes might survive it?"

"Yes, but they will become radioactive. If the laser doesn't kill them, cancer will."

Ryan looked at Jasmine with absolute respect. “So cruel, it becomes art.”

“I know,” she replied. “Now that I think of it, I could actually design a cancer ray. That would be fucking nasty.”

It was such a fun date, spending quality time with his girlfriend designing weapons of mass destruction. Then again, the courier had spent most of the weekend at Jasmine’s place, so the two had grown more familiar with each other. Jamie was too busy dealing with his new promotion, and while Dynamis hadn’t yet delivered on its promised retaliations, Vulcan had all but ordered Ryan to lay low for a while.

Well, as best as someone like the courier could.

“If your theory is correct and all true Genomes produce a Red Flux variant, then it should be possible to contain this hypothetical energy, even if we can’t observe it.” Jasmine brainstormed out loud while looking at the ceiling, both feet on the workbench. “I mean, your plushie keeps a creature from this Violet dimension sealed from what you told me.”

“I wouldn’t say *sealed* is the best ter—”

“Doesn’t matter, it can still contain it and prevent its energy from leaking out,” Jasmine interrupted him. “If we combine both our technologies, then we could design something keeping this hypothetical ‘Violet Flux energy’ inside you. Instead of dispersing the heat, we’ll ramp it up.”

And in theory, this would increase the energy his power would be able to access. “I love it when you talk dirty.”

“I’m so fucking excited about this, Ryan.” Jasmine was trembling from impatience. Much like Len and all Geniuses

Ryan had met, she felt happiest when doing mad science. “We’re going to discover the source of powers, change the whole world. Scratch that, we’ll own it.”

“If you could, would you change your power?” Ryan asked innocently. “Trade it for something else?”

“Nah, I’m pretty glad to have mine. Hell, I wish I got it earlier, though I wonder how much my state of mind back then affected my power.” Jasmine glanced at him strangely. “You?”

Ryan sighed. “I dunno,” he admitted. “I’ve hated and loved my power in equal measures, but now, it’s just part of who I am. I can’t imagine myself without it.”

“I get it,” Vulcan replied, though frowning. “You’re a pretty private guy, you know that?”

“Do you want to know my secret identity?”

“You’re asking me questions you don’t want to ask yourself, and I don’t like that,” Jasmine replied. “I ain’t your psychiatrist, Ryan. In the end, everyone is on their own.”

“I know,” Ryan replied, his mood turning sour. “But it would be nice to be able to count on someone else long-term.”

“Close your eyes peacefully, knowing someone has got your back for life? I thought I had that once. Didn’t work out.”
Jasmine pointed at her mech with her chin. “The only things you can count on are those you made yourself.”

Yeah, Ryan felt the same way about his car. “Do you know of the hedgehog’s dilemma?”

“What’s that, a pet disease?”

"Two hedgehogs seek to move closer and share heat during cold weather, but they cannot avoid hurting one another with their spines. They want to snuggle, but that would mean lowering their guard."

Jasmine quickly caught on. "Are you the hedgehog, or am I?"

"We both are."

"Well, that's fucking pessimistic," Jasmine replied.

"It's experience talking."

Truth was, Ryan sincerely hoped that Jasmine's armor technology would produce results; that somehow, things would be different this time.

Maybe he was a fool, but the courier would never stop believing things could improve.

He faced deadlines though. Though he had lost many men, *Hannifat Lecter* was still toiling inside Mechron's bunker, and Ryan didn't see any way to evict him without casualties or revealing the base's existence. The best solution he had found was to recruit Shroud to invade the bunker, but the glass manipulator refused to move without his team's support, and Leo Hargraves wouldn't hit New Rome until next week.

"It could have happened differently," Ryan said.

"What?"

"Your power," the courier said. "It's not just the potion. It's part you, part random."

His girlfriend frowned. "What do you mean?"

"If you give two different Red Elixirs to one person in the same circumstances, he won't get the same ability. If you give the same Elixir to one person while he's afraid for his life or feeling safe, he will get a different power, though within the color's classification. Same if he's healthy, poisoned, or irradiated."

"You can't repeat an experience in the exact same circumstances," Jasmine replied, skeptical.

Ryan could, and he did.

At one point, the courier thought he might eventually find a way to replicate his power... but while he had learned a great deal about Elixirs, he also learned it couldn't be done.

Jasmine moved from her seat, grabbed a water bottle, and sat on Ryan's lap as if she owned the place. He responded by putting his arms around her waist; she was warm to the touch. "But if I humor your theory," she said, putting her back against his chest, "what you're saying is, if someone had gotten my Elixir, they wouldn't have become a weapon Genius?"

Ryan shook his head. "And if you had received my Elixir, you wouldn't have gotten my power. The Elixir partly adapts itself to the person drinking it. And once the unique power has been assigned, nobody else can get the exact same one as yours."

That was only true for the original Elixirs though.

"Makes sense. Augustus probably managed to use two without going crazy due to a unique genetic quirk, according to Dynamis' research." Jasmine rested her head on his shoulder, her face thoughtful. "How did you get yours?"

"A friend found it among a batch of three. I took mine while trying to get out of a hopeless situation." The real tragedy was Len though. Shortie had won a power she would have loved under normal circumstances, but one that couldn't grant her dearest wish. "And you, darling?"

"Stole it while trying to flee Libya," Jasmine said with a scowl. "If you think Italy was a shithole during the Wars, then you haven't seen my homeland. Now Dynamis owns the oil field, and nobody controls anything else. It's all tribes and marauders killing each other."

"Can't be worse than Monaco."

She raised an eyebrow, a little curious. "What's up in Monaco?"

"Trust me." Ryan looked at her seriously. "No matter how desperate things get, don't go to Monaco."

She chuckled at his confusing words. "Comb my hair."

"What? Why?"

"Because I ask you to, minion."

Ryan chuckled playfully, raising Jasmine's hair and assembling it into a bun. The courier looked at the neural interface below them with interest. "Can you make a second one of these?"

"Sure," she said. "I've got to admit it though, it's not really my tech. It's Dynamis'."

"Dynamis?"

“Hector has a decade-long project about downloading minds in new bodies to achieve immortality. Scan a whole brain and transfer it into someone else’s. I guess the man doesn’t want his sons to inherit anytime soon.”

“I always knew corporations would eventually find a way to trademark humanity.”

“They can’t, even if Hector would do that if he could. A brain is a complex thing, and it’s double the complexity when you’re a Genome. So they need cloned bodies, which their creepy Dr. Tyrano can provide.” Jasmine shrugged, before sipping from her water bottle. “That machine-human brain interface was one of their milestones. I’m not sure how far they have gotten since I left.”

“And you managed to remake that device from memory?”

“While I’m a weapon Genius, I’m also a genius, period.” Jasmine was too modest to boast. “That’s why I’m interested in your Chronoradio’s brain-interface. My human reaction time can’t entirely keep up with my armor while I use manual controls, but with a perfect interface...”

“A question crossed my mind,” Ryan said. “What happens if we each wear an interface connected to the other’s brain, and then do child-unfriendly stuff?”

She looked at him with a sly smirk, lightly kissing him. “We’ll have to try for research purposes,” the Genius said, before tossing her empty bottle away. Her boyfriend froze time to put it in the trash can. “But that will wait for later. It’s almost time to go to Ischia island.”

“Do you think my cashmere suit will protect me from the radiation?”

"No," she smirked at him. "But my mech will."

A true winning team.

Today was the Ischia island defense perimeter inspection; and while he wouldn't be allowed inside the superlab itself, Narcinia had asked that Ryan come to visit. She probably felt quite lonely on that island.

Strangely though, Livia had given her permission and asked Vulcan to bring 'extra muscle.'

"I still don't get why the princess wants you to come, no offense," Jasmine said.

"I don't get her either," Ryan admitted. He had the feeling Livia had her own agenda and played with her cards close to her chest. Curiosity about how their powers interacted couldn't explain everything about her behavior. "Do you know what her power is?"

Vulcan shook her head. "She keeps it under wraps. All I know is that she's a pseudo precognitive who can interact with alternate universes, but she doesn't advertise."

Considering Ryan intended to destroy the island to settle his deal with Mr. See-Through, she didn't see very far. Vulcan hadn't received any tactical advice or warning in the loops where the Junkyard raid went wrong either.

Either Livia lied about her abilities, or she had some harsh limitations.

"This inspection is a waste of time," Jasmine vented off. "That superlab is almost as well-defended as this armory, and my place isn't haunted. You would need an army to bring it down."

Challenge accepted.

And if Dynamis truly had a brain uploading project, Ryan would need to pay them a visit too. Len had already sent him the design of her communications system, though it was the equivalent of receiving a car's computerized parts while missing the engine, the wheels, and everything else.

Now that he had seen Vulcan's armor design, Ryan had memorized it. If he could combine Len's tech with Jasmine's, hook it up with the Chronoradio, and steal whatever brain-scan Dynamis had available... maybe he wouldn't be alone anymore.

For the first time in a long while, Ryan felt hope.

The island of Ischia used to be a paradise once. A beautiful resort in the middle of Naples' bay, where tourists from all of Europe came to enjoy its thermal sources and fresh air.

Somewhere along the way, the fabled paradise had turned into a hellhole.

Ryan didn't know why Mechron had bombed this island, but he had done a pretty good job of it. Even more than fifteen years after the deed, a purple miasma covered most of the area, a plague so toxic it had killed every lifeform there. Plants, animals, humans... The substance's toxicity and radioactivity had transformed the island into a graveyard. Thick iron walls equipped with wind turbines circled Ischia's coast, perhaps to prevent the miasma from reaching the mainland.

The only part of the island with any sign of life whatsoever was the Castello Aragonese, a pre-Christ fortress. Built on a volcanic islet, the castle was connected to the island by a

stone bridge, shattered yet never rebuilt. In stark contrast with the rest of the island, the castle's outer layers housed plant life; overgrowth and crimson, alien flowers formed a ring around the fortress.

Vulcan had spared no expense on the defenses either. Unmanned turrets covered the ancient stone walls, alongside automated anti-air defenses. Mooks in power armor kept watch over the facility, equipped with flamethrowers, mini-guns, and rocket launchers. Ryan would need to do a suicide run to get past the perimeter.

The Castello Aragonese had seen many masters come and go since its construction, from the Romans to the Kingdom of Naples. But the Augusti were the first to turn it into a drug lab.

After she landed her mech on the outer wall, unbothered by the defenses, Ryan stepped out of it; much to his surprise, the air was breathable, probably thanks to the mutant plants surrounding the lab.

He found Livia waiting nearby, looking at the Mediterranean Sea with longing. Sparrow and Mortimer acted as her bodyguards.

“Quicksave, Vulcan, welcome,” Livia politely greeted the newcomers, while Vulcan emerged from her suit. Armored soldiers immediately checked on Ryan, in case he had smuggled anything dangerous on the island. Well, more dangerous than usual. “I appreciate your punctuality.”

“We had to be in time for the group visit,” Ryan deadpanned.

“The poor Mortimer didn’t get any free candy at the end,” Mortimer complained.

"I'm afraid you will not be allowed inside, Quicksave," said Livia. "The inner workings of this facility are top-secret for all but our elite members. Instead, you will stay outside and assist the staff in case we are attacked."

"Can't I get a meth cook internship?" the courier asked.

"No, but I'm sure Narcinia will show you the gardens when we are done," Livia replied, before speaking to an empty spot. "Geist, please, don't be shy."

A freezing wind blew on the outer walls, while a yellow, ectoplasmic skull the size of a house manifested above the group. A swirling vortex of colored dust and eldritch energies surrounded the leering apparition.

"Hi, guys."

But the ghost's small, casual voice was completely at odd with his sinister appearance. Nobody had reacted with shock either, perhaps because they lived in a world with far weirder things.

"Somebody call the Ghostbusters," Ryan said. "We've got a ghost problem."

"I'm François," the enormous skull replied casually. "Or Geist."

"I prefer Casper the Ghost," Ryan said, Jasmine chuckling. "Also, your name is François, but you use a German nickname? You aren't one of these self-hating Frenchmen, right?"

"I thought about using the *Spectre*, but James Bond got there first."

"Your whole existence has a lot of terrible implications," Vulcan said. "Namely, it means there's a freaking *afterlife*."

Personally, Ryan thought it was simply Yellow Elixirs being weird, but Casper seemed to agree with her. "Heaven is all yellow and golden, though I only got a glimpse," the ghost said, "I've been trying to get back in there, but so far, the gates are barred. Hopefully, Father Torque will manage to exorcise me."

"Have you tried suicide?" Ryan suggested. "I know it's not very Catholic, but maybe you can possess a corpse and then kill yourself again? If you try often enough, maybe it will stick."

"I tried everything."

"Fire? Ropes? Nuclear detonation?"

The skull said nothing for a second. "Haven't done the last one," he admitted.

"You won't," Livia said, her tone suddenly serious. "I won't allow it."

"The worst death is fire though," Casper the Ghost argued, the skull shuddering. "Cooked meat is so painful, it makes you a vegetarian."

"The rope is the best suicide method, by far," Ryan said. "It's painful, but if you do it the right way, it gets weirdly enjoyable. Takes a lot of trying to get the handle on it though."

"Only one suicide attempt out of three succeeds," Mortimer said with a morbid tone, "I feel so bad for the other two."

"Mortimer, don't encourage them," Sparrow chastised him.

"Geist, please be on the lookout for invaders," Livia declared, her voice silencing everyone. "The odds aren't good today. I can perceive alternate realities from my point of view, but a lot of them have become dark lately."

"Dark as in, you switched out the lights?" Jasmine deadpanned.

"Dark as in, I died in them." She said that with the same detachment as Quicksave himself. "So fast I didn't see the cause."

"Well, that's ominous," Ryan said.

"I'll say it again," Vulcan brushed it off. "Attacking this place is assisted suicide, princess."

"We will put that boast to the test." Livia smiled before looking at Quicksave. "We will meet again later."

Jasmine followed the Augusti princess and her bodyguards as they walked inside the facility, leaving Ryan and Casper outside. The courier looked at the sea, a simple question on his mind.

How could he blow this island up?

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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44: Return of the Corpo

“I win,” Ryan said, resting on the flower garden in the outer wall’s shadow.

“Again?” Geist complained, the ghost overseeing the game with a doubtful expression. Apparently, his phantom skull of a face could squint. “It’s impossible. How can I keep losing?”

Well, it was hard to catch someone capable of stopping time.

In the end, the trip to Bliss island had been a disappointment. Every time Ryan tried to ‘visit’ a restricted area beyond the walls and the gardens, armored guards or Geist kindly asked him to turn back. Though he memorized the patrols and turrets’ locations, the courier didn’t see any way to get inside the facility without starting a fight and ending the current run.

Eventually, he just settled into playing games with Geist in the plant garden outside the fortress, waiting for Vulcan and the others to finish their business. The ghost had happily played along, though he wasn’t very good. Ryan had the feeling the suicidal specter appreciated having some company.

“I really need a job as a drug cook,” Ryan told Geist. “Can’t you haunt Cardinal Creep until he gives in?”

"There's only one cook, and it's Ceres," Geist shrugged. "The rest of the facility supports her work, and nothing else."

Ryan figured as much. Narcinia's power made it easy for her to create new plants to harvest as raw material. Even this entire garden, capable of thriving in a toxic island, was probably her work. "So if she retires, no more Bliss?"

"Sort of," Geist replied. "Father Torque has enough flower strains to continue the work even if she's gone, though the quality will take a hit."

"You shouldn't say that out loud." Ryan didn't even move an inch, as Mortimer leaned over his shoulder, having phased out of the ground. "Walls have ears."

"Do you want to play?" the courier casually asked the bodyguard. "It's funnier when there are three players, and the guards are humorless killjoys."

"You are no fun, no fun at all," the hitman said, disappointed that he couldn't startle Ryan no matter how hard he tried.

"Shouldn't you be inside?" Geist asked, telekinetically crafting a chair out of nearby stones and dirt.

"Sparrow asked me to check on him," Mortimer said, glancing at Ryan while sitting on the makeshift chair. "She was worried he might start a forest fire or something."

"That's demeaning," Ryan said. "Sometimes I settle for nuclear winters."

"They make me want to glow in the dark," the hitman replied, looking at the game. "What are you playing?"

Ryan showed Mortimer bird talus bones. The hitman glanced at the bones, then at Casper the Ghost. “Knucklebones, really?”

“It’s to stick with the ghost theme,” the courier replied. “Want to play? It’s an old variant, a pure game of luck.”

Mortimer shrugged and grabbed some of the bones. “We should play cards next,” he said.

“Or use a Ouija board,” Ryan suggested, glancing at Casper. “Should be easy.”

“How does it even work?” Mortimer asked Geist, as he threw the bones with the force of his mind. “You need to settle some unfinished business before moving on?”

“Bite me,” Casper the Ghost explained. “I drank a Yellow Elixir on Last Easter, but it didn’t come with a manual. Hell, I thought I didn’t get any power until Mechron’s nanoplague turned my body to dust. I got the briefest glimpse of an afterlife, and then I was yanked back to that dumpster and bound to my mortal remains.”

“And you can’t leave the island?” Mortimer asked, throwing his bones on the ground. “Mortimer likes haunted houses. I could bury you in my garden.”

“I can’t go far, no,” Geist lamented. “My remains are all over the place now, so good luck putting it back together. Even Cancel only goes as far as preventing me from manifesting, and Pluto’s power needs someone to be alive in the first place.”

If you asked Ryan, besides that geographic limitation, Casper had hit the jackpot as far as Yellow Elixirs went. Unlimited ectoplasmic powers plus immortality? That was a

life to die for! Ryan laughed at his own mental joke, much to the others' confusion.

"Frankly, I'm just a groundskeeper cleaning up the place, waiting for the end," Geist said before throwing more bones on the ground. It would explain his casual attitude about the crime family's secrets, especially if they couldn't kill him permanently. "Father Torque says he's close to achieving Heaven though."

"Poor Mortimer sent many people there," the hitman said. "And to the place below too."

"I haven't reached any of those places, and I tried a lot," Ryan said, winning another Knucklebones round, and fairly this time.

"Father Torque saw God when he took his Elixir," Geist said, and he sounded like he believed it too. "He thinks a powerful psychotropic like Bliss could replicate the effect and allow him to receive a divine revelation. Not sure if it will work, but a ghost can always hope."

"I hope Ceres can solve all the long-term health problems before he overdoses on Bliss though," Ryan said. "Especially the sterility thing. Though I guess it won't matter much to a priest."

"Sterility?" Geist asked, a bit surprised.

"I know health safety isn't high among your priorities, but trust me, don't get high on your own product." Ryan had studied all drugs in-depth... for research purposes only. "Among other side-effects, Bliss acts as a long-term endocrine disruptor, working on a genetic level. Genomes aren't affected much due to their enhanced metabolism, but everyone else more or less becomes sterile after one year."

“Oh, that?” Mortimer shrugged. “I heard the rumor, but if you ask Poor Ol’ Mortimer, it’s just Dynamis propaganda. They can’t make a better product so they denigrate ours.”

Ryan looked at the hitman, squinted, and then stopped time.

When it resumed, the courier had grabbed Mortimer’s mask and looked beneath.

His true face looked a lot like Laurence Fishburne’s. Same receding hairline, same soft features, same Morpheus glare.

“Hey, my secret identity!” Mortimer complained while grabbing back his skull mask.

“You aren’t even old!” Ryan complained, extremely disappointed. He must have been in his early forties at worst! “You’re thirty years early to be such a downer!”

“Poor Mortimer is old inside,” the hitman replied, putting back the mask. “He’s an old soul!”

More like an emo teen’s soul in an adult’s body.

Before Ryan could mock the hitman further, his phone rang inside his coat. The courier grabbed it but didn’t recognize the number. “Quicksave Deliveries, what can I do for you?” he asked while taking the call.

“Riri?”

“Shortie?” Wait, Len had a *phone*?

“Is that your goomah?” Mortimer asked mockingly, still sore about the mask part. “Vulcan won’t be happy about that.”

Ryan threw the bones at Mortimer's face while walking away, and they bounced off the cackling hitman's mask. Maybe his intangibility only worked through inorganic matter.

"I couldn't contact you on the Chronoradio," Len said. Her voice was tense, alarmed, and Ryan could hear the children talking in the background. *"You are on Ischia Island?"*

"The only habitable part of it," he replied, leaning against the outer wall. "You know Vulcan can probably record our conversations? Everything you say will be held against you before in a court of law."

"I couldn't wait," she said, clearly in no mood for jokes, *"My radars picked tremors coming from Rust Town, and multiple flying objects moving towards Ischia Island."*

Oh? Were the Meta climbing out of their hole? Ryan wasn't sure if this was good or bad news.

Before he could ask for details, someone else called him; once again, the courier didn't recognize the number.

"Excuse me, Shortie, I will be back in a minute," Ryan said, before switching calls. "Quicksave Deliveries, what can I do for you? Pay for four explosions, and the fifth one is free!"

"You owe me a suit, Romano."

Blackthorn.

"I hope you appreciate, that everything-"

"-everything that happens now, will be on your head," Ryan said at the same time as his caller.

"You think this is-"

"-a game?" Ryan said at the same time, their words matching with perfect synchronicity. Enrique Manada fell silent on the other side of the line; the courier briefly wondered if he had been vexed. "I'm sorry, but after a while, you've heard them all. You should stick to gardening, Poison Rosy."

"I see this isn't your first rodeo, Romano, but this will be your last."

"I'm not sure if you use a marketing department for your speeches, but I would fire them if I were you." Though Ryan was flattered to have earned himself an archenemy. "Have you called to exchange threats? Perhaps challenge me to a duel to restore your lost honor?"

"Nothing so old-fashioned," the corporate mastermind replied, considering his next words. *"In truth, I wanted to thank you. You succeeded where I failed for years."*

That was a new one. "Looking fabulous?"

"You people mistake pragmatism for weakness," Enrique said, ignoring Ryan's jab. *"You think that because we let you be for so long, that we are prey. You're wrong. We simply know that war is bad for business. War has no winners, only different shades of losers."*

"I'm not sure I follow."

"My father is a pragmatic man," Enrique explained. *"He believes we can have a 'detente' with your boss, but my brother and I know better. You Augusti aren't a state or corporation we can coexist with. You are feudal warlords who only understand strength. And after you dared to attack*

our HQ, Don Hector finally decided to speak your language. Consider what's about to follow... a friendly reminder not to overstep again."

Well, that was ominous. "Is this about the suit? Or revenge for the public humiliation?"

"No, Romano, this goes beyond that." Blackthorn's composure broke slightly, and his true feelings poured through the corporate mask. *"We have struggled for years to rebuild a functioning society. Now we are at a crossroads, with two visions facing off. The one that prevails will dictate what new world emerges from the Earth's ashes... and I cannot, in good conscience, let Augustus become humanity's future."*

To be honest, he had a point... at least in theory. "Take a look at Rust Town," Ryan replied, completely unimpressed. "See where your high-minded words meet reality."

"We don't always succeed at improving things, I will concede it, but the difference between my organization and yours is that at least we try." Another short pause. *"Have you heard of Giorgio Rosa, Romano?"*

Giorgio Rosa, Giorgio Rosa... the Republic of Rose Island? "That crazy guy who built an oil platform in the middle sea and called it an independent nation?"

"You are a man of culture," Enrique said, his tone switching from icy to extremely pleased. *"I assume you also remember what happened to his rogue island?"*

Ryan frowned, before looking at the sea. Black spots appeared in the skies, flying under the sun towards the island. "It was sunk by the Italian government?"

Blackthorn hung up on him.

Ryan switched back to Len. “*Riri? What’s happening?*”

“Say whatever you want about Dynamis,” Ryan said, a strident alarm echoing across Ischia Island as the spots started taking shape. “They aren’t all bark.”

Thirty war helicopters were making their way towards the Bliss production facility, moving in three groups of ten. Ryan recognized the model as customized NH90s, optimized for troop transports and naval warfare. They probably transported three hundred soldiers, perhaps more.

“That’s a lot of mooks,” Ryan observed. It reminded him of the Rust Town raid, except he was on the receiving end this time.

“*I’m coming,*” Len said, before abruptly ending the call.

Ryan slowly put the cellphone back in its pocket, while Geist looked up at the skies. Besides the helicopters, a few Genomes followed the assault team by flight. Besides the usual suspect Wyvern, who hadn’t transformed yet, Ryan noticed a man wearing a *fabulous* hawk-like costume made of crimson and green feathers; the very winds seemed to carry him above the ground, with a small tornado forming around his waist. A red-skinned, muscled amazon followed, unleashing streams of flames from her feet to propel herself up. A devilish tail grew out of her pants, and two curved horns from her long black hair. Her skin-tight, *suggestive* leather suit reminded Ryan of a biker advertisement.

“Well, well,” Mortimer said, rising from his chair, bringing out a rifle hidden beneath his cloak, “that ain’t good at all. And Windsweep’s back in town!”

“Devilry too,” Casper said, looking at the red-skinned woman. Windsweep was the template of the Tempest Knockoff Elixirs, and Devilry had inspired the pyrokinetic Firebrand type. Dynamis had summoned Il Migliore’s elite team.

Maybe they brought Felix the Cat too?

The guards protecting the island’s walls had immediately raised their weapons, while the turrets around the fortress turned towards the helicopters. Instead of powering through and starting a fight immediately, Dynamis’ troops stopped at a respectable distance, waiting for a signal before opening fire.

Wyvern moved at the army’s vanguard, carrying a megaphone; out of everyone present, she looked the happiest. Knowing the heroine, she must have been waiting for a pretext to attack the island for a long time.

“Quicksave!” Wyvern spoke through the megaphone, her voice echoing across the skies. “Jasmine! You are under arrest for staging a terrorist attack against Dynamis’ labs! Both of you, step outside, hands behind the head!”

So what, they could let Vulcan trying to murder Ryan in a past loop slide, but not the theft of a suit? Then again, it was cashmere.

Most probably, it was the public nature of the heist that pissed off Dynamis. An attempted murder off-cameras could be swept under the rug, but a public affront had to be met with a harsh response to save face.

“*Fuck off, Laura!*” Vulcan’s furious voice echoed from the fortress, carried by loudspeakers. She must have noticed

the incoming army on her radars long before it showed up.
"I'm barely keeping my thumb from the trigger right now!"

"If you both come without resisting, you shall remain unharmed and we will leave this island peacefully," Wyvern said, her gaze focusing on Ryan. "Otherwise..."

She left the sentence hanging, all the defensive turrets pointed at her.

"Can I pay you to look the other way?" Ryan asked, raising euro bills like a white flag.

"You are fighting for the wrong side, Quicksave," Wyvern replied, completely unfazed by his taunts. "But suit yourself. I've daydreamed about wrecking that death factory for over two years."

"I would like to see you yuppies try," Mortimer added, the walls trembling while Geist's skull face transformed into a ghastly vision of hell. "Mortimer has been itching for blood lately, and he wonders if you bleed red or green."

"I will say it again, Laura," Vulcan's voice echoed through the loudspeakers, a turret firing a warning shot into the sea.
"Fuck. Off!"

"I'm sorry," Ryan said regretfully, straightening his coat.
"But giving you back that suit would be a legit war crime."

"I will take this as a no," Wyvern said, more pleased than anything. "Good. I no longer have to hold back."

The heroine quickly tossed the megaphone into the sea and started changing shape, growing into an enormous dragon.

“To be honest,” the mighty beast roared, her powerful voice carrying across the island. “I have never done a drug bust this big before!”

As both the turrets and helicopters opened fire at each other, Ryan stopped time, moved back to Mortimer’s chair, and turned it to face the sea. The courier sat, put his hands behind his hair, and let time resume to watch the fireworks.

Shroud had wanted this island wrecked.

And Ryan always delivered.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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45: Blood in the Water

Back when he played open world games, Ryan always loved to set the AI against itself. To lead one monster on the path of a settlement, and then watch NPCs fight computer-generated enemies for his entertainment. The courier always found it relaxing.

The real-life sight was a lot more stressful.

Dynamis' aerial force had unleashed a rain of missiles, which Jasmine's anti-aerial defense had mostly detonated mid-flight. Geist, now a howling specter the size of a building, also redirected some of the projectiles with telekinetic force, blowing up two of the helicopters.

Unfortunately, the Augusti had less luck with the enemy Genomes. The invulnerable Wyvern had smashed through the fortress' outer wall, sending stones flying in all directions; the pyrokinetic Devilry had started bombarding the superlab's defenses from above, targeting the turrets, and the aeromancer Windsweep had summoned a miniature tornado to try to repel Geist.

"Hey, Quicksave, want to bet with poor old Mortimer?" Mortimer said, shooting at the helicopters without taking cover. Bullets and projectiles phased through his body harmlessly. "The one who kills the most corpos wins!"

"Do non-lethal takedowns count?" Ryan asked. The courier was still sitting on his chair with a gun in hand, using a mix

of timesteps and accurate shots to blow up missiles before they could actually hit the fortress. “Because I left my best, anti-war helicopter stuff at home.”

A projectile aimed for his location, so the courier stopped time, moved the chair away, and let time resume once he had reached safety.

“Showoff,” Mortimer said, unimpressed. “You’re worse than Fortuna.”

“Hey, I resent that remark,” Ryan protested, tossing his gun away when he ran out of bullets. “I work on looking perfect, while her power does all the work.”

Truthfully, Ryan was starting to become a little worried. While the fortress’ human and automated defenses resisted well, Dynamis was making progress, and the courier wondered how Augustus would react to a very public assault on his drug factory. Ryan suspected reinforcements would be on their way soon and turn the already chaotic situation into a massive brawl.

In short, he couldn’t wait.

With some of the defensive turrets down, helicopters managed to land atop the outer wall. Soldiers in riot gear or advanced power armor engaged the Augusti defenders in a firefight on foot, while Wyvern kept hitting the fort in an attempt to make a hole into the facility. The ground shook with every blow of the giant dragon, although it seemed Vulcan had reinforced the old stone walls.

Eventually, Ryan noticed another helicopter landing in the garden nearby. A group of eight riot gear troopers stepped out of it, escorting two Genomes. One was a man with long black hair wearing a stylized, Mad Max-like mix of rusted

steel armor and cloak. Most of his face was covered by a red scarf and black goggles, and worryingly, he carried an explosive belt around his waist.

The other, more colorful one, was a young woman Ryan's age, perhaps of Chinese or Japanese descent. She reminded the courier of these pre-war K-pop idols, dyed hair, lovely face, and cute brown eyes. She wore a strange dress whose colors and length seemed to shift as the courier looked. Her bright, shy smile contrasted with the chaos around her.

"Reload and Wardrobe," Mortimer said while opening fire at the newcomers, the riot troops forming a plexiglass shield wall to protect themselves. The Dynamis Genomes hid behind them, listening to orders thanks to earplugs. "Just great, I can't stand Reload!"

"Why, because of his terrible fashion sense?" Ryan asked, rising to his feet and grabbing his chair as an improvised weapon. Seriously, Dynamis' marketing department should be eradicated; how could they advertise such a fashion disaster?

"Because he just won't die!" Mortimer snarled, reloading his rifle. "He's the worst kind of Violet!"

That made Ryan quite curious. He looked at the apocalypse punk disaster behind the shield wall, but couldn't figure out his power from how he looked. "Last warning, Romano!" one of the troopers said, readying his own firearm behind the shield wall. "Surrender now, or we open fire back! We're allowed to use lethal force!"

"Didn't anyone tell you, I'm immortal!" Ryan shouted back, raising his chair threateningly while explosions resonated in the background. "I'll come back to haunt you!"

"Oh, you're a Yellow too?" Wardrobe asked from behind the wall, more curious than anything.

"He's distracted, shoot him!" one of the troopers shouted, pointing a rifle over the plexiglass wall. Mortimer immediately opened fire, disarming the man with a well-placed bullet while Ryan threw the chair at the corporate police.

The projectile bounced off the shields, while Wardrobe's clothes literally changed shape. Her strange dress transformed into a wolf mascot suit, and she leaped over the garden with the strength and agility of a werewolf. Ryan had to stop time to prevent her from pouncing on him like a mouse, using the brief time window to put the *Fisty Brothers* on.

"Oh my, here I go dying again!" Reload said gregariously, as he leaped over the troopers' shield wall, and rushed at Mortimer's cover like a suicide bomber. In a scene straight out of an action movie, the hitman shot the hero in the chest, but he continued his charge. Reload jumped at Mortimer, who quickly phased through the ground below. The hero's belt detonated and blew Mortimer's stone cover to smithereens.

Ryan sensed a vague, familiar sensation at the back of his skull. At first, he thought it was Acid Rain's doing, until Reload's body reformed at the spot where he died in a flash of violet light, completely unharmed. His intact suicide belt was still around his waist.

"You copycat, I was wearing suicide belts before they went mainstream!" Ryan pointed an accusing finger at Reload, running in circles to escape Wardrobe's claws. "If you stop time, I'll sue!"

Why didn't Dynamis call *him* Timelord?

When Mortimer didn't reappear, the troopers turned to Ryan and started providing Wardrobe with suppressing fire. The happy courier stopped the clock to avoid the bullets and closed the gap with the mooks, punching the closest one with *Fisty* when time resumed. Much like the cannon fodder they were, they went down in one hit.

While her boyfriend was busy brawling with the troopers, a fully armored Vulcan emerged from the fortress, tackling Wyvern rugby-style. The mech pushed the surprised dragon back against Ischia Island's reefs, the transformed hero responding by unleashing a stream of aurora-like light with her maw. Crimson beams came out of the fortress to shoot the helicopters, probably Sparrow's doing,

As Ryan single-handedly demolished the trooper corp and Wardrobe remained at a distance, trying to figure out her approach, Reload entered the melee. He looked under his armor and brought out a tiny metal rod.

A sword of violet light came out.

Ryan interrupted his one-sided beating of a trooper to look at the divine weapon, mesmerized by its perfection; a pure, timeless design, and the purest shade of violet he had ever seen. It would match his suit perfectly.

It was love at first sight.

Ryan instantly activated his power, stole the blade, and kicked Reload in the frozen time.

When time resumed and the hero fell on his back among the flowers, Ryan raised his trophy up to the skies. It was as

weightless as a feather, but much to his disappointment, it made no sound.

“Schvrmmmmmm!” the courier said, trying to imitate a real lightsaber’s noise. “Schvrmmmmmm!”

He would never let it go.

“Hey, my laser blade!” Reload complained, rising back to his feet while Ryan returned to beating on the troopers.

“A lightsaber!” Ryan shouted back at this ignorant fool, absentmindedly slicing a Dynamis mook’s shield and rifle with it like butter. “Search your feelings. You know it to be true.”

At this point, his quips wrote themselves.

“Thankfully,” Reload said while drawing a second, crimson laser blade, “I got a spare!”

Wrong color though.

By now, Ryan had kicked the ass of every mook present or disarmed them, leaving only the two heroes to challenge him. The troopers fled back to the helicopter and quickly retreated from the island entirely, the Genomes facing each other in a Mexican standoff. The courier briefly glanced at Jasmine, but his girlfriend seemed to have the situation well in hand. The Genius and Wyvern were engaged in a long-range aerial firefight, with Vulcan repelling her ex-partner from the island’s perimeter.

“Hey, Quicksave!” Wardrobe’s werewolf suit transformed into a Jack O’Lantern Halloween costume. A pumpkin mask covered her head, the lips moving as if they belonged to a living being. “Is it true you can stop time?”

"Yes, I can!" Ryan replied with the same friendly tone, pointing his lightsaber at her like a fencer. Reload raised his own weapon, trying to find an opening; or perhaps to look cool. "Is Felix the Cat with you?"

"Oh, he wanted to come, but Enrique said no!" Wardrobe replied, manifesting a yellow facsimile of a fiery lantern in her hands and throwing it at Ryan like a stone. "I'm Wardrobe by the way! Nice to meet you!"

Well, she took the battle as seriously as Ryan himself did. A shame they were fighting on opposing sides, the courier was pretty sure they would get along great.

Using his pilfered lightsaber, Ryan cut the lantern projectile in half, the strange device collapsing into harmless yellow dust, before parrying *Darth Reload's* blade as he attempted to flank him. The two laser swords met without one going through the other, and Ryan used a timestep to dodge a new fire lantern from Wardrobe. This time the projectile exploded into ghostly fire upon hitting the ground.

Her power was *weird*.

Unfortunately for him, Reload was an amateur with a fancy weapon, while the courier had mastered every style of swordsmanship known to mankind. While the setup was epic, the lightsaber duel left Ryan wanting.

"Seriously, at this point, you force me to use only one hand," the courier said, putting an arm behind his back and parrying all of the hero's strikes with the other. "And it still feels unfair."

"I'll show you unfair!" Infuriated by the taunt, Reload attempted to detonate his suicide belt, but Ryan used his

timestep to move out of range. The hero exploded into dust, before reforming.

“Use your anger!” Ryan mocked him, absentmindedly cutting a fiery lantern from the side. “Use your pain! I’m sure you have a lot to draw upon!”

“You can spam time-stop?” Reload snarled with anger, wildly striking the rival Violet Genome with his blade the moment he recovered. His poor attempt at breaking past Ryan’s defense didn’t work, but it only frustrated him further. “You overpowered cheat!”

“Unlimited power!” Ryan replied. With a swift move, the courier cut the hero’s arm off... only for it to reattach itself to the body. Limited time-rewind, except applied to the body and objects in close contact. He refused to go down, no matter the amount of failed tries.

Ryan felt some spiritual kinship for this guy. Not enough to take him seriously of course, but he would probably invite him for a drink once the dust had settled.

“Why don’t you transform into Supergirl though?” Ryan asked Wardrobe while dodging a strike from Reload. He stopped time, grabbed the hero by his scarf with his free hand, and used the momentum to throw him at his teammate. “You could wrap up this battle in seconds if you did!”

“I can’t, that’s copyrighted content!” the Yellow Genome replied as time resumed, her costume transforming into a bedsheet. Reload went through her body as if she wasn’t even there. “I can only use public domain stuff!”

“What, intellectual property is your Kryptonite?” Ryan asked, *immensely* disappointed. “How does that even

work?"

"I don't make my power's rules, alright!" Wardrobe replied with a scowl, wounded by his comment. Her costume changed once more into that of a witch, and she shot a lightning bolt at Ryan with her fingertips.

"Sorry, sorry," Ryan told Wardrobe, blocking the lightning with his beam saber, Star Wars-style. "Honestly, I would totally hit on you under normal circumstances. You're completely my type, but I have an exclusive contract right now."

"Oh, thanks, but I have an exclusive contract too!" she said cheerfully while Reload rose back up. If anything, Ryan admired his perseverance. "Do you want to be my archenemy? I have none, and marketing says it boosts the ratings!"

Well, Psyshock was dead in this loop, so... "Sure, I'm free every weekend!"

"Thanks!" Wardrobe's costume changed again, this time turning into a mummy cosplay. The flowers around her immediately turned to dust, and her bandages transformed into tattered leashes flying towards Ryan. The courier hastily cut them with his laser blade, while Reload attempted to flank him from the left.

It confused Ryan why Wardrobe didn't change into another Genome, or stick to one form instead of switching constantly. Perhaps it was her fighting style, or her ability, however versatile, had a time limit.

Still, it was one of the best fights he had since he arrived in New Rome! Completely worth the trip!

"His power is completely busted!" Reload complained, as Ryan briefly stopped time to dodge one of his strikes.
"Wardrobe, you got anything that can resist it?"

"I think I do, but Enrique won't like it!" she replied, her costume shifted. Ryan stopped moving, observing the scene unfolding. Wardrobe's costume transformed into the guise of an ancient Greek god, including a toga, sandals, and a laurel crown of gold. The costume seemed to cover her skin, turning it into an unnatural shade of white.

It made her look like an ivory statue of—

...

Shit.

Ryan immediately stopped time, turning the world purple.

All movement, all noise stopped. The raging battle in the background became nothing more than a prop, a moment frozen in time.

"Oh, so that's how it looks," Wardrobe said, looking around in amazement at her frozen teammate. Her fingers shone with yellow electricity, almost golden. "It's so pretty!"

Chitter had warned him in a past loop, but he hadn't listened.

Shit, shit, shit!

"Shit!" Ryan shouted while Wardrobe blasted him with a lightning bolt inside the frozen time. The blast hit him in the chest, propelling him backward.

It hurt, and it looked like a bolt... but having died from electrocution more times than he could count, Ryan immediately recognized the attack as a pale imitation of lightning. The real thing would have killed him on the spot, but this yellow imitation only inflicted minor damage; it ran on movie logic rather than real thunderbolts.

Ryan ended his unwilling flight at the edge of the garden, where the flowers reached the Mediterranean seawater. Time resumed, Reload immediately shouting in happiness. "It worked!"

"I can't hold it..." Wardrobe said, her clothes shifting uncontrollably. One second, she was dressed like Augustus, and the next, she wore a tyrannosaur mascot costume. "Damn it, the persona isn't stable enough!"

At least she can't use the original's full power, Ryan thought, as he rose back to his feet. Or else he would have been vaporized.

His chest still hurt like hell though!

"It's over, Quicksave!" Wardrobe said with a smirk as she embraced her new saurian form, while Ryan stood tall once more, lightsaber in hand. "We have the high ground!"

Ryan wanted to groan, but her delivery was just *perfect*.

Though they had underestimated the power of friendship.

Ryan sensed something emerging from the waters behind him, the clinks and clanks of heavy robotic armor stepping on the land music to his ears. Dynamis' heroes blinked in surprise, before taking a torrent of pressurized water to the face.

Ryan looked over his shoulder, as his oldest friend moved to his side, her water weapon unleashing everything it had at the Il Migliore duo. "Shortie!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Len pleaded, her voice distorted by her underwater armor. "I came as fast as I could!"

She maintained the water pressure, but much to Ryan's astonishment, the liquid started splitting into two halves. Wardrobe and Reload stood unharmed in the middle, the Yellow Genome's costume having once more changed to some sort of wizened old man cosplay, white beard included.

"You can even copy *Moses*?" Ryan asked his newfound rival, astonished by her power's sheer flexibility. "What else, you can dress as Jesus Christ and turn water to wine?"

"I do that at parties sometimes!" she replied, while Len stopped using her water pumps. The duo watched the other for a few seconds, trying to think of a way out.

A series of explosions interrupted the standoff though, as a Dynamis helicopter crashed nearby in the garden, going down in flames and setting the flowers ablaze.

Ryan looked at the Mediterranean Sea. Colossal water arms the size of skyscrapers had sprouted from the waves, pursuing the helicopters like snakes.

Devilry stopped bombarding the fort to focus on these strange phenomenons, blasting the water tentacles with mighty fireballs. Yet, even as they turned to steam from the heat, more appendages rose from the waters in an attempt to crush the flyer. Far away, Ryan noticed multiple jet skis making their way towards the island; among the drivers, he recognized a few familiar faces, such as Greta.

Reinforcements.

Meanwhile, Wyvern and Vulcan had become spots in the skies, the duo continuing their battle above the clouds far out of sight. And though the outer wall had mostly crumbled from the bombardment, the Augusti's fortress remained mostly intact. Geist shielded the hole Wyvern had made in the structure, telekinetically raising stones in an attempt to cover it back up.

"Neptune," Reload said while looking at the watery arms, before turning to his teammate. "Wardrobe, bring out the Apocalypse Suit!"

"But it's too dangerous!" Wardrobe protested.

"If you don't use it, he will sink us all!"

Wardrobe inhaled, her costume shifting while Ryan and Len prepared to make their final stand, back-to-back.

The sound of a gunshot echoed across the battlefield, and Wardrobe collapsed.

For a second, time seemed to freeze, and Ryan had nothing to do with it. The heroine's body hit the ground while a shocked Reload watched, a figure having phased out of the ground right behind them.

"Good grief," Mortimer said without any remorse, the tip of his rifle still fuming. "Looks like Mortimer won the bet."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Here's a gorgeous piece of Fan Art by Jegor Pivrik.

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46: Chekhov's Gun

Well, Ryan had to admit it. No matter how savage the attack, it had been a perfect sneak headshot. Wardrobe probably didn't feel any pain.

"Wardrobe!" Reload shouted in panic, dropping everything to try and treat his teammate's wound. It was in vain though; the courier had seen the bullet go from one side of the head to the other, and unless she had regeneration, the shot had slain her instantly. The Yellow Genome's blood was flowing out of her skull and onto the ground, while flowers burned around them.

"Mortimer thought she would never shut up," the hitman said without any remorse, keeping his rifle pointed at Reload's head without pressing the trigger. In all likelihood, he had grown wise to his rewinding power.

"You..." While Ryan wasn't surprised, Len struggled to find her words. "You killed her. You *killed* her."

"You could have shot her in the knee!" Ryan said, quite pissed himself. While he didn't know the girl until a few hours earlier, she seemed quite the theatrical superhero; she was long-term rivalry material! "She was fun, goddammit! *Fun!*"

"She would have recovered from a knee shot," Mortimer replied with a shrug. For a second, Ryan had forgotten he was a brutal mob hitman beneath all the silliness. "With one

exception, Mortimer hasn't seen anyone recover from death—"

"Murderer!" Reload snarled suddenly, charging at Mortimer with his weapon raised. The hitman quickly took a step backward to dodge. "You'll pay for this!"

Len raised her water weapon at the Dynamis hero, hitting him with a stream of liquid; he dropped his laser blade in surprise, perhaps having been blinded by anger. Instead of propelling Reload backward though or cutting him in half, the water shifted around the hero and formed a dense, three meters-wide bubble around his body. When Shortie closed her water pump, the bubble stabilized and kept Reload immobilized.

"Thanks," Mortimer said, before grabbing Reload's laser blade as a trophy. "How long will it last?"

Shortie didn't answer. She didn't want to.

"She can't talk?" Mortimer asked Ryan, who deactivated the laser blade and put it in a belt pocket.

"Yes she can, but not to you," the courier said. "Also, you're a jackass."

"Hey, she was a corpo, why do you care?"

"She was my new archenemy, Mortimer!" Ryan said, raising a finger at the man's mask. "You don't kill a man's archenemy! It's like stealing his wife!"

"Oh, really? Sorry, poor old Mortimer is quite the *ladykiller*."

Mortimer liked his comedy pitch black, like his soul.

Unfortunately for him, Len didn't find the joke funny, and instantly raised her weapon at his face. "Hey, calm down!" the hitman protested, pointing his rifle back at Shortie. "What's up with you?"

"I should have let him kill you," Len said, clearly struggling against her instinct not to bubble the hitman to death. "You're just as bad as the Meta."

"Len." Ryan turned serious, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder. "It's not worth the hassle."

If she attacked him, then they would have the entire Augusti family after them. Ryan could handle them, but Len... didn't need that trouble right now.

The aquatic Genius remained still for a few seconds, before lowering her weapon.

"Anyway, you're the Underdiver, right?" Mortimer asked while appraising Len warily; unlike her, he hadn't lowered his rifle. "Miss Livia said you were in charge of the evacuation effort."

"I called bathyspheres already," Len finally spoke up, her tone icy. Vulcan must have paid her to keep a few in standby as escape pods.

"Good, I was in charge of clearing the way and then getting our VIPs out," Mortimer said, slowly sinking back into the ground. "I will be back soon."

"You want to evacuate?" Ryan asked, pointing at Neptune repelling Dynamis' air forces. "We're sort of winning."

"Bite me, Miss Livia's orders," Mortimer said while disappearing, "and you don't argue with the money."

Once he was gone, Ryan glanced at Reload's watery prison, the Violet Genome trapped in a bubble he couldn't escape from. His power restored him to his physical prime whenever he ran out of breath but never granted him the strength to escape. "Does it pop out if I stick a nail in it?"

"That's all you have to say, Riri?" Len looked at Wardrobe's body, and though Ryan couldn't see the face beneath her helmet, he didn't have to be a precog to sense his friend's sorrow. "He murdered her."

"Yeah..." Ryan moved towards Wardrobe's body, closing the eyes. She deserved at least as much. "That happens."

"She wasn't a Meta, Riri. She was... she didn't even use lethal force on you. How can you be so casual about it?"

"I told you," Ryan replied with a sigh. "You get used to everything."

"That's the saddest thing I heard you say yet," Len said. "Riri, you can't... you can't become numb to this."

"If you let it stick to you, it just gets overwhelming after a while."

She had no good answer to this. "I'm... I'm doing this for you, Riri. To pay you back. But that's it. When this is over, I'm done with these drug dealers."

Yeah. It reminded Ryan of that previous loop where he watched Jamie and co all perish before him. "I can make it right," he said, almost absent-mindedly. "It's just temporary."

"At what cost?" Len asked him, shaking her helmet. "Don't."

“Don’t what, save people?”

“You don’t owe *these* people anything. That mindset of yours, it’s destroying you!” she protested, before looking at Wardrobe’s remains. “I tried to save everyone who deserved to, but... I couldn’t. I could only help a few.”

But the difference between them was, Ryan *could* save everyone who deserved it. If he tried enough times.

Len must have telepathy because she seemed to have guessed his trail of thoughts. “When this is over, let’s go away.”

“Away from what?”

“Away from this cursed city,” she said, all but pleading. “It will destroy us both. Maybe even kill us.”

“Wait, Shortie, does that mean you want me back in your life after all?” Ryan teased her. “No more radio exchanges?”

She remained silent for a moment, with the courier wondering if he had been too bold, too soon.

“Yes,” Len finally said, after some hesitations. “I... it won’t be easy, but... yes. I... I don’t think I ever wanted you out of my life.”

Ryan remained silent, as his oldest friend struggled to find her words.

“I don’t think I would have checked up on you for years, if... it was truly over between us,” Len admitted, flinching as an explosion echoed nearby. Neptune had knocked out one of the last helicopters from the skies. “I’m sorry. I’m not good at this.”

“I... it’s okay.” They would have time to get comfortable in each other’s presence once again. If anything, this loop had been worth it just to reach this point. “It means the world to me, but you know I can’t go right now. What about Rust Town?”

Ryan needed to use vaguer terms, in case anyone listened.

“Tremors,” Len said. “I think they are digging below it.”

Ryan had seen enough bad endings through his long life to tell where this was going. He grabbed his phone and tried to call Vulcan, unable to see her in the skies. “Jas? Jasmine?” Nothing but static. “Shortie, do you have good phone coverage?”

“Someone is scrambling vocal communications,” Len said, while five bathyspheres emerged from the seawater nearby, their doors opening automatically. “Dynamis, I think.”

As if on cue, Mortimer emerged from the ground, holding both Livia and Narcinia with his naked hands. It seemed he could apply his intangibility to others as long as they remained in physical contact.

While Narcinia was clearly shaken, folding her arms and looking at the ground the second Mortimer released her, Livia managed to keep her composure. At least, until she noticed Wardrobe’s remains. “You killed her, Mortimer?”

“I shouldn’t have?” the hitman asked.

“Now it will be a total war,” Livia replied, shaking her head. “Hector cannot back down after this. Maybe... maybe that’s why. Maybe it’s the spark.”

“My garden...” Narcinia lamented, looking at flames consuming her flowers. “I... I wanted to show it to everyone.”

“You will make another,” Livia told the younger girl, before barking orders at Len. “Underdiver, we start evacuating immediately. Mortimer, you will go back inside, bring Bacchus and Sparrow.”

“Should we evacuate at all?” Mortimer asked, glancing at the fortress behind them. Geist had managed to close the hole, and the Dynamis Genomes seemed to have started bailing out. “I mean, it’s crappy, but it’s our turf.”

“I keep dying,” Livia replied, a look of brief concern breaking through her tranquil expression. “My alternate selves. Their life is snuffed out in an instant, and I can barely see the cause. I assume Dynamis has a secret weapon, and they will likely unleash it on the island. Perhaps a nuke.”

Len looked at Ryan. “Not me,” he protested, before adding a caveat, “*this time.*”

Mortimer *immediately* phased through the ground once more, while Len assigned a bathysphere to everyone. “Riri, you go first,” she said, all but shoving him inside.

“Riri?” Narcinia frowned at Len. “Are you two...”

“It’s complicated,” Ryan said, sitting inside the bathysphere. It was a larger variant of the one Shortie used for delivery runs, optimized to hold multiple people inside. He sat on a crimson, semicircular bench, and immediately noticed seat belts. The bathysphere was equipped with multiple screens and buttons and even included what appeared to be an infirmary stock for emergencies. “I’m disappointed by the absence of sickles and hammers.”

“Narcinia, move in,” Livia said with a rush, pushing the younger girl to move inside. The Augusti Princess stopped midway, a strained frown on her face. “I... I don’t understand...”

“Livia?” Narcinia asked, stopping with one foot inside the bathysphere, and another out. “Livia, you’re alright?”

“I don’t get it,” the Augusti princess said. “It’s all bright and then dark...”

Livia suddenly took a step back, a sharp, translucent blade grazing her cheek and drawing blood.

Narcinia let out a scream as an invisible force pulled her backward and out of the bathysphere. Almost on instinct, Ryan froze time and peeked outside the bathysphere.

Narcinia floated six meters above the ground, held by an invisible force; Ryan could see the hint of a hand covering her mouth, and he immediately guessed who was responsible. He had probably stalked the courier and watched the battle from afar, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

When time resumed, Len raised her water weapon at the skies, trying to locate the invisible Genome; glass shards emerged from the sea, surrounding the group and bathyspheres like a flock of flying knives.

“So it’s true.” A voice came out of nowhere, but Ryan instantly recognized it as Shroud’s. “Assassination attempts will always fail.”

“Did Felix send you, *Mathias*?” Livia asked, her face unreadable while she looked up at Narcinia. Clearly, she

could see Mr. Windshield perfectly fine. "You appear together a lot when I look at you."

"Let's just say we share a few moral sensibilities, especially as far as fighting vermin is concerned." Shroud dropped the invisibility, carrying Narcinia above the ground while keeping a hand on her mouth. If she couldn't draw blood, the Green Genome couldn't use her ability. "A power that could have helped the world, as her mother wished... and your father uses it to poison innocent people. You *disgust* me."

Livia's iron glare faltered briefly, a brief look of remorse flashing on her face. "Start by giving me back my mother," the Augusti princess said as she regained her composure, her face harshening again. "Then we will talk about morality. Now, tell your master to show himself."

"Leo isn't here," Shroud replied, glass shards threateningly raised at everyone present, Ryan included. Though the Carnival assassin and handsome courier worked on the same team, he seemed determined to pretend otherwise. "But he will settle the score."

"Lies," Livia replied, her frown deepening. "If it's not Hargraves, then..."

Was...

Did the skies clear up lately? The sun seemed to shine brighter for a second.

Ryan raised his eyes at the heavens, watching in amazement as a pillar of bright light fell from the skies, like judgment from above. He almost didn't notice Len's hand pushing him back into the bathysphere on instinct, while Livia looked at the skies with panic.

Ryan felt something in the back of his skull, and—

Fishes looked at him from outside the window.

Ryan blinked, glancing around in confusion. He was sitting alone on the bathysphere's bench, seatbelt on and laser blade deactivated. The escape pod had clearly fled under the sea, and all he could see through the porthole were dark waters and swimming sea animals.

His enhanced sense of timing told Ryan time had moved forward without him noticing, but he couldn't explain why. Livia's doing? He didn't know her power's limits, but this feeling... It reminded him of Acid Rain triggering her power. A Violet power, not a Blue.

Wait.

Vulcan said that Augustus gained two powers with no side-effects through a genetic quirk. How could they know that? Unless...

Questions for later.

“Shortie?” Ryan asked, trying to make sense out of the bathysphere’s buttons. “Len? Len? Len, answer me!”

“Warning: fallback point compromised,” Len’s pre-recorded message came out of the intercom. *“Bathysphere rerouted to Rust Town. Please sit until the door opens.”*

No answer. That device probably used an automatic pilot of some kind. Still, the screens showed a GPS map of New Rome, alongside the bathysphere’s rough position; he would reach Rust Town quite soon.

However, a large part of the map had turned red, including Ischia Island.

A chill moving through his spine, Ryan undid the seatbelt and looked through the porthole as the bathysphere ascended towards the surface. But as the escape pod emerged from the Mediterranean Sea's depths, the courier saw a vision straight out of Dante's Inferno.

New Rome was on fire.

Flames consumed the city, devastating the harbor, the strip, the entire coast; buildings had collapsed or been incinerated. A firestorm had taken over the highway leading into New Rome itself, with columns of smoke reaching as far as the clouds. Mount Augustus had crumbled, the proud hill now a fuming crater.

"What the..." Ryan muttered to himself, at a loss of words.

The skies brightened again, and a pillar of light fell upon New Rome.

Ryan had to put a hand on his eyes to protect himself from the radiance, but he saw it hit Dynamis' HQ and Il Migliore's tower in the distance. The following shockwave made the bathysphere shake, even if the device was kilometers away from the impact point.

When at long last the bright light subsided, nothing remained of Dynamis' twin towers. Nothing but flames and ashes.

"Len," Ryan turned to the control panel, desperately trying to find anyone to speak to. "Len, answer me? Len?! Len! Jasmine, anyone? Is anyone listening?"

No answers.

How could it be? Had Leo the Living Sun hit the city earlier than expected and gone completely mad? Augustus could probably do that much damage too, but why attack his own seat of power?

Ryan's eyes widened, as it all fell into place.

"Orbital Communications Center."

One of the rooms inside the bunker.

Mechron had designed orbital weapons. If one of his toys remained in the dark reaches of space, a Damocles sword waiting for someone foolish enough to make it fall...

As he looked at the devastation, Ryan couldn't help but wonder how many. How many people did it take? Without Psyshock to supply them with cannon fodder and with Dynamis turning on him, Adam must have thrown his own men into the meat-grinder. And through sheer desperation, he had succeeded.

Ryan had waited too long.

The Meta had unlocked Mechron's bunker.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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Elyshev, Anthony, Particlepigeon, Ryan Trueman,
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Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.**

47: While Rome Burns

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Official chapter music here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=haW_ruZ_Be8

When the bathysphere reached the shore, it stopped at the only place which the Meta-Gang hadn't opened fire on yet: their own turf.

Ryan walked the streets of Rust Town, people fleeing the neighborhood in panic on the other side of the road. The toxic atmosphere, already terrible, was now saturated with smoke and ashes. Without his mask on, the courier might have coughed every minute. The locals were so terrified of the orbital bombardment, that they trampled on other people while trying to escape.

Another pillar of light hit New Rome's south, illuminating the skies and causing a mini-earthquake. A building crumbled at Ryan's left, forcing him to use a time-stop to avoid falling stones and glass shards. He kept going through the chaos until he reached his destination.

The Junkyard.

Before going to this cursed place, the courier had tried to contact, well, *everyone*. But he received no answer but static when he used his phone. Either the orbital laser had

damaged underground cables and other methods of communications... or there was nobody left to answer him.

And when he had looked at Ischia Island from the coast, Ryan only saw flames and smoke.

Ryan had seen the worst hells the post-apocalyptic Earth had to offer across his travels. Irradiated cities, mutant-infested ruins, Monaco, and stuff straight out of H.R. Giger's worst nightmares. But none had hit him as hard as New Rome's current state.

The courier had found his bad ending, and it was all his fault.

He shouldn't have waited for Leo's Carnival to arrive in town nor left the bunker in the Meta's hands; even *Augustus* would have been more responsible than Adam with this technology. The courier might not have pulled the trigger, but he left the gun for anyone to find.

Ryan was alone now, just like when he lost Len the first time. Except for all he knew, she probably *died* on that island. Died saving him.

He would have to go back in time. He couldn't continue after this.

All Ryan could do now was clean up the trash.

As he walked inside the Junkyard's ruins, Ryan started to hear music. An indie-rock tune, sung by none other than Big Fat Adam himself. Only rats watched as the courier made his way through molten trash hills.

In preparation for the confrontation, Ryan had rigged a bomb hidden beneath his suit alongside his other ultimate

weapon, to explode on command. It would make him reload should Adam have one last trick up his sleeve. Thankfully, he always kept a dose of *Rampage* on himself, and so juiced himself up for the big finish. One way or another, this run would end soon.

The scene that awaited the time-traveler at the Junkyard's center was almost surreal, even by his standards.

A mighty, technologically advanced communication tower had sprung from the ground, close to the bunker's entrance. The device reminded Ryan of a black obelisk, albeit one covered with antennas pointed at the sky.

And the Meta-Gang were partying in its shadow.

They had cleared the trash around it to form a wide area of ground on which to stand, half the size of a soccer field. After all that happened during this loop, only five of the Psychos had survived to its final conclusion: Big Fat Adam, Frank the Mad, Acid Rain, Sarin, and a fifth soon-to-be-dead maniac. And instead of securing the area, the group had decided to hold a music jam. Acid Rain and Sarin were playing guitars, Frank was at the bass, Adam sang with a mike.

Ryan recognized the fifth one as the Land's rumored true form, which Jasmine had briefed him on. He could have mistaken the deformed creature for a parody of Area 51 aliens: a misshapen, mouthless humanoid with baby-like short legs and a humongous, hairless head. Unlike its softer grey-skinned cousins, the Psycho seemed almost entirely made of solid dirt, with her eyes glowing yellow.

Holding a rock concert while the city burned? Typical Psychos. But worst of all, Adam looked happy. Blissfully happy, even as smoke and firestorms filled the skies.

This. *This* scene summed up the Meta-Gang in a nutshell.

"You should have named yourself Big Nero, Whalie," Ryan taunted them as he revealed himself, laser blade in his right hand and a sharp edge to his wit. "That would have been more appropriate. Though I would have suggested a fiddle."

The music stopped, as Ryan leaped onto the open field and faced the Meta. The Land immediately reacted by mentally lifting dirt below her, forming a platform to fly on. Perhaps her geokinetic power was inversely proportional to her range, and fusing with an area came at the cost of precision.

"A thief!" Acid Rain snarled, throwing away her guitar and drawing a knife. "I'll gut him open!"

"Behind me, Mr. President!" Frank the Mad declared, rising from behind the bass and tossing it out of his way. The three meter and a half-tall titan prepared to smash the courier like an egg.

Adam raised a hand, stopping his teammates dead in their tracks.

"Come on," Hannifat Lecter said with a cheerful grin, eyeing Ryan with amusement. His soft human skin quickly turned to a shell of hardened carbon. "It's *Cesare*. He's almost part of the family."

"And soon I will be an orphan," Ryan replied with venom. His eyes trailed to the tower behind the group. The Meta must have caused the tremors Len sensed beforehand by unearthing it.

"Wait, he's alone?" Sarin asked the Land, who raised her tiny arms in confirmation. "Wow, it's true what they say. Some folks are just too dumb to live."

"Don't worry about that, Miss Flatulence," Ryan replied, stretching his limbs. "You won't live past the next ten minutes."

"And here I thought you came to listen to our performance," Adam said with mock sadness. "It's Franz Ferdinand's *This Fire*, mate. One of the last songs the band recorded before the wars. Still, call me surprised. A full blast on that island and you lived? They don't make doomsday weapons like they used to."

"So, you were targeting me personally?" Ryan asked. "I'm honored you thought you needed a Mechron-made WMD to take me out. Must have been hard to see me with a paunch that big."

"You and the precog princess. When things started to go sour, I tried to look for the cause, and your name came up a lot." Adam raised his fingers as if to count. "First you got Ghoul, then you put Psyshock six feet under the only way he could ever be. Then the Land tells me you convinced Augustus' goons to give pursuit instead of letting us skip town. That's an awful lot of coincidences, mate. I think you knew exactly what we came in town for, and tried to beat us to the prize."

"What can I say?" Ryan shrugged his shoulders. "I'm a cheat. Did you see the name Cesare in the Dynamis' files? Because it looks like you sent them a pretty nasty severance package."

"Their Elixir supply and resources were useful... until they weren't." Adam dropped his mike and adjusted his clothes. "There's a whole juice lab down there, mate. Advanced enough to make knockoffs of our own. For my men, that's all that matters."

“But not for you,” Ryan noticed. “Before I kick your whale ass and make sure this horrible moment never happens again, you’re going to answer one question, because I truly want to know.”

“A last request?” The Meta straightened around Adam and tossed away their instruments, like a hyena pack waiting for the signal to attack. “Do tell, I’m in the mood to honor it.”

“Why?” Ryan asked, pointing at the burning city. “Why?”

Adam chuckled. “Actually, mate,” he said, a savage grin on his face. “This is all your fault.”

Ryan’s fingers tightened around the laser blade. “*My* fault?”

“Your fault. See, I’ve been juicing up on Elixirs for almost fifteen years. You know the drill. My genetic code degrades, causing cellular degeneration, shortening telomeres, mental instability, tumors, etc... until I take a shot and become healthy again. For a while, I was happy that way. Until I noticed a *tiny* problem.” Adam raised his thumb and index finger, keeping them straight and close to one another without touching. “My powers are starting to go, let’s say, haywire. I guess the Elixirs can’t heal everything, ya know? Bugs slip through.”

“You’re going to die.” Having studied their condition, Ryan knew very well that the Elixirs Psychos consumed were just delaying the inevitable. “Good.”

“Yeah, yeah, well, I came to this place because I thought I could find a cure. But now that you killed Psyshock, we can’t fully hijack Mechron’s central mainframe. We could only settle on partial control.” Adam shrugged, though the dangerous glint in his eye betrayed his true feelings. “Thanks for ruining everything, boyo.”

“You’re welcome. I did my best.”

“Well, looks like you messed up pretty bad then. Because partial control meant we could get our hands on that big interstellar firestick... and it got me thinking.”

Adam looked into Ryan’s eyes, and for a second, the courier saw it all. All the sociopathic, solipsistic narcissism lurking beneath the friendly facade. The savage beast wearing the human skin.

“I’m going to die, but you people...” Adam’s sneer turned into one of pure *hatred*. “You will continue to live your miserable, meaningless lives as if I never existed. That’s fucking selfish, mate. So I figured, pharaohs and kings, they were entombed with their slaves; that’s just the way things are. If I have to go, then my sendoff party will set the whole place on fire.”

Jonestown.

It was Jonestown all over again.

“That’s your motive?” In all of his endless wanderings, Ryan had never hated someone as much as this heartless, psychopathic *prick*. “All this pain and sorrow, just because you wanted to pull off a Jim Jones?”

“What can I say, mate?” Adam shrugged it off with a cold, cruel smirk. “Life ain’t about winning or losing. It’s about being happy. And the truth is, I don’t want anybody to be happy without me.”

Ryan flinched, these words a cruel perversion of his own philosophy.

"Anyway, Cesare..." Adam cracked his knuckles, while Acid Rain played with her knife. Poisonous rainclouds appeared in the skies above them. "I know all about your sister's underwater base. And all the little children inside."

The Ogre's grin turned savage.

"I guess I will have fried fish for dinner."

Ryan stopped time and went straight for the kill.

Obviously, Acid Rain immediately teleported away before his ability took effect, but Ryan anticipated as much. Running straight at Hannifat Lecter, the courier grabbed the plushie hidden inside his suit, flipped the switch, and tossed it into the melee.

When time resumed, Ryan had closed the gap with Adam, getting past his goons to leap on the Meta leader's chest. The madman could barely flinch in surprise before the courier sliced his face horizontally, targeting the eyes.

The madman let out a scream of pain and surprise, before attempting to grab Ryan with his bare hands. Thanks to his enhanced sense of timing and Rampage-boosted body, the courier fled out of range, before dodging a mighty punch from Frank the Mad. The giant's fist smashed the ground with enough force to create a small crater, the entire area shaking from the impact.

Unfortunately, Acid Rain immediately teleported to Ryan's left and stabbed him in the flank with a knife. Only the courier's *Rampage*-boosted reflexes allowed him to leap away and avoid a follow-up strike to the throat; blood dripped from his flank, but the performance enhancer dulled the sharp pain.

"My eyes!" Adam snarled, covering his wound. As Ryan expected, the madman's power only covered his skin, like an outer shell of diamond scales. But one couldn't see with eyes of hardened carbon.

Still standing atop a flying platform, the Land mentally caused stones to rise from the ground in the form of sharp spikes, forcing Ryan to stay on the defensive. Though he leaped around to dodge the stone traps, Frank the Mad began pursuing the courier with astonishing speed. Unlike the frail courier, he simply smashed through the Land's spikes. Sarin, meanwhile, had floated atop a molten trash pile to gain the high ground. Acid droplets had started falling in a faint rain, damaging Ryan's cashmere suit.

And the plushie had awoken, looking around with curious eyes.

"An angel..." Acid Rain said upon noticing the rabbit, so amazed by its terrible cuteness that she stopped her assault on Ryan. "It's an angel."

"The other kind!" Ryan replied while running circles around Frank. Thankfully, while the colossus had speed and range thanks to his size, it was much easier to dodge his attacks in an open space than the bunker's narrow corridors. "Rabbit!"

The plushie raised its ears, listening to him intently.

Ryan pointed a finger at Acid Rain. "Attack!"

"Happy birthday!" The plushie leaped at Acid Rain with astonishing speed, hungry for blood. The maniacal Psycho realized the danger and quickly teleported away. Unfortunately for her, no sooner did she reappear above a pile of trash that the plushie started climbing it. "Let's hug!"

Once the beast was unleashed, none could escape it.

While Acid Rain teleported out of sight and the plushie pursued her across the junkyard, the blinded Adam recovered from his wound to go on the offensive. His mouth widened like a pelican's, enough that the madman could shove an arm down his throat. He brought a long spiked chain out of his own stomach, swinging it with both hands.

"We fight to the death, mate?" Adam asked, with a mix of gleeful savagery and fury. Somehow, he managed to pinpoint Ryan's position even without his eyes. Perhaps he had an enhanced sense of smell or hearing.

"Yours first," Ryan replied, cutting a stone spike with his laser blade as it threatened to impale him. The courier might have said a joke under other circumstances, but he was *through* playing.

He just wanted these monsters *dead*.

"Texas smash!" Frank the Mad relentlessly continued his pursuit, attempting to bullrush the courier. The ground trembled with his steps, Ryan narrowly managing to sidestep to the left before the impact. Instead, the colossus hit a nearby pile of molten trash, metallic garbage absorbed in the colossus' body. When he recovered, Frank had grown half a meter taller.

As Ryan suspected, the Psycho could absorb metals to increase his mass... and his range. He had to kill the weaker Meta first, to make the stronger ones more manageable.

"Let's see you dodge this!" Sarin unleashed a blast of air from her high point, while Adam and Frank converged on Ryan from both sides. The courier stopped time, moving between the various obstacles.

Keeping Frank and Adam for last, Ryan instead rushed at the tower and the Land defending it. The courier grabbed a grenade from under his suit and tossed it at both. The projectile exploded when time resumed, the blowback blasting the Land off her platform and sending the silent Psycho to the ground.

But though Mechron's tower trembled, it didn't break; crimson force fields automatically appeared to shield it from damage.

Though disappointed, Ryan settled for a consolation prize. Like a hawk falling on a mouse, he cut the Land in half below the waist with Reload's blade before she could recover. The creature made no sound and didn't shed blood. Instead, both halves fell off the ground without any reaction.

Was she even alive?

Ryan didn't have time to ask himself questions, as Adam was instantly upon him. The cannibal maniac moved with cat-like grace in spite of his enormous size, his spike chain surging through the air like a swift serpent.

The courier had to stop time to dodge and noticed Sarin ready to attack from her rookery. Grabbing a small gun inside his back pocket, Ryan shot her repeatedly in the face in the frozen time. When the clock moved again, Sarin's head exploded into gas, vaporous fumes escaping from her hazmat suit. Ryan also noticed that Acid Rain's toxic clouds had moved north, perhaps to escape her pursuer.

Changing his strategy from close-combat to ranged attacks, Frank the Mad grabbed his bass and tossed it at Ryan as easily as a frisbee. Ryan managed to leap to the side while the projectile crashed behind him, only to almost stumble.

The courier glanced at his left foot, finding it encased in a shell of stone.

The Land's upper half was crawling at him with her arms, her hateful eyes glowing yellow.

Exploiting his distraction and the timestop's cooldown, Adam caught Ryan's right arm with his chain, the spikes tearing at his flesh. Though he had grown almost numb to any form of pain, the time-traveler had to keep his teeth clenched, as the two Psychos pulled him in opposing directions. The spikes tore through his hand's muscle, making him drop his lightsaber.

Damn, if this continued, they might tear his whole arm off!

"On second thought, mate, I won't kill you." Adam opened his mouth again and spat out a new item from his gullet. A syringe full of an azure blue liquid, and bearing a familiar helix symbol.

An Elixir.

Oh God no.

Anything but *that*.

"I'm going to destroy you," Adam said with a laugh, raising the potion like a knife with one hand and holding the chain with the other. "You know what they say... like father, like son!"

Ryan shouted the safe word. "Jar-Jar B—"

He didn't finish his sentence.

A crimson sphere hit Adam's chain and melted its links, while the surprised Psycho took an anti-tank shell to the face. The blast propelled the invulnerable maniac against the tower's forcefield, while the Elixir shattered on the ground.

"Mr. President!" Frank the Mad immediately attempted to rush at his leader's side, only for an enormous shape to fall upon him from the skies. The impact blew dust in all directions, Ryan only able to see a winged shape pinning the colossal Psycho to the ground, two giants trading blows. Meanwhile, a horde of rats emerged from the junkyard and immediately fell upon the bisected Land, burying her beneath their swarming mass.

Ryan glanced at the spot where Sarin used to stand, noticing Lanka and Jamie in civilian clothing in her place. They looked like *shit*, their face covered with ashes and minor wounds, but the courier had never been so relieved to see them at all.

And of course, she was there. Her mech landed right behind Ryan, battered, dented, but still ready to take names.

"You made me keep your fucking cat, Ryan!" Vulcan declared, raising her cannon at Adam. "You aren't dying before I kill you!"

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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**Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc Claude
Louis Durand, Drekin.**

48: Bad End

Ryan had to admit it, being the damsel in distress was a nice change of pace. Usually, he was the one doing the rescuing.

But it wasn't very relaxing, for the Junkyard had erupted into complete chaos. An increasingly taller Frank traded blows with Wyvern in dragon form, the colossal reptile pushing her opponent against a pile of molten trash. For every hit the superheroine inflicted, the Psycho seemed to gain additional height. However, Lanka sniped him with white-colored spheres from her vantage point, shrinking Frank and keeping his size manageable.

Was she Cancel's lost sister or something?

"You teamed up with Wyvern?" Ryan asked Jasmine, astonished.

"Temporarily," Vulcan replied, unleashing a volley of bullets at Adam. While the Psycho's carbon skin shrugged off the projectiles, the repeated shock prevented him from moving forward. "Very temporarily."

You could tell the situation was *bad* when those two set aside their differences.

Having devoured the Land and left nothing behind, Chitter's rats moved on to Adam, but the Meta's leader proved to be a harder meal. He stomped on the rodents, turning them

into blood smears on the ground; even when they tried to bury him under their weight, his enhanced strength allowed him to shrug them off.

Exploiting the distraction, Ryan grabbed a knife with his unwounded arm and managed to free his leg from the Land's dirt binding with it. Meanwhile, Jamie, showing his badass samurai credentials, jumped off his rookery and created a sword of red light mid-flight. Swinging his blade during the descent, he cut through Frank's back as easily as butter, leaving a scar around the waist.

Unfortunately, the Psycho's metal body quickly regenerated from the wound, and while Lanka slowed down his exponential growth, she couldn't stop it. Frank would reach eight meters in height soon.

"Anything that can take down the communication tower?" Ryan asked Jasmine, needing to shout to be heard over the sound of gunfire. "I mean, their gun is bigger than yours, no offense."

"I wasted most of my good stuff on the reptile over there," Vulcan replied with frustration, quickly running out of ammo. Without suppressing fire, Adam was now free to move and brought out a warhammer from his gullet. "Cover me while I reload."

To give himself more time to think and plan, Ryan activated his power. The world turned violet, the courier looking under his suit with his left arm. He couldn't feel the right one, Adam's chain having shredded its key muscles.

Could a Desert Eagle be powerful enough? A higher caliber gun perh—

"So you were the source of these anomalies."

Ryan flinched, before looking up to the skies.

A man of ivory floated above the Junkyard, shrouded in a blinding electric aura; powerful streams of whitened winds came from his feet, allowing him to hover above the ground. He alone moved in the frozen time, standing above and looking down on the humans below.

Electrohydrodynamics. He used electrical charges to ionize air molecules and allow himself to fly.

“I was starting to wonder,” said Augustus, carrying a half-burnt corpse in his hand. From the clothes, Ryan recognized it as Acid Rain’s. “You would make a powerful Saturn.”

Time resumed, and Lightning Butt focused on the other people present.

The moment Augustus came into view, everyone stopped moving; even the blinded Adam seemed to have sensed his presence. The lightning emperor’s mere presence, and the sheer electrical tension coming from his person, cowed everyone present into silence.

“You failed,” Augustus told Adam, tossing Acid Rain’s corpse on the ground below like a piece of trash. “Even Hargraves’ flames could not warm me. You thought this feeble light could kill me? You thought that *anything* could kill me?”

To his credit, Adam quickly recovered from his surprise.
“Frank, squash him!”

The now eight meters-tall giant immediately pushed Wyvern aside and attempted to smash Augustus with both hands, the way a man crushed a mosquito. Instead of dodging, the lightning emperor raised his arms and stopped the giant’s hands with his own.

As he did, Frank's metal skin shifted around Augustus' fingers, covering them; even Mob Zeus looked briefly surprised by this development. It seemed Frank the Mad's metallic structure tried to digest Augustus' hands but struggled to. It reminded Ryan of a dog trying to chew a bone too hard for its teeth.

But it made no difference.

Augustus looked at Frank and blasted the titan's head with a blinding lightning bolt from his eyes. The sheer power behind the blow melted the Psycho's steel body, leaving a pile of molten metal where the brain should have been. Though pieces of him remained stuck to Augustus, Frank collapsed to his back.

"Ryan, get down!" Vulcan activated her propellers and grabbed Ryan, flying out of the giant's falling shadow. Chitter's rats fled in all directions, while Wyvern, Jamie, and Adam dispersed. Frank hit the ground and blew dust in all directions, missing the tower by an inch. He remained still, even after the dust settled.

Without wasting time, Augustus gracefully landed on the ground and began to slowly walk towards Adam. Instead of cowering, the nihilistic Psycho glared back at the invincible man.

"My sister, daughter, and goddaughter died because of you." There was no word on earth to sum up the cold fury coming from Lightning Butt's mouth right now. "Their deaths were swifter than yours will ever be. I promise you a *Tartarus*."

"Doesn't matter," Adam replied while swinging his warhammer at the invulnerable man's head. "Even if I die, I already won! You all *lost!*"

His weapon flattened on impact, while Augustus didn't even flinch.

"Well, it was fun while it lasted," Adam said, before outright shouting. "Adam to Bahamut! Change target to current lo—"

Augustus casually backhanded Adam in the face, tearing off his jaw and sending the carbon-made man to the ground. The emperor then kicked the Psycho in the stomach with enough strength to make him crash against the orbital tower. While everyone looked on, too terrified to move or say anything, Lightning Butt started stomping his victim. The Psycho's hardened shell folded like aluminum under the savage beating, bones breaking, legs twisting.

When at long last, Adam had become a bloody, battered mess on the ground, Augustus lowered his neck to look at his victim dead in the eyes. "Any last words, vermin?"

Adam laughed.

It wasn't a laugh of despair or madness, but the taunting cackle of a monster happy with his work. A loud, gregarious laughter of pure schadenfreude.

It only enraged Mob Zeus further.

"At the end of the day, for all your delusions, you only bear the first man's name." Augustus raised his foot above Adam's face. "While I am a *god*."

Augustus stomped on the head with a sickening crack. Adam fell silent, drool falling off his mouth; his outside turned from carbon to scarred skin, weak and vulnerable. The Meta was still breathing, but with a nasty concussion.

He might soon wish he was dead though.

"Soldiers, grab this piece of trash and send him to Venus. He will not die until I have him nailed to a cross on Ischia Island, his screams soothing my daughter's soul." Augustus then turned to Wyvern. "We fight now?"

"Fight over what?" Wyvern regained her human form and waved a hand at the devastation around them, while Jamie and Lanka immediately rushed to tie Adam up. "The ashes?"

"Then get lost," Augustus replied, glancing at the communication tower. "Now that I look at this cursed ground clearly, there is an entire crypt of metal beneath our feet. Mechron's tomb I assume."

"What are you going to do?" Wyvern asked with a frown.

"Finish what Hargraves did not have the guts to."

Lightning Butt's electrical aura grew brighter and stronger, his body building up energy inside itself. The courier immediately realized what the thunder emperor planned, and how it would ruin everything.

"No!" Ryan pleaded, turning to Vulcan, whose face he couldn't see beneath her helmet. "There's still bound to be something down there that we can use!"

"Ryan," his girlfriend replied with a hint of finality. "It's over. If we stay, we die."

Augustus unleashed a lightning blast at the orbital tower, his overwhelming power short-circuiting the force fields and snapping the building in half. One half of the tower fell on the junkyard's ground with a cataclysmic shockwave. The aura around Augustus briefly vanished, revealing the human underneath: a statue of ivory, with pieces of Frank's body still stubbornly attempting to eat away his hands.

Lightning Butt looked sick, his cheeks creased and his eyes sullen. But he was already recharging, and this time his aura turned brighter than ever.

Vulcan grabbed Ryan in her arms and flew away, the courier too weakened by his wounded arm and blood loss to protest. Everyone evacuated in short order, Wyvern assisting Lanka and Jamie in dragging Adam away, and leaving the lightning emperor alone.

Twenty minutes later, a mighty thunderbolt hit the junkyard in a cataclysmic detonation, burying Mechron's bunker once and for all.

As expected of Rampage's side-effects, Ryan started throwing up everything he had eaten in the last few days once the drug wore off. With his existing wounds and a damaged arm, Jasmine had him sedated.

When the courier woke up in a hospital bed, it was surrounded by his friends and a cat. Jamie sat on a chair with his girlfriend on his lap, and Jasmine was petting a white cat. Only Lanka stood on her own feet, her back against a white, featureless wall.

"Hello, sleeping beauty," Lanka mused, though her usual devil-may-care attitude had softened up a little.

"My, were you worried for me?" Ryan asked, raising his bandaged left arm. He could actually feel pain now, which was an improvement over its previous state. "Didn't anyone tell you I'm immortal?"

Ki-jung chuckled, though her boyfriend didn't. Jamie was happy to see the handsome courier alive but clearly didn't like the joke.

“There.” Jasmine all but dumped the white cat on her boyfriend. “Now it’s your turn.”

“Schrodinger!” Ryan grabbed the cat, who immediately took the courier’s lap as his own throne. “You’re alive!”

“I don’t know how,” Jasmine admitted. Ki-jung looked at the cat with a worried gaze, clearly forcing herself to stand the feline’s presence for Ryan’s sake. “Out of everyone at the factory, only that fucking cat made it out alive. That pet is luckier than Fortuna.”

“Did she make it out?” Ryan asked, before correcting himself. “Who else made it out?”

“Precious few,” Jamie admitted with a sorrowful face.

“Fortuna and her parents were far enough away from ground zero to avoid being killed outright, probably thanks to her busted luck,” Lanka added. “The house almost collapsed on us when the Meta targeted Mt. Augustus, but we avoided incineration. Neptune survived too.”

“Is...” Ryan’s voice died in his throat. “Is Len alive?”

The group exchanged glances, while Jasmine scowled outright.

“You don’t need to sugarcoat it,” Ryan declared, his hand tensing on Schrodinger’s back. “Say the truth outright. I expect it.”

“Almost everyone on Ischia Island perished, either from the laser itself or the searing ashes,” Jasmine said bluntly, though she was clearly crestfallen. “Only Geist lived if you can call it that, and the few of us who were fighting outside ground zero. The Underdiver... didn’t survive.”

Ryan said nothing for a moment. Whether it was because of the anesthesia, the tiredness, or the gnawing realization that he had completely messed up this run... he couldn't muster the strength to feel anything.

"I'm sorry," Jamie apologized. "I know it's a cold comfort, but nobody could have stopped this."

He meant well, but it only hurt more. "I could have," Ryan said.

Once again, he had failed to protect Len from Psychos.

"You couldn't," Jamie insisted. "It happened in a flash, no time to think."

"You're a hero, Ryan," Ki-jung said. "You probably prevented Adam from firing that beam again and killing thousands."

"It was completely foolish, you mean!" Jasmine snarled at Ryan. "What were you thinking, attacking them head-on?"

"Hey, I tried to call for backup but nobody answered!" Ryan replied. "And I thought I could pull off a Tony Montana."

"Well you did," Lanka said with a snicker. "Your own drug did more damage to your system than the Meta, from what I heard."

"We're in Sorrento, south of New Rome," Jamie told Ryan.

"You can still see the fires out of the windows," Lanka said, Ki-jung elbowing her.

"It's one of our cities, so it's safe here," Jamie reassured the courier, in an almost paternal way. "With your Genome metabolism, you should recover in no time."

At this point, Ryan wasn't sure if he should drag out his recovery time or put a bullet in his head right this instant. He decided to wait a little, to get a clearer picture of the situation. "What's going to happen now?"

"We bury the dead," Jamie said grimly. "After that, we rebuild and we continue to move forward. That's all we can do."

"I don't think now is the time to speak of it," Ki-jung told her fiancé.

"Yeah." Jamie rose up alongside his girlfriend. "We'll let you rest, my friend. Lanka."

"Yeah, yeah," Lanka said, as the trio left Jasmine and Ryan alone. The courier heard her grumble while closing the door behind them. "Goddamn lovebirds..."

Vulcan waited a few seconds for the other Augusti to leave, before turning to Ryan.

"You're holding up?" She tried not to sound concerned but wasn't very good at it. "You owe me one."

"Unfortunately, I can only pay with my body; my money went down in ashes." Ryan's response drew a chuckle from the Genius. "Is my car alright?"

"No," Jasmine shook her head, mourning this beautiful device's destruction too. "Adam blew it up alongside my foundry."

If Len's demise hadn't finished off Ryan, his car's *murder* did. The Chronoradio was gone, and even if he memorized the plans for Len's device, it wouldn't work without the brain powering the Plymouth Fury.

What did his car do to the Meta to deserve such bitter treatment? Besides running them over again and again?

Someone knocked on the hospital room's window, the Genome couple immediately looking up at it.

"Hi," said Wyvern while opening the window from the other side. Ryan found the scene extraordinarily familiar.

Jasmine immediately revealed a gun hidden beneath her trousers, pointing it at Wyvern's face. "Get the fuck out of here, Laura."

"Jasmine, can we stop doing... doing this?" Wyvern sighed. "Stop fighting for once? After everything that happened, aren't you tired of it too? I come in peace."

Vulcan kept her weapon raised, finger on the trigger... and then lowered it.

"How did we fall apart?" Wyvern asked, looking down while she entered the room through the window and landed on the floor.

"You started it," Jasmine replied, putting the gun aside. "Aren't you helping the civilians?"

"I was, but the Carnival arrived to help."

Jasmine's eyes widened in alarm. "Does Augustus know?"

"Not yet, but he will soon," Wyvern said. "He and Leonard can't stand each other, so I expect more fighting soon."

"What about Dynamis?" Ryan asked.

"What I always feared will come to pass," Wyvern admitted. "Alphonse Manada is in charge of what remains, including all

the troops in Sicily, Libya, and Spain. The truce won't hold with him in command. If anything, I think he sees it as an opportunity to wipe you all out for good."

"There's going to be a new round of Genome Wars," Jasmine muttered. "They're going to fight over the scraps."

"Yes."

An awkward silence fell on the room. While he wouldn't live to see it, Hannifat Lecter had won. He had ruined Europe for years to come.

And worst of all... the plushie was still out there.

"This is your fault," Jasmine told Wyvern with a scowl. "You hired the Meta. You planted the seeds from which this disaster grew."

"I... I didn't," Wyvern shook her head. "Jasmine, I swear I didn't know. Neither did Enrique, bless his soul. If anyone is at fault, it's Hector. I would have stopped him if I had known."

"That's your problem, Laura. You could never pay *attention*." Vulcan shook her head, skeptical. "Why are you here?"

"I came to apologize," the heroine admitted, causing Jasmine to blink in surprise. "I still don't understand how we went from friends to enemies, but after all that happened, I've been reevaluating my choices. I don't want to fight you again, and... whatever I did that caused you pain... I wish to apologize for it."

Jasmine listened without a word, different feelings changing her expression. From disbelief, to anger, to regrets. "Get out, Laura," she finally said, unable to process it. "Get out."

"I understand," Wyvern replied with a scowl, before turning to the courier. "Romano, I'm not sure why you chose to join the Augusti, but... what you did was very brave. There's still time for you to turn your life around, become a force of good in the world."

"Yeah," Ryan replied, looking at the sleeping cat on his lap.
"There's still time."

With one last glance to Jasmine and Ryan, Wyvern flew through the windows, probably to rejoin New Rome.

"You knew," Jasmine said once she was gone, glaring at her boyfriend. "About that Mechron bunker. That's what you were hiding."

"I knew Mechron kept a weapon stash below," Ryan admitted. "Not that he had an orbital laser's control panel."

"And you didn't tell me?!" she snarled. "Fuck, Ryan, we slept together! In my bed! It couldn't hurt to trust me a little!"

"Jasmine, I swear—"

"Shut up," she interrupted him, looking away. "Just shut up."

Schrodinger let out a cute meow as if to alleviate the tension in the air. Ryan petted him between the ears, wondering if Shub-Niggurath had also survived the devastation. Though most of his thoughts were for the orphans in Len's undersea base. With luck, the automated systems would provide for them, but without Shortie...

All in all, this run had been a disaster.

Mechron's bunker had been blown up, like his car, the Chronoradio, and whatever brain-copying research Dynamis

stockpiled in their HQ. His plan to transfer someone else's consciousness through time had been dashed.

The courier only had one option left; his only chance to salvage something from this run, and that was Vulcan's power-enhancing armor. But would she help him after everything? He wasn't sure.

At this point, he should just ask Vulcan for her gun and pull the trigger.

And yet...

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Jasmine broke the silence. "I know I'm beautiful, but that's just creepy."

"I was thinking about what you said," Ryan said. "A little trust. You knew I was hiding things but you said nothing to Augustus or the others. Why?"

"I wonder myself," the Genius replied with a shrug. "I dunno, you're smart, you're fun, and I like you. Simple as that."

"Like, as in present? So you still have a thing for me."

"Don't push it, Ryan," she replied, though he saw the edge of a smile on her lips. "Yeah, I still have a little crush, and that's why I'm mad at you for your stupidity. You can only really be pissed at people you hate or care about."

Ryan smiled a little, though the heart wasn't in it. Thing was, he had plenty of people he had grown to hate, but very few people to care for. He had always remained careful not to get attached to others because it only hurt more when he looped.

Thing was, Vulcan had kept some of his secrets when she could have easily betrayed him. Even now, she hadn't completely written him off as a lost cause. She wasn't a good person, as his Dynamis loop could attest, but she wasn't all that bad either.

A little trust... it had been a while since Ryan had trusted anyone except Len, because trust was a fragile thing that could easily turn into an open wound. Because it was something that once given couldn't be easily taken back.

But this whole disaster happened because he couldn't trust anyone but Len with the bunker's secrets. If Ryan always did the same things all over again, then he would get the same results. Maybe... maybe it was time to change.

Maybe it was time for *him* to change.

"Jasmine."

"What?"

"I can time-travel."

Trust was a two-way street, after all.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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49: Time and Again

Standing in the middle of a white, underground experimentation room, Ryan let out a groan. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Too late, asshole,” Jasmine replied, as she used a screwdriver to close the armor’s lightweight alloy chest plate, leaving only the courier’s head exposed. Eugène-Henry Schrodinger meowed at her side, looking at his master with curiosity. “But I added a urine-recycling system if you want to drink your own piss.”

“Charming.” Ryan’s body didn’t feel so heavy, even if he wore a twenty-five kilogram suit of armor. The weight was evenly distributed to lessen the strain on his muscles, and the servos provided additional strength. While the courier wouldn’t be able to move as fast as in his glamorous suit, he could probably punch through concrete.

As per his demand, Jasmine had painted the armor purple, with orange lenses for the helmet’s eyes. Though Ryan looked like an oversized humanoid bug in it, he would remain outrageously flashy, and that was all that mattered.

Hell, his armor’s design matched Vulcan’s own. Wasn’t that adorable? Ryan had also memorized its schematics, so he could rebuild it in a future loop if needed.

Separated from a control area by a door and Plexiglas window, the place used to be an underground police

interrogation room before the Wars. Jasmine had repurposed it into a lab, even managing to complete the armor in a matter of days using available material. The makeshift workshop was a far cry from Vulcan's previous foundry, but it was sufficient.

They didn't even have to lie about that project, not completely at least. Vulcan had promised Augustus that she would work on a new type of armor capable of enhancing Ryan's power, and the would-be emperor had given his seal of approval. It seemed the courier's power had left a good impression on Lightning Butt, or he just didn't care anymore after his daughter's demise.

Say what you wanted about the Augusti, but they got things *done*.

"Should have figured it out sooner," Jasmine grumbled, as she grabbed the last part of the armor she hadn't put on Ryan yet: the helmet. "You were just too fucking perfect. Was it a repeat performance? Did you fine-tune your sweet-talking until it worked?"

"No." Though Ryan had centuries of experience with women, so he knew what made people tick. "You tried to kill me in a previous loop."

"Did I succeed?" she asked, almost hopeful.

"Nope. Not even close."

"A shame. Guess I might succeed this time."

"It's fine, half my girlfriends tried to kill me at one point or another," Ryan replied with a smirk. "I'm a masochist."

"I know you are," Jasmine replied with a chuckle, though her mood quickly soured. "I've got a request, Ryan."

"A request from you?" Ryan asked, quite surprised. Vulcan didn't do requests, she gave orders. "How can I refuse?"

"If this fails... and it won't fail, because I'm a genius..."
Jasmine gathered her breath, as if admitting the mere possibility of failure took a colossal effort on her part. "But let's assume that if it fails..."

"I won't be able to transfer your mind." In Ryan's experience, failure would be the rule, and a potential success the exception.

"Yeah, right Sherlock," she snapped, clenching her teeth. "If I don't make it, it means I will cease to exist. The me right now."

"You will just lose your memories," Ryan argued. "Don't be so pessimistic. It's amnesia, not death."

"I will lose memories of things I haven't done. Stop kidding yourself, Ryan. I'll be erased, end of the story." She let out a sigh as if bracing herself for death. "So, if I don't make it... I want you to leave my other self alone. Make sure she lives and doesn't go to corpo-jail, but don't pull off your summer fling crap on her. Don't replace me with another Jasmine."

"I understand," Ryan said.

"Before, I said you wouldn't forget me, and I mean it now. Even if I disappear... promise you won't forget me."

"I promise."

He had made that oath before and always kept it.

The helmet in her hands, Jasmine pushed her lips against Ryan's. The courier put his hands behind her waist, the armor clinking as it moved, and held her tight. It was a passionate, intense kiss; he felt as if Vulcan wanted to eat him on the spot.

This may be their last.

"Don't forget that," Jasmine said upon breaking the embrace and putting the helmet on Ryan's face. The courier started to breathe with a respirator and see the world through lenses. Vulcan then tried to grab Schrodinger, but the cat stubbornly refused to get caught.

"I think he wants to stay," Jasmine mused.

"It's a Schrödinger's cat," Ryan replied, easily seizing the cat in his armored arms. "He'll improve the odds."

"Whatever, I hope he has enough lives remaining," Jasmine replied, closing the room's door behind her. The Genius sat next to a control panel beyond the window, sparing her boyfriend one last glance before starting her work.

The plan was for Ryan to open a rift to the Purple World with his enhanced power. Though the courier had never succeeded in doing so for centuries, it should allow for physical time-travel, at least in theory. It was a far-fetched plan, even a risky one, but they had exhausted all other options. Since they had lost the necessary tech for a consciousness transfer and Europe would soon erupt in conflict, there was no other way for Jasmine to survive the restart.

The chances were slim, but one could always hope.

"If you think you might die, why are you going along with it?" Ryan asked Jasmine as she began hitting buttons on her control panel, fine-tuning the armor's functions. Schrodinger waited, strangely silent. "You could keep me chained up in your basement."

"Don't tempt me," Jasmine replied, pulling a lever on her control panel. Words and numbers started to appear on Ryan's lenses, the suit's systems activating. "Roughly eight million people live in New Rome and its countryside. The Meta killed what, two, three million of them? No matter how I see it... one versus three million. You would have to be a huge dick to consider it a fair deal."

"Some would have thought otherwise," Ryan admitted. One Genius tried to keep his brain in storage in an old loop, to prevent the courier from reloading. "That's why I tried to keep my secret under wraps after a few betrayals."

"Poor you," Jasmine mocked him, before looking at the armor regretfully. "I was a hero once."

Ryan said nothing.

"I just wanted to change the world. Make an impact. Like your Len girl is doing, though she doesn't get it yet. I guess that's why I wanted you on my team, Ryan; I had the feeling we were going to do great things together."

"We are," Ryan reassured her.

"Yeah," she replied, stopping her work to look at him through the window. "Make sure this disaster never happens again, okay? Kill that fatass."

"I'm killing him in every single loop from now on, I promise," Ryan said, frowning. "If I told the Augusti about the bunker

—”

“No, don’t, unless I follow you. At best, Augustus will blow up Rust Town like he did now, casualties be damned. At worst... I don’t want to think about it.” Vulcan clenched her fists, scowling. “If I don’t make it, go to Laura.”

“I’m sorry, have I misheard?” Ryan asked, astonished. “You want me to go—”

“I was jealous, alright!” the Genius snapped, interrupting her boyfriend. “Because she’s so fucking *perfect!* And now she just apologizes? It’s sickening.”

Ryan didn’t answer, letting Vulcan vent out all her pent-up frustration. He had the feeling that the short Genius had invested so much in her bitter rivalry with her former teammate, that she had no idea what to do now that Wyvern had thrown in the towel. Maybe with time, Jasmine would learn to move on. To stop hating.

If she had time.

“I know her better than anyone,” Jasmine grumbled in admission. “She’ll help getting rid of that bunker, if only because she’s too stupid to see the possibilities. She isn’t corrupt, just goddamn naive.”

Ryan wasn’t sure if it was meant to be a compliment or an insult. Knowing Jasmine, probably both. “Do you regret joining the Augusti?” the courier asked his girlfriend.

She considered the question for a few seconds. “No, I don’t regret it,” Vulcan finally said. “It wasn’t the best choice, but it was mine. If that makes sense.”

It didn’t, but the courier accepted it all the same.

In any case, the Genius finished typing on the control panel and looked through the window. "Ryan, we're ready. Open the path to that Purple World, for the both of us."

"I will do all I can."

"Do or don't. There is no try."

Both burst out laughing; Ryan couldn't believe they even shared the same love for pop culture. Truly, they had been a match made in mafia heaven. Even if it ended terribly... this loop had been something special.

Gathering his breath and holding Schrodinger in his arms, Ryan activated his time stop. Now was the moment of truth.

The world turned violet, as the Purple World and their universe converged. Instead of freezing in time, Vulcan's armor kept working inside the temporal anomaly. Even if the experiment failed, at least Ryan could upgrade his arsenal for later runs.

Two seconds within the time-stop, the courier immediately noticed something unusual. Bright violet particles began to appear inside the interrogation room, swirling points of light coming off from his person. They floated around the room, even as the universe remained frozen.

The armor was meant to focus Ryan's power, to fully harvest the theoretical 'violet flux radiation' that powered spacetime manipulators. Could this be those particles?

As two seconds turned into three, four, then five, the number of these lights only increased at an exponential rate; from a few dozens to thousands, shrouding everything around him. Their color turned from bright violet to purple, and they grew from the size of fireflies to bubbles.

At this point, Ryan reached the ten seconds limit and decided to stop before he accidentally made a new save. This was a mere initial test to access more power from the Purple World, but it wasn't worth setting New Rome's destruction in stone.

The genome hastily cancelled his power...

But the world remained frozen.

In fact, the number of particles around him only increased, until they drowned his sight entirely. Schrodinger, Jasmine, the entire room vanished behind a veil of colored bubbles.

"Jasmine?" Ryan attempted to move, but his body refused to. Or rather, the armor didn't follow his movement, keeping his limbs encased in steel. He couldn't even sense Schrodinger in his arms. "Jasmine, I can't stop!"

No one answered.

The veil of purple bubbles split open, finally allowing Ryan to see through the armor's lenses. But instead of the interrogation room, the courier looked at an icy, silent wasteland beneath a dark sky.

Was this Antarctica? It would fit the stars' positions in the skies.

Strangely, while the bubbles remained at the edge of his vision and the armor refused to move, Ryan saw snow move with the wind. It felt like watching a 3D movie from an outside perspective.

Ryan's viewpoint focused on a dark metal dome emerging from the snow; perhaps a research station or something similar. His vision glitched out, showing a mahogany desk in

a darkened room. Three figures spoke around a table, although Ryan couldn't see them clearly; they appeared as phantoms made of blue particles.

"These higher dimensions defy physics and our understanding." A woman's voice. *"Yet, to master these alien worlds and conquer the stars is mankind's destiny. To survive, even thrive, in this hostile universe, humanity must ascend to a higher state. From man to overman... from homo sapiens to homo novus."*

"Ascension through genetic engineering." A similar voice, but slightly different. Ryan couldn't explain it, but it seemed like the same actor voicing two characters. *"But governments and institutions will try to stop us, to preserve the status quo. Those old fossils can't see what's up ahead; they live in the past, while the future came to us with this craft. We were warned."*

"Old nations are fragile things that will crumble to dust, or they will adapt. The chaos we will unleash..."

"Is well within our budget."

What was that? A vision of the past?

The scene glitched out again, and this time he could only hear broken voices; purple particles obscured his vision, like a VHS tape suffering from a breakdown.

"There is no place for Black... out of all the colors, it alone can't be safely harnessed. The creatures within the black dimension do not seem malicious, but their mere existence tears our lower reality apart. Physical laws cannot coexist with paradoxes."

"All the ultimate ones are compassionate, but also narrow-minded... they only understand lower universes through the prism of their color. Limitless power without complexity."

"Or perhaps they see farther than we do."

The veil of purple parted ways, revealing a green meadow populated with white rabbit plushies, dozens of them. They all looked at him, raising their ears as if they could see him through time and space. Their fur was covered in blood, and the courier noticed a dismembered human corpse hidden behind tall grass.

"Hi," Ryan said.

The plushies raised their tiny paws and waved at the courier in perfect synchronization.

The purple particles' brightness intensified, and in a blink, they all exploded in a blinding flash. Ryan had to squint, though he managed to see a shadow inside the light; through it he saw hints of impossible geometries, shifting spaces and doors to other alien worlds. A crossroads between realities, whose existence defied the physics of mankind's universe.

He had entered the Purple World.

The shadow grew in size as if Ryan approached it. It vaguely looked like an inverted pyramid covered in eye-shaped spheres, though the courier couldn't work the details through the purple light. However, he could tell it was colossal in size. A flying structure the size of a planet, maybe a star...

No. Not a structure.

A living being.

The godlike entity looked at Ryan with its countless eyes, and—

It was May 8th, 2020, a brand new day in Rome.

His hands on the driving wheel, Ryan immediately parked at the nearest spot and glanced through the window. Cars passed by his Plymouth Fury and made their way towards the glitzy city, ready to gamble their souls to win fortunes in its glamorous casinos. Mount Augustus and Dynamis' HQ stood proud, two would-be nations facing each other.

Ryan observed his surroundings, trying to gather his thoughts. He had traded the armor for his usual clothes, and after checking, confirmed that everything was back in its proper place. Either the entity had killed him, or it activated a failsafe in the Genome's own ability.

And no sign of Vulcan either. She was supposed to call him immediately should she somehow manage to travel back in time, and so far, his phone had remained silent.

Jasmine hadn't made it through.

"Well..." Ryan let out a deep, sad sigh. "That was a failure."

The time-traveler wasn't surprised, just... disappointed.

At least Ryan had managed to go back after all, instead of accidentally making a new save. It had only cost him a trusted friend, and everything else. But the Genome had a chance to make things right, and he wouldn't waste it.

Gathering his breath, Ryan put on the chronoradio, and prepared to make his way towards Renesco's place.

"I still think we're alone in the universe."

Ryan stopped, as Len's voice came out of the chronoradio.

"It's all dark and cold beyond our little blue planet."

"We aren't alone," Ryan's own voice answered through the radio. *"And if you ask me, the stars shine brighter still."*

The courier behind the wheel froze, as he heard himself discuss with Len through the radio. It didn't take him long to realize what was happening.

He listened to a recording. A recording of that conversation with Len, on the orphanage's roof.

How? He didn't record it, and neither did Shortie as far as he knew! How did it travel back in time? Did Len manage to send a recording through her device before Mechron's satellite claimed her life? Or was it that strange entity's doing?

Whatever the case, the whole orphanage conversation repeated perfectly, as Ryan had experienced it. Eventually, the courier's own words echoed in his car.

"It can improve. Len, all you see is the dark, but everywhere you look, there's light."

Yes. Even if the world held much sorrow, it was also worth saving.

Ryan pushed the accelerator and drove towards New Rome, to begin again. It didn't matter how many tries it would

take, how many false starts and bad endings he would have to go through. He had a city to save, and a Perfect Run to complete.

The courier had made a promise to Vulcan, and he would keep it.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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50: Past Fragment: How to Tame Your Plushie

- *Spring 2018, farm near Firenze, Italy.*

An eighteen-years old Ryan Romano kicked the laboratory's door open, naked as the day he was born. "Braindead!" he shouted, raising a rabbit plushie above his head. "I did it! I did *it!*"

His 'roommate' Alchemo, who had been busy operating on an extracted dog's brain, raised his head at Ryan. This lanky cyborg had bones made of brass, steel pumps for organs, and glass for veins; his hands ended with syringes. A brain and two green eyes floated in its glass dome of a skull, glaring at the time-traveler.

"Why are you naked, you shameless exhibitionist?" The voice that came out of the cyborg's speaker was annoyed, but not surprised. "Have you let your base, biological urges run wild yet again?"

"Yes, but no!" Ryan replied happily, waving his new invention at the cybernetic Genius. "I just couldn't wait to show you the *truth!*"

The cyborg looked at the beautiful toy without a word. For a moment, the only sound that echoed in the workshop was that of computers. The Genius's laboratory was a true den of mad science, a chaotic gallery of brains in jars, tubes full

of multicolored, chemical substances, and experimental weed strains. The Chronoradio awaited on a table nearby, hooked to an artificial brain and a miniature particle accelerator.

“What is this?” Alchemo finally asked. “A scavenged children’s toy?”

“The test probe!” Ryan replied proudly. “It’s way more imaginative than another rover!”

“And *why* a lagomorph plushie, exactly?”

“Well, it’s cute. If the dimension is inhabited, it will lull the locals into complacency.”

To prove it, Ryan flipped the back switch, waking up the plushie. Its blue eyes shone with artificial light, and it immediately played a pre-recorded message, “I love you!”

“See?” Ryan asked. “It comes with lasers and is programmed to protect children under the age of thirteen. It’s completely safe.”

“Sometimes I wonder if your neural connections are damaged beyond repair,” Alchemo said, absentmindedly finishing his current surgery. “But it is as you wish.”

Alchemo, or *Braindead* as Ryan liked to call him, was a Genius with a special focus on neural technology. Brain-machine interfaces, brains in a jar, sensory drugs, if it involved neurons, he could do it. Ryan had known him for over two years, at least from his point of view. They even started a drug cartel together in a previous loop, though that venture ended with Ryan shot by one of his maddened customers.

But it was fun! Maybe Ryan will dedicate this new loop to make their *Rampage* start-up work this time?

In any case, the time-traveler had dedicated the last decade or so to mastering Genius tech, learning from the best. With enough knowledge, the time-traveler hoped he could find a way to travel further back in time; before he drank his Elixir.

Progress was slow but worthwhile. Alchemeo in particular might finally find a way to make the Chronoradio work.

“Romano.”

“Yes?”

“Put something on before the Doll sees you,” the Genius all but ordered his roommate. “You already corrupted her mind enough with your ‘body enhancements.’”

“You’re just jealous of my android design talent.”

“I fail to see the use in mammarys in an asexual gynoid construct,” Alchemeo replied icily, completely missing the point. “Anyway, toss that thing into the accelerator. You still will not tell me the purpose of these experiments?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Ryan replied, moving towards the device. The mini particle accelerator took the shape of a small metal tube with a hatch, hooked to the Chronoradio. Ryan quickly opened it and put the plushie inside, like a child in an escape pod.

“We won’t know unless you try,” Alchemeo grumbled.

Well, maybe Ryan could? Most of the people he confided in during the early loops didn’t believe him, but Braindead had grown more and more open-minded in the Violet Genome’s

company. “How about I tell you if the experiment is a success?” the courier asked, before remembering something important. “Also, you should stop abusing that *metaboost* drug you designed. The side effects will catch up to you.”

“How do you know—were you looking into my stash? You thief, I should have you expelled from my property!”

“Sure, sure,” Ryan replied, knowing the cranky genius’s bark was worse than his bite. “Alright, so the particle accelerator should send the plushie to that alternate dimension I told you about. It is equipped with a camera and the best artificial intelligence hardware I could find.”

“Knowing you, that’s not saying much.”

Ryan eventually put on a red shawl around his waist, though only because Braindead refused to activate the machine unless he covered his most powerful weapon. Once they were ready, Alchemeo transformed his fingers from syringes to USB keys and hooked himself to a computer. The particle accelerator made a terrible sound as it activated, like the roar of a living engine.

“So far so good,” Braindead said, processing data directly into his brain. “Energy readings are stable.”

“Did it teleport?” Ryan asked, hands clenched in excitement.

“I wouldn’t say it *teleports*, but it coexists in two dimensions so long as the accelerator is active,” Braindead replied with what could pass for a shrug. “Are you sure you want that device hooked to a car’s engine? Seems like a waste of promising technology.”

"Oh, I'm certain." If the accelerator managed to send the plushie into another dimension, then it should allow the Plymouth Fury to do the same. Ryan could settle for an alternate Earth where his family and Len were both still alive. "Have you watched *Back to the Future*?"

"I don't watch movies, I *live* them."

Oh, right, the old Genius hooked his brain to artificial ones to experience false memories. Ryan himself wondered if he should enter the market considering his wealth of experience, though two-thirds of his past would be rated *18+*.

Eventually, the noise from the particle accelerator lessened and finally subsided completely. Ryan expected to find the plushie missing, but instead, a brief, violet flash suddenly erupted from the accelerator the second he opened the hatch.

When it subsided, his creation looked up at its maker with its big, beautiful blue eyes. Ryan blinked, the plushie tilting its head to the side.

"Uh, Brainy, are you controlling my rabbit from afar?" Ryan asked, the plushie raising its ears as if it was a living being, instead of a stylized exploration probe.

"Let's play together!" said the plushie, raising its tiny hands on its own. The time-traveler started hearing sound coming from the robot, strange whispers the time-traveler couldn't decipher. Was the speaker broken?

"Why would I touch that dirty thing, except with a stick?" Alchemeo replied, disengaging from the computer to observe this furry wonder of engineering. "Perhaps the energy blast fried the hardware?"

The plushie glared at the Genius, its blue eyes turning red.

Aww, it could even make an angry fa—

ZAP!

Alchemo's glass skull exploded as a laser went through it, vaporizing the brain inside. Ryan barely had the time to cover his head with his arms, shards cutting his skin while the cyborg's body collapsed to the ground.

The rabbit's eyes shone with malice, the hidden lasers within having activated on their own.

"Damn it, that's the fifth time!" Ryan complained, looking at Alchemo's remains. "*Fifth* time I got him killed!"

The plushie clearly didn't think it did anything wrong. "Let's go to Disneyland!"

"Not today," Ryan replied, deeming this experiment a failure. "Now I have to reload before Doll finds him."

With a sigh, the courier casually headbutted the nearest jar and used a glass shard to slice his own throat.

Ryan woke up a few minutes earlier, gazing into a blue abyss.

The plushie looked back at the time-traveler, orienting its ears at him instead of attacking immediately.

What happened? Why did Ryan reload now instead of the day before? He hadn't created a new save point since yesterday night! Did... did the experiment force him to save

on reflex? Whatever the case, Ryan was sure it *remembered*.

“It is still in our dimension?” Alchemeo replied, moving towards the accelerator to look at death once more. “Is the hardware still functional?”

The plushie’s eyes turned red yet again.

Ryan immediately attempted to activate the switch on its back and save the Genius, but the plushie hopped out of the particle accelerator and onto a nearby table. Alien voices echoed through the room, as the rabbit’s left hand revealed a hidden blade, which it quickly raised at Ryan.

“Wait, you equipped it with a switchblade?” Alchemeo asked. “Also, you have a weird choice in sound design for that thing.”

“It was for self-defense only!” Ryan replied, wondering if he should just use a time-stop and be done with it.

But he couldn’t figure out what happened for the life of him. The time-traveler didn’t program the plushie to react like this! Had the accelerator damaged the hardware inside? It was as if something else, something *intelligent*, controlled it from afar...

Ryan’s eyes wandered to the plushie’s shadow, and he realized it didn’t belong to a rabbit anymore. The shape didn’t fit any creature of this world, but that of a monster with tentacles, appendages, and impossible geometry defying comprehension.

Okay. The good news, the particle accelerator worked. Somewhat.

Bad news, it had worked in reverse, bringing something *in* instead of sending a probe *out*.

“What is all this racket?”

A new voice echoed in the workshop as its door slowly widened, and a redheaded, green-eyed woman walked in. While she looked normal at first glance, with a lovely heart-shaped face, one only had to give a cursory glance at her arms to realize her true nature: that of a lifelike mannequin, animated through technology.

Doll was a robot, a gynoid animated by an artificial brain created by Alchemo; one advanced enough to pass the Turing test. Though he pretended to have created her to assist him in his work, Quicksave was sure the Genius actually wanted human company. Brainy might have let go of his physical needs, but emotional ones were another matter entirely.

Still, Alchemo had only equipped her with a human face, a featureless body, and called it quits. It had fallen to Ryan to make her body truly humanlike, in all the ways that mattered.

He even gave her a name.

“Tea, back off!” Ryan shouted, the plushie hiding its switchblade arm behind its back and changing its eyes from red to blue. Even the alien voices had suddenly fallen silent.
“It’s dangerous!”

“Dangerous to you, mayhaps,” Alchemo mused, none the wiser. “Methinks you cannot control your own creations.”

“Dangerous?” Tea looked at the plushie, immediately joining her hands together. “It is so adorable... what are you hiding

behind your back?"

The plushie slowly revealed his hand.

But instead of a switchblade, it held a rose.

"I love you!" it said to Tea.

The gynoid couldn't help but gush, as she took the flower. *Wait, Ryan thought, where did it find a rose in this lifeless dump?* "Thank you," Doll said, petting the plushie behind the ears. "It is adorable."

"Tea, step away from the rabbit," Ryan pleaded. "You don't know where it has been!"

"But look at it, it's cute," the gynoid replied, holding the rabbit on her shoulder like a child, and the tiny monster didn't resist. She looked at Alchemo, who had observed the scene with some degree of amusement. "Can I keep it, Father?"

"If you want, Doll," the Genius replied with a grunt, uncaring. "Do as you wish with it."

"Hey, wait, you can't dispose of my stuff like that!" Ryan protested.

"Stop stealing from my medicine stash, and we'll talk."

The plushie looked at Ryan over Doll's shoulders, its eyes turning from blue to red.

Eventually, what was bound to happen, happened.

A containment breach.

"Research log B-101," Ryan told himself, fully dressed and rifle in hand. He didn't record anything though; he just wanted to monologue. "My hunt for the plushie continues. The beast has eluded capture so far, but I do not despair."

The plushie had used its cuteness to lull Tea into a false sense of safety, and then immediately ran away when she wasn't looking. Ryan had followed its trail for over three days.

It wasn't difficult. He just had to follow the corpses, strung to trees with their own intestines.

"The beast is learning," Ryan observed. The first 'ropes' had been crudely designed, collapsing under the weight of their owner. The newest ones were thicker, stronger, more complex. "Though it appears to focus its unbridled hostility towards humans."

While the rabbit attacked Alchemo on sight, Tea didn't trigger a hostile reaction. Ryan had also crossed paths with animals like wild dogs and hares during the search, yet none had perished at the plushie's vicious claws.

Perhaps it found humans to be the most dangerous game of all, or something about *homo sapiens* infuriated the creature on an instinctual level.

Eventually, Ryan tracked the plushie to a farm closest to Alchemo's. He didn't have to look too hard; he had heard the voices when he approached the area.

He found the farm's owner, a woman named Sarah, tied up on a bed of broken wood right in front of her barn. The plushie had shoved an apple down her throat, like a pig ready for roasting. The responsible party stood next to her, eyes crimson and white fur drenched in blood.

It seemed to struggle with lighting a match with its associated box, while its captive looked at Ryan with pleading eyes.

"Bad rabbit!" Ryan shouted, raising his rifle at the monster he had created. "Drop the match!"

The rabbit looked back at the time-traveler and finally lit a match.

"Don't do it," Ryan warned, keeping the rifle aimed at the creature's head. In response, the plushie dangled the match over the woodpile, seemingly entertained by the woman's muffled cries. "I know violence solves many problems, but not all of them!"

"Mom?"

Ryan and the plushie looked at the barn, a blonde child no older than ten peeking through the door. A tense standoff between an armed man and a murderous rabbit, with his mom in the middle...

Well, this must have been quite an embarrassing sight.

"Child detected." The rabbit's eyes turned blue, and the alien voices fell silent. "Entering cute mode."

The rabbit instantly dropped everything to rush at the child, the lit match falling towards the woodpile and the captive. With supreme marksmanship honed through countless restarts, Ryan managed to shoot the match with the rifle, blowing it out before it could set the victim ablaze.

The child screamed and stumbled as the plushie powered through the barn's doors.

"You are my best friend!" said the rabbit, grabbing onto the screaming child's leg with its bloody hands. "Let's hug!"

Ryan briefly worried for the child, but thankfully, besides refusing to let the kid's ankle go, the rabbit didn't attack in any way. The plushie's programming kept working, preventing it from attacking children under thirteen and activating the protection subroutine.

Now, the time-traveler just had to free the captive, pull the switch, and everything would return to normal—

Pop.

Ryan blinked, unsure if he was experiencing hallucinations.

For while the blood-drenched rabbit still held on tight to its new, and unwilling, best friend... a second, white-snow plushie had appeared out of nowhere, looking at Ryan with its big blue eyes.

Uh...

That wasn't good at all.

Research log C-011...

Well, actually, now wasn't the time to monologue.

Though only a ruin after the world ended, Firenze had only a few days ago welcomed a population of refugees, trying to rebuild the city. Dynamis had an enclave there, and even Augustus' drug cartel had a presence in the area.

But today, Ryan didn't see any humans as he walked through the city's empty streets. He didn't hear a sound.

But he wasn't alone. Everywhere around him, white forms occupied every corner of the city.

Rabbits.

Rabbit plushies, everywhere. On the roofs, on the ground, behind the windows. None made a sound or even twitched. They just watched Ryan, as if they were all mere drones bound by a singular intelligence.

"Well," Ryan said, "I fucked up."

It seemed that the child had triggered a new pattern in the creature. Perhaps its sheer happiness allowed it to divide, or it 'summoned' alternate versions of itself from other universes. Whatever the case, the plushie had started *reproducing*.

And like all rabbits... the plushie multiplied exponentially. By the time Ryan had tracked the second one to Firenze half a week after the farm incident, it was already too late. The time-traveler wasn't sure what happened to the city's population, but he had no intention of finding out.

"Alright, I just doomed humanity yet again," the time-traveler said, sighing before looking for a rope to hang himself with while the rabbits watched. "I shouldn't make it a habit..."

During the next loop, Ryan went to sleep with a clear mind, happy to have contained the dangerous anomaly.

In the end, Ryan dealt with the plushie by activating his time-stop and flipping the switch off the moment he reloaded. The creature possessing it might seem capable of

remembering his past loops, yet it remained bound to its host body's programming. Sort of.

As it turned out, the accelerator had fried the hardware, damaging the camera. Not only could Ryan not extract any information about whichever dimension the plushie had been exposed to, the robot shouldn't even *function*.

Why did it follow the original programming if the CPU no longer worked?

Ryan himself didn't remember how he made the plushie in the first place, and half of its pieces didn't make sense on a closer look. It had been a stroke of inspiration, born of his raw nakedness. Perhaps the plushie's behavior was caused by its mechanical part, or by the abomination now using it as an anchor on Earth... or perhaps a combination of both.

Ryan hesitated about destroying his creation, considering its threat to the world at large, but decided to keep it. It could prove an amusing last-resort weapon, and he was curious about its true nature.

Also, destroying the plushie might release whatever dwelled inside into their reality. Even Ryan wasn't crazy enough to try.

In any case, the courier closed his eyes, dreaming about new adventures and how he would tell Braindead the truth. The plushie looked down from the bedside table, inactive.

For hours, there was no movement in the room. Even the noises coming from Alchemo's workshop stopped; the Genius ended his hard day's work with a moment of relaxation, replaying harvested memories from before the war.

And then, with the slightest click sound...

The plushie's 'off' switch flipped to 'on.'

Without making any noise, the plushie hopped on the bed, leaning over the sleeping Ryan. The courier's slumber was too deep for him to notice, even as the shadow of death approached. The plushie observed its human creator without a sound, watching his chest rise up with his breath.

"I will always be your friend," the plushie finally said.

It raised the bedsheet to keep Ryan warm and then sat on the nearest pillow. The switch moved from on to off, and the plushie played statues.

They would have so much fun together...

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

This interlude was selected by my patrons on **Patreon**. Enjoy.

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51: Route Split

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Hi everyone, *The Perfect Run's* first volume is now available on [Amazon Kindle!](#) I would be thankful for any review/rating!

For each new review, someone is saved from the Plushie's wrath!

"So, let me get this straight," Wyvern asked, floating above the street outside Ryan's hotel bedroom. "You came to New Rome hunting for the Meta-Gang, who managed to uncover a cache of Mechron tech beneath Rust Town. You also strongly believe that someone in Dynamis, probably Hector—namely, my *employer*—hired them to harass the Augusti."

"Pretty much, yes." Ryan nodded, wearing nothing but his underwear.

Wyvern smiled. "Am I being pranked?"

Was it because Ryan refused to wear a shirt? He had been replicating the plans for Vulcan's armor when the superhero knocked on his window to make her sales pitch. "I would like to joke about it, but no, I'm serious." The courier raised a thumb up. "Honest."

Wyvern crossed her arms, a frown on her face. "Do you have any proof? These are dangerous allegations."

"You can ask Ghoul," Ryan said, pointing at a cooler next to his bed. "He makes the best ice cream."

The superheroine's frown only deepened. "But you didn't let the Private Security bring him in custody."

"I won't surrender my favorite cooler," Ryan replied. "Or else your incorruptible mooks will let him escape."

"This meeting is going as well as I thought it would," Wyvern lamented. "Let's assume for a second that this isn't some conspiracy theory and that I believe you. Why are you telling me this?"

"Because somebody trusted you."

"Somebody?" Wyvern put her hands on her waist. "Quicksave, it will be difficult for us to build a degree of trust if you play your cards close to the chest. All in all, I find your tale rather... *flimsy*."

"Well, she said you were naive too," Ryan said and shrugged.

"I will not set aside what you said, but I only have your word on it. While you have a reputation for reliability, your psych evaluation implies you are highly unstable and prone to attention-seeking behavior."

"Duh, you can't make life a comedy without an audience. If you're alone, it's just a tragedy."

Wyvern sighed, before offering Ryan the Dynamis business card anyway. "While I'm not sure you will follow through after what you just said, I suggest you meet with my manager. See if you are a good match, clear this up."

"I hope he won't mind if I bring a bottle of weedkiller?"

Wyvern couldn't help but chuckle in response. "I wouldn't try if I were you. Enrique isn't fond of aggressive negotiations."

And with those unwise words, Dragon Mom flew away and left the courier alone.

She didn't believe Ryan, but at least the superheroine gave him the benefit of the doubt. It didn't surprise the courier all that much. Wyvern didn't know him well yet, and had been doubtful even with Mosquito's testimony in an earlier loop.

And at long last, Vulcan called immediately afterward.

Ryan briefly hesitated to take the call, worried about how it would go. He eventually braced himself for the impact and answered. "Quicksave Deliveries?"

"What did the bitch tell you?" Vulcan's encrypted voice asked.

The mere sentence sent a chill down the courier's spine.

He had heard it before.

"My name is Vulcan," the caller continued. *"I represent the Augusti. We are the organization that runs things in New Rome, and most of Italy. Whatever the winged lizard promised you, we can offer more. We need people who get things done."*

Ryan listened to his former girlfriend the way one did a recording. "I'm sorry, mystery voice," he interrupted her sales pitch. "But have we met before?"

Vulcan didn't answer immediately. Perhaps he had called her out on a bluff. Perhaps she was toying with him, only to reveal that the armor had worked. That for once, things would be different.

Her next words hit him like a hammer.

"I think I would remember if we did."

And like that, the last ember of Ryan's hope died out.

"Anyway, if you're interested, I sent you the Bakuto's coordinates," Vulcan said, Ryan not even bothering to check the email notification. *"We own the establishment. Come tonight, alone, and don't make us wait. We never ask twice."*

Yet, she just did.

More than twice.

Door-to-door salesmanship was difficult. You traveled for miles to pitch the perfect product to rednecks, only to be threatened with bodily harm.

A hand on a blue cooler, Ryan faced his meanest customer yet.

"What did you just say?" Shroud asked his visitor, a glass shard aimed at Ryan's throat while his shack's computer servers hummed in the background. It was so cute, how he thought the courier actually cared.

"That for one Ghoul Cooler bought, you get one free, Mechron-made orbital laser!" Ryan opened the box, with Ghoul's skull glaring at him from within. "Made by Third

World children paid five cents per hour and sold at the mere price of ninety bucks, this cooler is perfect for all and any improvised pick—”

“Cut the chit-chat,” Mr. See Through all but ordered.

“Matt, Matty, my friend, the sales won’t last forever,” Ryan mocked him. “You’re wasting a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

The shard pushed against Ryan’s throat, threatening to draw blood. “You think knowing my name gives you power?” Shroud threatened. “I was ready to risk discovery when I came to New Rome, and I fear nothing. So last warning: spill the beans.”

“Cannibal Adam is trying to access the control panel of a Mechron-made orbital satellite, called the Baha...” Ryan tried to look for the exact name. “The *Bahamut!*”

The shack’s windows all fractured when he said the word.

Shroud remained silent for a while, before removing the shard aimed at his guest’s throat. He sank on his chair in front of the shack’s computers, hands clenched. “Okay,” the vigilante finally said, at a loss of words. “Okay, how did you know that name?”

“Well, as you guessed, I can see into parallel timelines, and select the one which favors me the most,” Ryan lied. While he had grown to know the glass manipulator through the various loops, he was still wary of confiding in him so early in their relationship. “I’ve seen some ugly ones.”

“One where Adam the Ogre gets his hands on the *Bahamut*.” The mere thought made the vigilante flinch in dread.

Wow. Ryan had never seen him startled that much before. That could only mean one thing. “You believe me?”

“Nobody but the people involved in the Mechron raid knew about the satellite,” Shroud declared. “It’s possible there was a leak from someone like Nidhogg, but you haven’t been in contact with any of the survivors as far as I know. Also, if you wished to deceive me, you would have found something less outlandish.”

“Hey, are you implying I’m not naturally outlandish?” Ryan asked with mock outrage. “I’m shocked, I tell you, shocked!”

“No, you aren’t,” Shroud replied, his fingers fidgeting. The news really had him worried. “Why are you telling me this?”

“So you can tell your Living Sun to hurry up because I can’t destroy the bunker alone.” At least not yet. “What is taking him so long anyway?”

Shroud let out a sigh. “Regularly fighting threats of Augustus’ caliber means our team has a lot of turnovers. After our last outing, the Carnival doesn’t have the numbers to take on the Augusti. We have heavy hitters, but so do our enemies.”

Ah, that explained their tactics. Why rely on asymmetrical warfare to weed out the enemy if you were in a position of strength? “So, your leader is recruiting?”

“He’s calling in favors from old allies, but they can’t leave their own protectorates for long,” Shroud admitted. “Leo didn’t feel confident he could have everyone on board before the end of May.”

“Yeah, well, Hannifat Lecter is probably less than two weeks away from success too,” Ryan added, like the cherry on the

cake. The Meta-Gang destroyed New Rome on May 18th, though the courier doubted it would happen on the same date again. “Tell your sun to rise faster.”

“I will scout Rust Town and interrogate Ghoul. If I confirm your intel...” Shroud joined his hands, his fingers intertwined. “If you are correct, then we can’t afford to wait, no.”

“How long?”

“A few days at most.” Oh? Well, that went a lot better than expected. Ryan thought he would have to argue for hours, but the threat was dangerous enough for the Carnival to finally throw caution to the wind. “If it’s confirmed, I will contact you.”

“Well, then, I will infiltrate the Augusti and deliver on my end of the bargain,” Ryan said while moving towards the door, leaving the boxed Ghoul behind. “You still owe me ninety bucks for the cooler.”

“No,” the vigilante replied, trying to shortchange the courier.

“Matty, I don’t do charity.”

“No, as in, the Augusti will wait,” Mr. See Through declared firmly, much to Ryan’s surprise. “If you are correct and Dynamis hired the Meta-Gang, then this may only be the tip of the iceberg. Wyvern offered you a chance to join Il Migliore. Take it and keep me informed.”

Ryan put both hands on his waist. “What about your planned hits on the Augusti? Because I won’t oblige unless I have your word that you won’t target a few.”

"We don't have resources to wage war on both the Augusti and Dynamis, if it turns out they're the Meta-Gang's employers," Shroud declared, although it clearly wounded him to admit it. "Augustus is a monster and his business kills thousands each year, but he will sit on his mountain unless challenged. That bunker is an urgent crisis."

"So, you will stop your serial apartment bombing spree until we've downsized Dynamis?"

"How do you know about that?" Mr. See Through shook his head. "Whatever. You have my word. At least, until Mechron's legacy is put to rest once and for all."

Well, time for a Dynamis run then.

It was better this way. Ryan wasn't sure he could stand an Augusti run so soon after losing Jasmine.

Sometimes, he wondered why he kept clinging to false hopes when clearly the odds didn't favor him. Time and time again, the courier had thought he could confide in someone, and not have it all wiped away with his inevitable death. Yet he kept reopening old wounds, instead of just... letting it go.

"I guess hope is a scoundrel's last refuge," Ryan muttered to himself, exiting Shroud's shack with a heavy heart. Hope was all he had, once the loop had stripped him away of everything.

Ryan moved to his Plymouth Fury, only to find someone had beaten him to it.

A white, Persian cat slouched on the car hood, his magnificent blue eyes dazzling Ryan with the splendor of

their nobility. The creature meowed ferociously at the courier, who immediately recognized him.

“Eugène-Henry?” Ryan approached the Plymouth Fury, examining the cat carefully. It... yes, it *was* Eugène-Henry. The courier could recognize the noble animal’s lazy, prideful attitude anywhere.

How could it be? The cat should be in the orphanage at this moment, and he never showed up at the old harbor in any previous loop. What was happening?

Eugène-Henry let out a loud ‘meow’ sound, *demanding* to be petted. So Ryan obliged, raising his hand to scratch the animal between the ears.

Pop.

Ryan’s hand touched only air.

There was no flash, no warning. One second, the cat was right in front of him; the next he had vanished.

Was he hallucinating? Or...

Wait, Eugène-Henry had been exposed to Violet dimension energies at the end of the previous loop; even perhaps that strange, alien entity the courier had briefly glimpsed. Could they have changed him somehow? Ryan knew cats were superior creatures, especially compared to dogs, but could these furballs truly gain superpowers like a Genome?

He had to go to the orphanage and check on the cat, just to be sure. Ryan sat on the driving seat, and prepared to make a short trip to Rust Town before meeting with his favorite cashmere supplier.

“Riri.”

At least, that's what he planned for until her voice came out of the Chronoradio.

And this time, it wasn't pre-recorded.

Ryan's fingers clenched around the driving wheel, and he moved the car away, to get out of Shroud's range. He had no intention of letting the vigilante eavesdrop on private matters. “Shortie.”

For an agonizing minute, Len didn't seem to know what to say while Ryan drove through New Rome's crowded streets. Finally, she mustered her courage. *“I heard the broadcast. Through your chronoradio.”*

... she did?

Of course she did, she had been listening to his communications since he arrived in New Rome.

All these years, he had hoped for someone that could remember him. And now...

“Is it true?” she asked. *“Can you... time-travel?”*

“Yeah,” the courier said bluntly, tensing up. He should have felt relieved, even happy by that unforeseen development, but the barrier between them had risen up again. The loop had washed away all their progress. “It happened before. I don't know how the recording went through time though.”

Maybe Len had managed to complete her invention before the *Bahamut* wiped Ischia Island off the map, or it was a side-effect of Ryan's own experiment.

Len considered the news, before asking another question.
“*Why didn’t... why didn’t you repeat it?*”

“Repeat that conversation, you mean?”

“*You... you and I...*” He could almost picture her biting her lower lip on the other end of the line. “*It worked before. It could have worked again.*”

“I told you before,” Ryan said with a sigh, though that didn’t make much sense from her point of view. “The... the breakdown that led to this conversation had been genuine. If I repeated it, it would have been fake. Even if it worked, if it was necessary for us to become friends again, it would have been manipulation.”

Though it killed him inside, he couldn’t replace the Jasmine he lost either. Ryan may see it as mere amnesia, his old girlfriend had a point. If you forgot actions you didn’t commit yet and chose to go on another path, were you truly the same person? Or would you become someone else?

“I guess I wanted our relationship to remain true,” Ryan admitted, speaking with the heart. “Even if it hurts.”

He knew it was a lot to ask for, but that was what the courier wanted above everything else. He didn’t want to save the world or anything like this, though he would. Ultimately, all that Ryan desired, was to be happy.

“*Where are you going, Riri?*” Len asked, her voice breaking. She tried to keep her composure, but his words had clearly affected her.

“To the orphanage,” he said. “I have to check up on something. And make sure the kids will be alright.”

Psyshock was alive again, and if Ryan committed to Dynamis this loop, he couldn't rely on Cancel to kill the bastard permanently. He had to figure a way out of this conundrum.

"I..."

Another short silence.

"I will be there too."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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52: Chance Meetings

No matter what Wyvern said, Enrique ‘*Blackthorn*’ Manada had to be a sinister criminal mastermind.

As he waltzed into the man’s office, Ryan realized it wasn’t just his fashion sense or icy behavior. Almost all the plants the Green Genome collected were poisonous, and one of the fish in his Japanese pond was a fugu pufferfish, infamous for its neurotoxins. Though Ryan knew from experience it tasted wonderful, if prepared well.

Yeah, nothing suspicious about this man.

“I am Enrique Manada, Dynamis’ CBO and Head Manager of the Il Migliore program. Though you seem to already know that.” The manager shook Ryan’s hand after rising from behind his desk. “I am surprised you agreed to meet with us. Wyvern wasn’t very optimistic after your last exchange.”

“Well, I thought I should ask you directly why your organization hired the Meta-Gang,” Ryan said bluntly. “I figured we would lose way less time this way.”

His sheer frankness silenced Blackthorn on the spot. It seemed Wyvern hadn’t informed him of Ryan’s ‘conspiracy theories.’

Enrique hung back in his chair, quietly angry. He didn’t invite Ryan to sit, but the courier did so anyway. “Where does this nonsense come from?”

“I saw them with dozens of crates filled with Dynamis-made knockoffs. It looked like a Black Friday sale.”

“Seen, Mr. Romano? With your own two eyes?” Enrique’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “Do you have any tangible evidence? Photos, samples?”

“I have this,” Ryan said, happily giving the manager a paper file he had prepared just for the occasion. “Here is the proof that some of your knockoff Elixirs went missing, disguising off-the-books deliveries to the Meta-Gang.”

The manager all but stole the documents from the time-traveler’s hand. Now was the moment of truth. If Enrique had Ryan killed on the spot or later that day, then he was clearly corrupt.

Blackthorn carefully reviewed the files without a word. However, the flowers in his office seemed to become more and more agitated as he read. Like Matty boy, his power seemed to automatically react to his emotional state, no matter how hard the Green Genome tried to hide it.

“How did you obtain these documents?” Enrique asked while halfway through his review, his tone sharp.

“I hacked into your databases,” Ryan replied. Well, technically, Shroud did it, and the courier borrowed the documents.

“You know I could have you jailed for this?”

Jailed? Not killed? “Don’t whistleblowers get legal protection in New Rome?”

“No,” Blackthorn replied, putting aside the documents. “Any other information you stole from our company?”

"Now that I think of it, some of your doggy drones ended up in the Meta-Gang's hands," Ryan remembered. "You shouldn't leave that stuff laying around."

Enrique looked at his guest without a word for a few seconds, then brought a cell phone out of his suit. He typed a number and called, though Ryan didn't hear the person on the other end.

"I have been informed some of our drones have gone missing lately, probably repurposed by the Meta-Gang," Enrique asked. "Do you confirm? Uh-huh, uh-huh... why wasn't I informed? I see... I understand, don't worry... pack your things, you're fired."

The last part was said so casually, to the point Ryan almost didn't catch it.

Enrique ended the call and focused back on the courier. "Alright, Mr. Romano, let's cut to the chase," he said, done with the niceties. "What do you want?"

"For Hannifat Lecter to have a botched lipo."

"Why? Revenge? Your psychological profile tells me you are no selfless vigilante."

"You know, if you had asked me a few weeks ago I would say it isn't personal, that it's just business," Ryan said, before remembering Len and countless others vanishing as the *Bahamut*'s light struck New Rome. "But it is personal now. It really is."

"I see," Enrique said, doing a mastermind's pause. "I do not appreciate the methods you used to gather this information, but I will admit, it worries me. However, you understand

that if the Meta-Gang has a sponsor inside Dynamis, it is someone in a high place. Probably from the board.”

“You say it like I should be worried.”

“Yes, because it means people in my own department could be compromised. For all you know, I could be involved. So why did you come to me?”

Ryan shrugged. “Frankly Greenhand, I thought it was a coin toss. A lot of people thought you were clean, but if you tried and failed to have me killed, at least I would know where you stood.”

And Ryan remembered his last discussion with the man, before Ischia Island’s destruction. Whatever Blackthorn may be, he seemed to have a vision of the future that didn’t involve people like the Meta or Augustus.

“Hmm, arrogant aren’t you?” Enrique said with a snicker. “Now, how does Len Sabino fit in this? I know you established contact with her shortly after your arrival in New Rome.”

“Wait, you had me followed?” It wounded Ryan, who thought he had mastered counterintelligence tactics.

“Dynamis keeps the Underdiver under close surveillance,” Enrique explained. “We know she went to that orphanage in Rust Town a few hours before this meeting, and you visited the district around the same time. I do not believe it is a coincidence.”

It couldn’t have been communications monitoring, or he would have learned about the time-loop. In all likelihood, Dynamis surveyed Shortie’s underwater base and trailed her wherever she left it.

"Wait," Ryan said, making a connection. "That's how Adam knew about the underwater base, you paranoid *dicks*!"

"I am not sure I understand, but if we assume the Meta-Gang benefits from a Dynamis executive's assistance as your evidence implies, then... yes, they probably know about her underwater base. I assume you want to protect Miss Sabino?"

"Yes," Ryan conceded, his voice turning serious. "But if you think you can threaten her to make me behave, you'll die the way of the dinosaurs."

"I have no such intention," Enrique replied, though the courier couldn't tell if he was honest. "But I want to know your motivations, and if I can trust you. You possess a useful power, but are also psychologically unstable. I have to see if you are worth the risks. Considering your motives, I do not think you are a long-term asset either."

"I like to think of myself as a speculative investment."

Enrique adopted a diabolical mastermind pose, making Ryan really wonder if he was truly clean. "You put me in a difficult position," he said. "The circumstantial evidence you gathered implies corruption in my organization, and the responsible party might be someone with more clout than I. Investigating the matter will necessitate a high degree of trust, and with a few exceptions, I am not sure on whom we can rely on."

"Say no more, I can be your semi-loyal secret agent!" Ryan happily suggested. "My car is even classier than an Aston Martin!"

Enrique considered the offer, before reaching a conclusion. "I will be honest, I do not like you, Romano," he said bluntly.

“But you seem set on investigating this, and I have the intuition it will cost Dynamis to let you act without supervision.”

And he was probably right.

“Here’s how things will work between us, Romano. You will join Il Migliore’s junior division for a six month trial period, under my direct supervision. We will not apply a DNA tracker until we have recovered the lost drones. Considering your reputation, nobody will blink at these conditions. But make no mistake, our association will be on my terms. Every piece of information you uncover will find its way to this desk. You do as I ask, no questions asked. And you will not hack the company’s assets without my authorization. Am I clear?”

“Under three conditions,” Ryan replied, raising his fingers. “First, I keep my name. It’s a copyrighted brand.”

“I doubt you will be with us long enough to become a team mainstay, so you can call yourself Timestamp for all I care,” Enrique replied dismissively. “What next?”

“You don’t mess with the Underdiver. Ever.”

Enrique hesitated for a few seconds. Ryan was starting to suspect something was up; she was too minor a player for Dynamis to care so much about her. “Granted, unless she or you call for our help first,” the manager said, though with great reluctance. “And the last condition?”

Ryan looked at the man dead in the eyes. “I want a purple cashmere suit. With a matching tie.”

Enrique Manada joined his hands and considered the courier’s words. His response was swift and merciless.

“Denied.”

“One just doesn’t say no to cashmere,” Ryan warned, his tone turning dangerous.

“You will meet with Wardrobe tomorrow, and she will make you a hero costume,” Enrique replied dismissively. “She will be your goddess as far as fashion goes. She will decide.”

“And if I’m a nonbeliever?”

“Then the *kids marketing* subdivision will design the costume,” Enrique said. “Over the years, they have learned to do their job with ruthless efficiency.”

That... that was unbelievably cruel and wrong! “I knew you were soulless, but I didn’t understand how much!”

“That’s part of the job,” Enrique replied dryly, before calling his secretary through an interphone. “Summon Devilry and Wyvern for a meeting, and inform the vice-president that I want a call. Tell them this cannot wait.”

“Sir, you already have a rendezvous with a new hero candidate planned,” warned the secretary.

“Who?”

“*The Panda.*”

“Who?” Enrique repeated though the courier had the feeling he was merely playing coy.

“The Panda, defender of the innocent,” Ryan declared, offended by the corpo’s utter lack of knowledge. “He can fly and shoot lasers from his eyes!”

“I doubt that,” Blackthorn replied dryly.

In response, Ryan joined his fingers. “You don’t know much about pandas, do you?”

“Is that so?” Enrique replied, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “Then I guess you won’t mind taking him under your wing? Considering his poor track record, I was considering giving the Panda a chance to impress us, but certainly surviving your presence will be a test in itself.”

Huh? That explained why the Panda ended up picking a fight at Vulcan’s factory. Greenhand must have asked him to capture a villain or something. “So you do know him.”

“Wyvern believes he has potential, and Dr. Tyrano thinks his power has interesting applications for his work. However, he seems... incompetent. I worry he might make any team he joins look bad.”

“Trust me, sir,” Ryan said, “When I’m done with him, you will never look at pandas the same way ever again.”

“Well then, the both of you will be a package deal. If he proves lacking, it will look less damaging if *you* were in charge of him than Wyvern. If it works, then all good.”

Fail and take the blame, succeed and share the credit. “But do I get to choose the team’s name?”

The manager clearly couldn’t care less. “I will summon you again shortly. Until then, you behave.”

And with these words, the manager gave Ryan a contract and dismissed him from his office.

The courier walked into the waiting room, where a poor animal in human form anxiously waited. Enrique canceling

their meeting seemed to have put him on edge, but he looked at Ryan with his big hopeful eyes.

“Panda,” Ryan said, holding the contract.

“Y-yes, sir?” The would-be hero tried to look strong, but couldn’t face his anxiety. He looked so cute, like a human muppet.

“Panda, I’m sorry to say that your candidacy...” Ryan let out a long, distressed sigh. “How should I put it...”

The Panda’s heart seemed to stop, as all hope disappeared from his face.

“Your candidacy...” Ryan gave the Green Genome his contract. “Has been accepted.”

For a second, the courier thought the sheer relief would make the Panda faint, and he almost did. He clearly couldn’t believe Dynamis had given him a chance. “I... I’ve been hired? I’m going to join Il Migliore?”

“Yes, you are, you magnificent beast!” Ryan’s outburst made Enrique’s secretary glare at him in the background, but he ignored her. “What is your name, samurai, your real name?”

“Timmy! I’m Timmy!”

“It’s not very Chinese but it will do, Timmy, it will do!” Ryan said, putting his hands on the manbear’s shoulders. “You are now my teammate!”

“You... you want me on your team?” Tears started to appear in the manbear’s eyes. “Somebody wants the Panda on their team?”

“How can one say no to a panda?” Ryan asked rhetorically. Now, he just had to recruit Felix the Cat, and he would have built the ultimate hero team to take on the Meta-Gang. “I already have our group’s name! *Quicksave the Pandas!* It’s a new franchise!”

“Can we get a hero car?” the poor animal asked, overwhelmed with emotion. “A pandamobile?”

Why did Ryan have the feeling future historians would remember this moment as when his Perfect Run went wrong? But he couldn’t say no to a panda. “Of course we will get a pandamobile, so long as you don’t get anywhere near my car! And we’ll get movies, webtoons, tele-reality shows, our faces on noodles!”

“I... I will finally be famous, and honor my panda heritage!” The Panda wiped away his tears, now pumped up for battle. “What should I call you, sensei?!”

“I’m Quicksave, but privately, you shall call me...”

Ryan's eyes widened, suddenly inspired.

“Super Sifu Ryan.”

After promising to his new sidekick that they would meet again tomorrow morning, Ryan left the Il Migliore HQ and drove away towards Rust Town. The sun was setting beyond the horizon, and night would soon come.

“Shortie?” Ryan asked, driving the Plymouth Fury through New Rome’s busy streets. “Are you listening?”

No answer.

“Len?”

“*How... how did it go?*” Len replied through the chronoradio, clearing her throat. She sounded somewhat relieved to hear from him, but also anxious.

“I’m still convinced Blackthorn is a supervillain, but he doesn’t seem to be the mastermind behind the Meta-Gang.” Though Ryan might revise his opinion if he ‘mysteriously disappeared’ in the next few hours. “They also keep you under tight surveillance. They know about the undersea habitat.”

Len didn’t reply for several seconds, as she usually did. “*No matter where I go... I will never escape them,*” she finally said with a heavy sigh. “*No matter how deep I swim... their tentacles reach farther. They will never be satisfied.*”

“Hey, we’ll figure a way out,” Ryan promised her. “And I don’t think they will bother you in the short term.”

“We?”

Ryan’s hands tensed on the driver’s wheel. Maybe he had been too forward. “If... if you wish it. My door is always open if you need help, Len.”

Another silence followed, and Ryan realized they still had a long way to go.

As it turned out, the Chronoradio had recorded, and played, all of the duo’s interactions before the last one on Ischia Island. Which meant that Len had probably recorded and sent the information herself in the previous loop.

It had helped Len trust Ryan a little, even if she disagreed with his choice to approach Dynamis; enough that she let

him stay at the orphanage. But a recording wasn't a personal experience, and to the courier's disappointment, it hadn't allowed their relationship to carry over from one loop to the next. It had only helped him make a little more progress in a shorter time.

Eventually, Len found the silence too oppressive and changed the subject. "*Sarah, Sarah couldn't find your cat anywhere. You're... you're sure he gained powers?*"

"Certain." Eugène-Henry had been missing from the orphanage when Ryan last visited it. Ergo, something caused a change in the noble animal's behavior. "Maybe he could help with your Chronoradio upgrade."

"I... I don't know, Riri. I don't know. I will need more info before I can tell if my idea will even work."

Yeah. Ryan's goal for this loop, besides sending the Meta-Gang six feet under, was to get his hands on Dynamis' brain scanning research. Besides weeding out whoever helped Big Fat Adam inside the company, joining Il Migliore would give the courier an opportunity to access their labs in due time.

"Thanks for the help, Shortie," he said, looking at the road ahead. "I will bring reinforcements tomorrow, to help deal with Psyshock."

With luck, he could get his other favored cat onboard.

"I... it's nothing." However, he could tell Len found the conversation straining, and she ended it abruptly. "*I need to go. See you soon.*"

"See you soon," he replied, before glancing at the pile of antidepressants in his car's backseat. This time, the courier

intended to make Shortie follow an effective treatment, rather than poison herself through self-medication.

She deserved as much.

The path between Rust Town and Il Migliore's tower forced Ryan to go through the shopping district. Also known as Sol Street, the area was a temple to fashion, its buildings home to prestigious clothiers, luxury brands, and perfume clothes. Pedestrians walked by each other while carrying shopping bags and taking phone calls; some Ryan recognized as knockoff Genomes, taking selfies of themselves showing off their purchased powers. Everyone competed to look the best, but nobody paid attention to anyone else. Of course, Quicksave's fashion sense trumped them all.

Eugène-Henry suddenly leaped from a street corner while pursued by a woman, right onto the Plymouth Fury's path.

Ryan abruptly froze time and smashed the brake, but the cat had vanished before time even resumed. Instead, the Plymouth Fury had stopped within an inch of a pedestrian.

"Hey, if you want to die to me, make an appointment first! I'm *busy!*" Ryan complained while looking out of the window, until he recognized the person he almost killed. A blindingly beautiful woman with long golden hair, and an extravagant dress.

"How can that furball escape me?" Fortuna complained, completely ignoring the car within an inch of her skin. "Me?"

"Fortuna, are you alright?" Livia Augusti walked out of the street, wearing a sleeveless black dress and an elegant, white rounded hat atop her platinum hair. She immediately noticed Ryan, and hastily nodded at him, clearly embarrassed. "We apologize for the commotion."

"Hey, what are you two ladies doing here?" Ryan couldn't help but ask, before noticing that Livia carried a luxurious bag. They had probably been shopping. "You aren't insurance chasers, I hope? Because if so I will give no quarters."

"Livy wanted to see that cat more closely," Fortuna replied with a furious scowl, putting her hands on her waist. "Where did it go?"

"I couldn't see it clearly," Livia admitted, before frowning at Ryan. "And... I can't see you at all."

Couldn't see... did Eugène-Henry partly exist in the Purple World? It would explain his random teleportations, and the Augusti princess probably couldn't see the noble animal clearly if he existed in two realities at once.

"In any case, if you could step away from the road," Ryan asked Fortuna, eager to return to the orphanage. "I only run over grannies or Ghoul."

His dismissive tone made Fortuna look down on him, like a noble crossing path with the dirtiest of peasants. "Do you know who we are?"

"No, but I know who I am, and I'll tell you!" Ryan replied with an upbeat tone. "I'm Quicksave. I'm immortal, but don't tell anyone."

"I don't care," Fortuna replied, irritated.

Livia's frown deepened though. "Quicksave, you said?"

She seemed to find the name familiar. Had Ryan's visit to Dynamis caused Vulcan to put a hit on him already? In that case, he better leave.

Unfortunately, Fortuna didn't see things this way. "In any case, we need someone to drive us home, and you will do nicely," she said with a newfound smile, clearly expecting him to agree on the spot.

"Oh no, sorry, I've got something planned," Ryan replied with a shrug. "Take the bus."

Fortuna blinked. "I think I misheard."

"Wait, she's blind, and you're deaf?" Ryan asked. "You cover each other?"

Livia couldn't help but chuckle at the joke, but Fortuna didn't find it funny. "What is wrong with you?" she asked Ryan as if it was only one thing.

"Fortuna, I will just call Sparrow," Livia said, though she didn't hide her amusement.

"No, Livy, he has to understand how the world works." Fortuna moved towards Ryan's car door and put her hands on the window, crossing the line. "Look at me. Look at *me*."

Ryan slowly looked at the self-entitled brat, unimpressed. She was pretty to look at for sure, but *damn*, her personality made the courier want to make Felix an only child.

"I'm the best thing that ever happened to you, and that will ever happen to you." Fortuna said it with so much confidence, Ryan was convinced she believed it too. "Your whole life led you here. To bring the most beautiful woman in the world, and her best friend, home."

The courier seemed to consider the 'offer' carefully, while Fortuna's insufferable grin grew wider.

"Eh," Ryan said dismissively, before looking back at the road. "Six out of ten."

And like that, he drove away into the sunset, leaving a speechless Fortuna and a semi-amused Livia behind. Ryan looked at the rearview mirror and noticed the Augusti princess kept watching him even as he disappeared around a street corner.

She looked *intrigued*, for a lack of a better term.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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53: Fashion Disaster

As it turned out, Wardrobe had an entire floor of Il Migliore's tower dedicated to her.

Ryan and the Panda waited inside an elevator, as it slowly climbed towards their destination. The duo could see the sun illuminate New Rome through a glass window, Ryan glancing at Rust Town while his sidekick sang a *Spider-man* cartoon tune to himself.

It was May 10th, and Psyshock would soon attack the orphanage.

Ryan's cell phone buzzed to the tune of *I Got You, Babe*, drawing him out of his reverie. "Quicksave Deliveries, yes?" he said while answering the unknown caller. "We will deliver your mail, no matter how many corpses it takes!"

"There is a logic in this world," Fortuna's furious voice said on the other end of the line. "Everything that can go well for me in this universe, does. You violated the natural order!"

"Wait, how did you get this number?" Ryan asked, curious but not surprised.

"I typed it at random." Goddamnit, her ability was overpowered. She could probably stumble onto the Dynamis conspiracy by sheer luck if she wanted to. "Nobody talks to me like that, Quicksave! I have men throwing themselves at my feet, millionaires, celebrities—"

Ryan hung up on her. “Who was it, Sifu?” his panda disciple asked him.

“A loony fan,” the courier replied dismissively, even as Lucky Girl kept trying to call him.

“Oh, I had one of those too! She tried to kidnap the Panda because she loved his smooth fur. The Panda... the Panda had to run.”

“Couldn’t you... you know...” Ryan looked into his eyes. “Eat her?”

“I-I can only eat bamboo in panda form, Sifu! Meat makes me want to vomit!”

The Danish warlord Nidhogg had drunk a Green Elixir and became a kilometers-long, near-invulnerable serpent. While Timmy drank the same kind of potion, only to become... *that*.

There was no fairness in this world.

“Sifu, why are you looking at me like that?” the Panda asked, a little anxious.

Ryan sighed and put a hand on the poor animal’s shoulder. “I will always support you, young disciple. No matter what.”

“I...” Ryan thought the Panda might start crying. “Thank you, Sifu.”

The elevator finally reached Wardrobe’s floor and the duo stepped inside.

After the ascent, Ryan had expected something luxurious, but nothing like this. The rugs in the welcoming hall had

probably cost a fortune, all the chairs were made of refined leather, and the walls had been covered with artistic designs like an art gallery. Fashion and girlie mags were piled up on fancy wooden tables.

“Come in!” Wardrobe called them from another room. The new hero team followed her voice and passed in front of shooting studios, including darkrooms, props, and various photography equipment.

Eventually, they made their way to a lobby whose walls were covered with thousands of model pictures and cloth designs. Wardrobe was facing a tough customer around a table, a paper sheet and pencil in hand.

“No!” Felix the Atom Cat said, sinking in his chair in front of the hero fashion designer. “I’m not wearing a cat latex suit!”

“Felix, don’t be a child,” Wardrobe protested, “it would be form-fitting, and won’t restrict your movements in a fight.”

The young hero crossed his arms and pouted. “My outfit is good enough.”

“What? How can you say something that stupid! You take that back!”

“Personally, I suggest a Valentino suit with a cat-themed tie, but I think the outfit is already taken,” Ryan mused out loud, waving a hand at the heroes. “Hi, I’m Quicksave, and this is my trusty Panda sidekick.”

“Oh, hello, I’m Atom Cat,” Felix replied, a bit gruffer than usual. Ryan had missed him.

“Hi, I’m Wardrobe! But you can call me Yukiko, or ‘Yuki’ for short!” She was Japanese, huh? Ryan would have said

Korean. She smiled brightly at the two, making her unbearably adorable. “Nice to meet you! Please have a seat!”

“She’s so cute...” the Panda muttered under his breath, before trying to sound dignified. “The Panda greets you too!”

“You’re the new guys, right?” Felix asked as they joined the fashion debate. “Shouldn’t you be at the newbie seminar or something?”

“Shouldn’t you, kitten?” Ryan asked back.

“Don’t tell me,” he sighed. “I’m supposed to waste time watching corporate videos instead of actually doing hero work.”

“We are doing hero work right now,” Wardrobe said, looking at the Augusti rebel’s white gymnast clothes. “Wearing this is a crime against humanity, Felix. Follow Quicksave’s example! Look at that perfect color nuance and this fancy noir trench coat. His costume stands for something greater than him!”

“Thank you,” Ryan said. “I am so glad to finally meet someone civilized in this savage wilderness.”

Atom Cat wasn’t convinced though. “I will take practical over fancy any day.”

“That’s what she said,” Ryan replied, Wardrobe chuckling while Atom Cat rolled his eyes. “Anyway, I am told you will be my goddess as far as fashion goes, but I’m not yet ready to believe in you.”

"Don't worry about that, Quicksave, I got your costume covered," she said while drawing on a blank paper sheet with her pencil. "I thought about a Valentino-style suit with artificial fibers, but the more I thought of it, the more I realized I should use a better material. One that fits you."

"Cashmere?" Ryan asked, hopeful.

"Cashmere, my thought exactly," Wardrobe said with a nod, revealing herself as an island of sanity in a world gone mad. "Dark purple, with a fancy black turtleneck underneath. And a bowler hat."

"Oh, no," the courier suddenly hit the brakes, before she went too far. "That's too extreme and violent."

"I thought the same, but I found a solution."

She raised the sheet before the group, Ryan, the Panda, and even Atom Cat observing her sketch. "Instead of a corporate tie, we're going to add a wool scarf," Wardrobe pointed her pencil at the neck. "Light violet, almost pinkish, with tiny clock symbols everywhere."

The costume... it was wonderful. The perfect blend of modern fashion and Victorian-style dandiness.

A pinkish bright scarf instead of a tie? That was a stroke of genius! Why didn't Ryan ever think of that?!

"It's wonderful," the courier whispered as if facing a divine revelation.

"I know! The scarf will restrain the bowler hat's energy, symbolizing the conflict between your violent spirit and society's rules! Can you truly live up to your duty to the *law*, or will you stay true to your wild, single-minded pursuit of

justice? That's your message. That's your conflict."

Wardrobe pointed at the drawing. "That's your costume."

"How about my bipolarity?" Ryan asked, now giddy. "What do you do about my *bipolarity*?"

"We paint your metal mask silver and black, light and darkness coexisting without ever mixing!"

"I have been converted! Yours is the one true faith!"

"Oh God, there's two of them now," Felix complained.
"We're doomed."

"What about me?" The Panda asked, hopeful. "Can you make a costume worthy of the Panda's pure awesomeness?"

"Yes, I can!" Wardrobe replied with enthusiasm. "I thought about leaving you shirtless, with two bullet bandoliers around the chest."

"Bullet bandoliers?" Timmy's face deflated. "But I don't know how to shoot!"

"It's not about whether you can use it or not," Ryan enlightened him. "It's about looking cool!"

"Exactly!" Wardrobe agreed while writing down a new sketch. "So I say, two bandoliers around your chest, a green beret, black shorts that will adjust to your transformation, and maybe a pair of sunglasses. You're no longer just a panda. You're *Rambo Panda*, the last of your kind, fighting an eternal war for the future!"

She showed them the sketch, and even Ryan had to admit, it looked like one manly Chinese bear. When he glanced at Wardrobe and remembered how Mortimer had dared kill this

gift to mankind from the heavens, the courier couldn't help but feel sorrow.

"You are a national treasure that must be protected," Ryan told Wardrobe. "And you will be! I swear you will be!"

"Oh, thanks!" she said with a bright smile. "It's okay, I get that all of the time!"

"I... I will finally impress the girls in this." The Panda looked at the costume, utterly mesmerized. "What about the car? Can we get a pandamobile?"

"The *Kids Marketing* department is already on the case," Wardrobe promised, grinning at the two. "So, you're okay with the costumes? Of course you are. Once you validate them, I can make the designs a reality within the hour."

"Yes, yes, yes!" Ryan said enthusiastically. "And afterward we go patrol in Rust Town!"

"Patrol?" The Panda and Atom Cat asked at once.

"Well yes, we have to test these costumes in the field," Ryan argued. "It's like baptizing a ship, except you use the blood of your enemies instead of alcohol."

"You want to do what exactly?" Atom Cat asked, a little skeptical. "Go to Rust Town and pick a fight with the Meta-Gang?"

"Uh, yes?"

"But Sifu, what about the seminar?" The Panda asked, worried. He must have thought not attending would hurt his chances at becoming an Il Migliore member. "We haven't finished training!"

“You fail to see the truth, arrogant young disciple!” Ryan told his sidekick. “One must confront evil, instead of waiting for it to come to you! To think for yourself is the real training!”

“Yes, Sifu! I understand, Sifu!” The Panda put his hand on his chest. “The Panda shall support you, as you supported him!”

“That’s the spirit,” Ryan patted the Green Genome on the back, before glancing at a confused Felix. “Do you want to come too? I don’t have cat litter in the car though.”

“Me?” Felix the Cat asked, a bit unsure.

“You, Atom Cat, for your own good,” Ryan pleaded, rising from his chair and putting his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “There is a moment in the life of a man, where he must take charge of his own future! Where he must break the chains of corporate hierarchy and stand for what’s right!”

“Can you stop invading my personal space, please?” Felix asked, leaning back in his chair.

“They’ll milk you, Felix!” Ryan continued, completely ignoring the hero’s resistance. “They’ll milk you like a cow! They’ll harvest your happiness and turn it into cash, until you stand for nothing but a brand! They will destroy you with one hour and a half long corporate videos, addict you to coffee and catering, and brainwash you with accounting buzz—”

“You had me at the video part,” Felix interrupted Ryan and pushed him back. “You know what, even if you’re clearly off your meds, you’ve got a point. About time someone confronted this city’s Psycho cancer. Stand for what’s right? You’re talking my language.”

“Oh, can I join too?” Wardrobe asked with her usual enthusiasm. “Team trips are so fun!”

“You’re sure you can leave your atelier without authorization?” Atom Cat asked.

“I will officially join the Pro League next week, after we finish filming the new Wyvern movie,” Wardrobe said happily. “I already have a field license. It will be my last junior league adventure!”

“Well then,” Ryan raised a finger at the ceiling, “to the Quicksave Mobile!”

A few hours later, Ryan drove through the streets of Rust Town in a brand new costume. Wardrobe sat at his side, while Atom Cat, that fashion disaster, had taken over the backseat with the new and improved Panda.

“What a dump,” Atom Cat said, looking through the window. No matter the loop, nobody ever got used to Rust Town. Even the Panda—*the Panda*—seemed intimidated by the overwhelming atmosphere of ruin and decay. “It’s even worse than I thought.”

“Yeah, it’s... it’s a bad place,” Wardrobe admitted, her fingers twitching. “I see why they don’t let juniors patrol here.”

“Wardrobe,” Ryan said, a lighthearted idea crossing his mind.

“Yes, Quicksave?” she said, moving closer to his seat.

“You can change into any persona that isn’t copyrighted right? Fictional or not? Does that mean you can change

into..."

He whispered the terrible name into her ear.

"Yes I can, it's my 'Apocalypse Suit,'" Wardrobe nodded.

"But it's too dangerous to use unless all is lost. I think I could destroy the world if I wear it for too long."

Ryan needed to see her in that costume. That would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "Can you dress like God?" Felix asked at the back. "That would be pretty overpowered."

"Uh, somewhat?" Wardrobe admitted, a little embarrassed. "But I can't do much in most gods' costumes actually. The more defined a persona, the better I master it. Nobody agrees about what God can or can't do, or what He even looks like, so the persona isn't all that stable. I have an easier time cosplaying as Jesus or Moses. I can't wear a persona too long though, or else I start to become it."

"So if you dress like Augustus, you start to think like him?" Ryan asked.

"Yeah, don't, you'll probably become a colossal asshole," Felix said with hateful venom.

"It's... strange, to be Augustus?" Wardrobe admitted. "I'm not sure if it's his power or just the idea people have of him, but I become so cold that I don't feel anything. I become more like a statue than a living being. I can't relate to other humans anymore."

"I figured as much." Felix shrugged. "Any idea how his invulnerability works? I thought Dynamis would test out its limits."

"Well, I don't actually copy people or their powers," Wardrobe explained. "I copy the *idea* that people have of them. I mean, Dracula could walk under the sun in the original novel just fine, but I can't stand daylight because everyone thinks vampires are weak to it. So Dynamis isn't sure if my insight is very reliable."

Ryan wasn't so sure. Both the original Augustus and his cosplayer had been able to move in the stopped time. Come to think of it, this run might be a rare opportunity to figure out the limits of Lightning Dad's power.

"Could you cosplay as me?" The Panda asked with enthusiasm.

"He's the last panda on earth, Yukiko," Ryan told the fashion goddess, who had earned that nickname with flying colors. "You could save the whole species!"

"I don't think I can," Wardrobe admitted sheepishly. "You aren't famous enough."

"What about me?" Ryan asked, his heart filled with hope, while the Panda deflated. "Or Cancel? Can you copy Cancel?"

Atom Cat looked at the courier strangely when he mentioned the power canceller, but Wardrobe had clearly no idea who she was. "Who? No, I can only copy personas ingrained in mankind's collective consciousness. I'm sorry."

Uh, well, that sent Ryan's plan to deal with Psyshock down the drain, and Wardrobe wouldn't be able to mimic his power if nobody knew its true nature. A shame.

Atom Cat grabbed his cell phone, read the screen, and then put it back in his pocket. His mood clearly worsened

afterward. "What is it, Felix?" Wardrobe asked, clearly worried for his well-being.

"My sister, and my ex," Felix replied.

"Oh, Livia?" Ryan asked out loud.

"How do you know that? Did Blackthorn tell you?" Felix crossed his arms. "Yeah, it's Livia."

"Oh, you had a girlfriend?" The Panda asked, immediately interested. "Do you still love her?"

"No, we're over," Felix replied bluntly, looking sorrowfully through the windows. "At the end of the day, it's family over what's right, or even what's good for her. I can't compromise anymore. Not after what I've seen."

"Yeah, I see exactly what you mean," Ryan said with a sigh, remembering the old bad days with Bloodstream. He heard his phone buzzing, checking it with one hand and keeping another on the driving wheel. It wasn't responsible, but he had mastered the art of text-driving early in his loops.

You have forty-one messages from: **Lucky Girl**.

You have one message from: **Unknown**.

Fortuna was quite persistent.

Wait. She was all over Matty boy because he didn't give in to her attention. Just like Ryan himself this run...

He had a bad feeling about this.

Anyway, he didn't check these messages, and instead read the text from his unknown caller. The message consisted of a single sentence.

Unknown : The orange is in the hen house.

Ryan hit the brakes so fast it startled everyone.

"Sifu, you shouldn't text while driving!" The Panda complained from the back.

"Sorry, sorry," Ryan replied, frantically typing the answer before driving back towards the orphanage, his mind bustling with questions. Though he only sent one to the unknown caller.

PlushieTamer: Where and when?

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54: A Gambling Man

“And right in front of us, you can see Rust Town’s famous orphanage, where the most dangerous creatures in the world are raised in the wild,” Ryan said as he finished giving his team a tour of the area, parking the Plymouth near the entrance. “Human children.”

“You exaggerate,” Wardrobe chuckled, looking through the window. Len was waiting with Sarah and another boy near the orphanage’s entrance, the kids playing with a labrador. Unlike the previous loop, the Genius hadn’t put on her diving armor yet, sticking to her brown suit and water rifle.

“I think you underestimate these creatures,” Ryan argued. “They eat baby candies, and they listen to loud music at night.”

“Why are we here exactly?” Atom Cat asked from the back.

“Well, according to my intel, the Meta-Gang intends to target the place today,” Ryan said, though he didn’t mention which source. His words caused everyone to look at him in alarm. “They will abduct the residents unless we drive them off.”

“They intend to attack children?” Wardrobe’s adorable face had turned white from the horror.

“I would like to say I’m surprised, but I’m not,” Felix grumbled.

“Don’t worry, Sifu, we will save them!” The Panda said with enthusiasm, a hand on his chest. “We will break these villains like... like bamboo!”

“We will need to work on your puns, arrogant young disciple,” Ryan said as the group stepped out of the car, instantly catching the children’s attention.

“Oh, it’s Wardrobe!” Little Sarah’s eyes widened upon recognizing the heroine. It seemed that while she wasn’t as well-known as Wyvern, the fashion designer had her fans.

“Where, where?” another child asked, rushing out of the orphanage alongside half a dozen of the tiny devils.

“Riri,” Len whispered softly, while the children swarmed the heroes, most asking for Wardrobe’s autograph. The Panda looked really jealous of her fame, which he coveted for himself.

“Guys, this is Len, alias Underdiver,” Ryan introduced them. “She’s a friend. Shortie, this is Atom Kitty, my new BFF Wardrobe, and Superpanda. He can fly and shoot lasers from his eyes.”

“Atom Kitty, huh? Never heard that one before, *Quickie*.” Atom Cat crossed his arms while he observed Len. “Isn’t she a criminal though? I heard Vulcan paid the Private Security to have her released.”

Len immediately tensed up, looking at Atom Cat suspiciously. “Your corporate overlords are the real criminals,” she replied harshly, waving a hand at Rust Town. “This... this is their work.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Felix admitted with sheepish embarrassment. “You’re taking care of the place?”

“Someone has to.”

“Quicksave, you monster!” Wardrobe glared at him, having finished writing autographs for the kids. “I’m so disappointed in you.”

“About what?” Ryan asked with a frown.

“You can’t let your friend dress like this!” Wardrobe ranted, as she approached a very surprised Len and touched every part of her outfit with her soft fingers. “Her costume is *hideous!*”

Clearly, Len didn’t know how to react to this. “I’m, what, what...”

“The colors are all wrong, it stands for nothing, and it’s not even form-fitting!” Wardrobe started touching Len’s breasts, much to her dismay. “Look at her beautiful figure! All that potential, wasted!”

“S-stop please,” Len pleaded, as if attacked by an over-affectionate puppy.

“I’m sorry, darling, I can’t look the other way.” Wardrobe removed her hands from the Genius and adopted a pose reminding Ryan of the *Rodin’s Thinker* statue. She devoured Len with her eyes, the poor Genius now as red as a tomato. “We need silver and blue, with scales...”

“What’s your power?” Little Sarah asked the Panda.

“Oh, I can become the best creature in the *world!*” The Green Genome immediately transformed into his animal shape, much to the kids’ delight. “Overpanda overdrive!”

“It’s a bear!” a little girl squealed, as the Panda lifted her on his shoulders. “It’s a bear!”

“So soft and warm,” another boy said, as he touched the beast’s fur.

“Oh!” Little Sarah looked up at Felix. “Can you transform into a cat too?”

“No,” Felix replied with a gruff tone.

“But your name—”

“I like cats, that is all.”

“You are a huge disappointment,” Little Sarah snarked back at him, before giving in to the Panda’s cuteness. The animal eventually laid on his back, letting the children use his belly as a trampoline.

The Panda had found his power’s true purpose. Entertaining children.

Ryan would have found the scene quite funny, had his mind not been distracted by something else.

The orange is in the hen house... It was a joke phrase that Ryan told people when they asked details about his power. But he hadn’t used it once in this entire loop! The fact someone sent it to him could only mean one thing.

Somewhere, somebody remembered.

No, no, he shouldn’t keep his hopes up, in case they ended up dashed. For all he knew the Chronoradio could have broadcast that message. But in case someone did remember, who could it be?

Ryan remembered using that sentence three times. Once in the *Bakuto* during an early loop, once to Shroud when he asked his power, and once with Livia. It could have also been Jasmine, but why would she fake amnesia?

Livia, though, had seemed to recognize Ryan's name. He was also pretty sure she had a second power like her father, one he didn't fully understand yet. For all the courier knew, it could allow her to keep her memories from one loop to another.

Rah, his thoughts raised more questions than answers!

Ryan could ask the poor kitten for confirmation, but he had the feeling it would backfire. If it was Livia, Felix would ask why the courier received messages from Augustus' daughter; he might mistake the time-traveler for a mafia mole, and ruin everything.

Children eager for an autograph managed to distract Wardrobe long enough for Len to escape her clutches. "Riri," the Genius whispered to the courier. "Do you have a plan?"

"My idea to deal with Psyshock was a flop," Ryan admitted. He thought Wardrobe could cosplay as Cancel and finish off the bodyjacker, but clearly, it wouldn't happen. "We'll have to go with yours."

"I hope it will work," she said, raising her water gun. "I never tried it before."

Her bubble prison worked fine against Reload in the previous loop, so Ryan didn't doubt its effectiveness. Unless of course, Psyshock had an automatic suicide button to avoid capture. The Psycho didn't use any against Cancel, but she was nullifying his body-transfer back then.

Automatic triggers were nasty things. The courier developed one in his early loops, but he never found the right balance. One of his devices, meant to protect him against mind-readers, ended up mistaking his ‘saves’ as memory manipulation attempts. In another case, a chest bomb kept detonating at inopportune times. Eventually, Ryan gave up on the idea altogether, finding it more trouble than it was theoretically worth.

Had Psypsy reached the same conclusion? He couldn’t tell until they crossed that bridge.

Which, unfortunately, wouldn’t take that long. Ryan noticed Psyshock’s black, rusted minibus drive towards the orphanage, quickly followed by a second one.

The Meta-Gang had brought reinforcements.

He should have expected it. Without Ghoul to serve as a smokescreen, the Land probably noticed a large group of Genomes around the orphanage. Hopefully, Adam would keep his heavy hitters in reserve to protect the Junkyard, rather than send them all to the orphanage.

Ryan could do without another fight with Acid Rain. Especially since she murdered Felix the Cat the first time they met.

“It’s them,” Felix guessed, tensing up. “The Meta.”

“Go inside, right now,” Len told the children. “Hide in the basement, and don’t come out until I say so.”

“But ma—” Little Sarah protested.

“Do as I say,” the Genius asked more firmly, raising her water gun.

"Don't worry, sweetie," Wardrobe said with a reassuring wink. "Heroes always win."

Unless they took a bullet to the head, but Ryan hoped it wouldn't come to that. The children fled into the orphanage, the other Genomes preparing themselves up for a fight.

"Alright, guys, let me do the talking until bullets start flying," Ryan said, stealthily grabbing a device from the back of his Plymouth Fury and hiding it inside his suit. He also put on the *Fisty Brothers*, determined to personally introduce them to Psyshock's jaw. "No matter what you hear, try to keep calm."

"Y-yes, Sifu," the Panda said, fidgeting in place. Though he tried to put on a brave front, Ryan could tell the hero wannabe didn't have any experience whatsoever.

"What's this?" Atom Cat asked, eyeing Ryan's suit. "Some ultimate weapon?"

"You can say that," Ryan replied, preparing himself for his performance as the Meta-Gang parked in front of the orphanage. "It's a wiretap."

Psyshock stepped out of his car first, followed by Mongrel and Mosquito. The other minibus stopped nearby, two more Psychos emerging from it. A reptilian humanoid, and a bipedal jaguar.

Ryan remembered them both from his suicide run. He had run the lizard over on his way to the bunker, while the jaguar-man, *Rakshasa*, could summon gremlins.

The two groups were evenly matched, or so it seemed.

“Little Cesare.” No matter the number of loops, the possessive way Psyshock said it always sent a shiver down Ryan’s spine. “And the delightful Len. It’s quite the reunion.”

“I told you, I smelled a pack of Genomes,” Mosquito said, cracking his knuckles. The other Meta seemed to barely restrain themselves. Mongrel showed his teeth, the lizard guy’s tail whipped the ground, and Rakshasa prepared to summon gremlins for support. “Guess it’s blood harvest time.”

“Yes, though we only came for the children in that shelter, this is a good day indeed,” Psyshock said.

“Then you will have to explain that to Don Hector,” Ryan lied, channeling Blackthorn’s corporate arrogance. “He’s not happy with you already, so I wouldn’t recommend it.”

The sentence made Psyshock flinch.

It was an epic poker bluff, but Ryan knew he could still win with a weak hand. They didn’t call his style *loose-aggressive* for nothing.

The Meta glanced at their leader, who carefully examined Ryan. He sensed something was wrong, but the fact he didn’t immediately call out the courier’s bluff meant he had hit the mark.

“I did not have the pleasure of meeting with any Hector,” Psyshock said, suspicious.

“Oh well, in that case, we’ll cut off the juice,” Ryan lied as easily as he breathed. “If you don’t deliver results soon, you can say goodbye to your knockoff supply. These crates and the drones were a big investment on the big man’s part, and he doesn’t do charity.”

Now, that took Psyshock aback, because Ryan should have no way to know this information. He could have spied on them, but the knockoffs and drones were safely hidden inside the bunker. Most probably, the supplier himself had provided the information to Ryan... or he could time-travel.

Guess which Psypsy found more likely?

“Why are they here?” Psyshock glanced at Ryan’s team. All of them had tensed up, while Atom Cat seemed to brim with cold rage.

“The boss was worried you would go off-the-leash, and we would have to teach you a lesson.” Ryan’s fingers twitched dangerously. “Will we have to, Psypsy?”

The key to a good bluff was confidence. You had to seem so arrogantly sure of yourself that your opponent doubted his own judgment. Steve Jobs called it a *reality distortion field*, and it wasn’t that far from the truth.

The Meta-Gang’s second-in-command looked at Ryan dead in the eyes, the tension palpable. Their respective groups prepared themselves for a fight, for now was the moment of truth. The courier stood firm, with the arrogance of someone convinced he would always get his way.

And thankfully, Psyshock caved in.

“No,” he said, before pointing at a spot far from the two groups. “Here, let us discuss things far from unwelcome ears.”

Ryan glanced at his team and nodded at them. Hopefully, they could keep quiet until things inevitably escalated.

The two nemeses' walked away from their respective groups, at the edge of the orphanage's courtyard. "Explain yourself," Psyshock cut straight to business. "Mr. Manada specifically asked Adam and I not to reveal his involvement, even to our own men. What changed? Why did he send you rather than go through the usual channels?"

"Somebody talked," Ryan replied, faking annoyance with the Psycho. "The old channels are no longer secure."

"It wasn't us," Psyshock declared. "As we told your employer when we approached him, we are very careful about security. If there is a leak, it comes from your side."

"Yeah, sure," Ryan said while faking heavy skepticism. He noted that the Meta had approached Dynamis first, rather than the other way around.

"I personally altered the memories of anyone involved in our operations, to minimize risks," Psyshock insisted, forced on the defensive. "The leak does not come from us. Is that why you brought these people? So I can check their memories?"

"No, they don't like it, but they will keep their mouth shut," Ryan lied. "Why is the big boss paying you off generously to visit orphanages? Don't tell me the fatass wants some chicken nuggets for dinner?"

Hannifat Lecter had been cunning enough to keep his mouth shut in the previous loops, at least until he had blown up the city. The courier had the feeling Psyshock wouldn't share his boss' self-control. He was too arrogant and confident in his immortality.

"We intend to use these goblins as soldiers against the Augusti," Psyshock lied as he breathed. "I assure you, we

are making progress. We pushed them out of this district and started hitting their suppliers—”

“Barmen and normies,” Ryan replied disdainfully. “Where is the A-material? The Killer Seven? Pluto, Neptune? Looks like you’re underperforming, and company divisions who don’t bring results... get *downsized*.”

Okay, maybe he was laying it a bit too thick with the corporate metaphors, but it seemed to work. Psyshock lying about Mechron’s bunker also meant that Hector Manada probably didn’t know about it.

The more he listened, the more Ryan saw the bigger picture. Adam had learned of the bunker somehow, and came to Rust Town to unearth it. But since he needed time to do so quietly, the Meta’s leader had approached Hector Manada to secure a knockoff Elixir supply and pacify his crew of addicts. Adam promised to target the Augusti on Dynamis’ behalf, without ever intending to deliver.

These Psycho bastards had planned to overthrow their ‘employers’ from the start.

“As I told Mr. Manada, we lack the numbers to move carelessly,” Psyshock argued, trying to save the knockoff connection. The Meta-Gang probably expected to take weeks to fully conquer the bunker, and they couldn’t jeopardize their juice supply until then. “We need to gather more information before we can make a strategic move.”

Ryan raised three fingers. “Three days,” he said. “You have three days to deliver results.”

“Three days?” Surprise broke through Psyshock’s emotionless tone. “That is way too short.”

"You have three days to deliver," Ryan repeated boldly, "or the deal is *off*."

Now, he was mostly trolling Psyshock before the coup-de-grace, but he hoped to make him panic enough to blurt out one last juicy bit of info. And he had guessed right.

"I have made considerable progress on the other project," Psyshock argued. "If Mr. Manada was willing to extend that period, I could show him."

The second project? Now, Ryan couldn't be sure about it, but he could infer its nature from various elements compiled from the previous loops. "The brain scan?" the courier asked, hoping he had guessed right.

"Your technology, while primitive, is compatible with my power," Psyshock said, regaining his composure. "I can easily copy a mind from one brain to another, as long as they are closely related."

As Ryan had thought. He had wondered why the Dynamis/Meta alliance quickly collapsed in the previous loop with Psyshock's death, but now it made sense. With the Meta's failures against the Augusti and the brain-manipulator's demise, Hector Manada probably thought he should just scrap that alliance and cover his tracks. "How closely?"

"Clones would be the best, but we can work with close relatives. Siblings, children..." Psyshock marked a short pause. "Even Genomes."

"Careful, there," Ryan said, though he would make sure Enrique would hear of this. "What you imply could be taken the wrong way."

“I am simply saying that it is an option, if your employer is willing to entertain it.”

And like that, Psyshock had given the courier everything he needed.

Ryan looked at the skies, hoping to see flying armor. Now was time for Vulcan to show up, and turn it into a *ménage-à-trois*. Any minute now. Any minute now...

Damn, was it the higher number of Genomes involved that made Jasmine change her mind? At least, Ryan was pretty sure he could rely on someone else.

“Was that enough for you, Mr. Windshield?” Ryan said, glancing at an empty spot.

Psyshock froze in confusion, until a voice answered out of nowhere, “Yes.”

“Oh well,” Ryan said, glancing back at Psyshock, who started to realize he had been tricked. “Psypsy, you probably don’t remember, but there’s something I promised you last time we met. And Quicksave always delivers.”

Ryan punched Psyshock in the jaw by surprise, as all windows in the area exploded into glass shrapnel.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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55: The Future Past

And the whole thing started so well!

Right after Ryan punched Psyshock's jaw out, Shroud revealed his 'presence' and unleashed glass shards in all directions. The situation quickly devolved into a chaotic melee, while the pets in the animal shelter howled as one.

Shortie immediately fired at Psyshock with her water rifle, the liquid forming a three-meters wide bubble around the Meta. The malevolent telepath struggled inside, unable to escape the liquid prison. Meanwhile, Rakshasa had summoned a dozen gremlins, Atom Cat attempted to engage Mongrel in close combat only to be repelled by a blast of compressed air, and Wardrobe's costume transformed into a cosplay of Che Guevara. As for the Panda...

Mosquito instantly flew at him when the melee started, singling the bear out as easy prey whose blood he could drink. Except he forgot that Ryan's disciple was a seven hundred kilos juggernaut bigger than a polar bear, and who hit just as hard.

So the Panda caught Mosquito's sting mid-flight, pivoted on himself, and tossed the surprised Psycho against one of the black minibuses. The bugman hit it with enough force to trigger the alarm, but the Panda immediately closed the gap before he could recover.

“Bear Smash!” The Panda roared while he lunged at the Meta, hitting him so hard he bent the minibus’ metal doors; he then started beating the tar out of Mosquito with his bestial strength.

He was...

He was *good!*

The *Panda* was *good!*

He was ridiculous, but he was good!

Unfortunately, Ryan didn’t have the time to observe the animal brawl. The lizardman among the Meta lunged at an empty spot and slammed something against the ground, the blown dust revealing the invisible Shroud’s position. Ryan guessed the lizardman had managed to sense the glass Genome through sound or scent. The Carnival vigilante retaliated with shards, but they couldn’t cut through the Meta lizard’s tough scales.

Stopping time, Ryan rushed to Shroud’s rescue and punched the lizard with *Fisty* in the frozen time. When the clock struck again, the blow sent the reptile flying to the side, allowing Shroud to fly away. The glass genome switched targets to support Atom Cat with shards before Mongrel could incinerate him with pyrokinesis.

“Use pebbles!” Ryan shouted at Atom Cat, who still attempted to engage Mongrel in close-combat. “Use pebbles!”

“Oh, good idea!” Felix quickly caught on and threw a small stone at Mongrel, the projectile blasting the Psycho against the orphanage’s walls. Len managed to exploit his

temporary incapacitation to trap him in another bubble, the rabid Psycho gasping for air.

Unfortunately, it turned out, Len's bubble wasn't powerful enough to fully immobilize Psyshock. When he realized all was lost, the malevolent mindjacker managed to raise a tentacle at his head and shattered his own skull. His grey matter flowed into the water, the Psycho abandoning his men to their fate.

"Damn, not again!" Ryan complained, as he pummeled the reptile Psycho into unconsciousness with *Fisty*. Shroud started shredding gremlins with shards while Atom Cat tossed explosive stones at them, but Rakshasa kept summoning more. By now, hundreds of the critters threatened to swarm the shelter.

At least, until they noticed Ryan and abruptly stopped.

"Huh?" the time-traveler asked, as the critters seemed to panic. One of the gremlins put two raised fingers behind his head, as if mimicking a rabbit's ears, and then pointed at Ryan.

The creatures' anxious expression turned into stark raving terror.

"Wait, you remember me?!" Ryan asked, the gremlins immediately running away as he approached them. They seemed to recognize him, even with a new costume.

Wait, of course they did! Rakshasa probably summoned these creatures from another universe and the genome's ability only affected this one! "Come back," Ryan pleaded. "Rabbits are friendly!"

The gremlins frantically escaped into Rust Town, much to Rakshasa's shock and surprise. "Hey, come back here!" the jaguar-man ordered, even as Wardrobe rushed at him. "Come back, you cowards!"

Che Wardrobe tackled the jaguar to the ground, Rambo-style, and started manhandling him. Perhaps the costume gave her superhuman fighting skills or increased strength, but she quickly restrained the mook summoner with a chokehold. The vicious catman attempted to claw at her flesh, but Shroud nailed his palms to the ground with glass spikes.

"Back off!" Shortie warned, raising her rifle. Wardrobe released the chokehold and rolled away, just as Rakshasa became trapped inside a bubble of his own.

"You have the right to remain silent!" The Panda forced Mosquito's bloody face against the minibus' car hood, while holding him in a wristlock. "Perp!"

Ryan pitied the Mosquito. To be beaten by that bear must have hurt, physically and emotionally. A few seconds later, both the bug and the reptile Psycho joined their brethren in bubble confinement.

"I caught one, Sifu!" the Panda said, his bear face the very picture of happiness. "I caught one! We won!"

"No," Len said, the only one crestfallen with the result. "Psyshock, he escaped."

"I wouldn't call *that* escaped," Atom Cat said, pointing at the floating corpse in Shortie's watery prison.

"Actually, can they survive inside these bubbles?" Wardrobe asked, as Mongrel and Rakshasa had both passed out inside

their prison, while the wounded Mosquito gasped for breath. “They’re monsters, but killing them... it makes me feel uneasy.”

“They will survive,” Len nodded. “The special water provides them with enough oxygen to survive through direct skin contact... but not enough to stay conscious. Their body falls into suspended animation to preserve biological functions.”

All in all, the ‘fight’ had been a crushing victory, but unfortunately, Shortie had a point. They only caught mooks and Psyshock lived to fight another day. Which meant that the Meta could not only keep their enslaved thralls, but also operate Mechron’s mech.

While the Dynamis heroes rejoiced, Len’s face remained bitter. “I... I should have put more pressure,” she said, blaming herself for Psyshock’s escape. “If I had increased the oxygen ratio, I could have... I could have made him pass out quicker.”

“Shortie, it’s okay,” Ryan consoled her. “We’ll get that squid eventually.”

“You owe us an explanation,” Atom Cat scolded Ryan. “Who was that invisible guy?”

“That guy?” Ryan turned around, and realized Shroud had vanished. He must have turned invisible and left before the others could ask embarrassing questions. “That sneaky bastard, I hate it when he does that!”

“What was that for?” Atom Cat kept asking, suspicious. “That stuff about Hector? Because I assume it is *the* Hector?”

"Haven't you heard?" Len snapped at him, her anger at Dynamis stronger than her social anxiety. "Your employer bankrolls the Meta."

"Oooh, a conspiracy?" the Panda asked, clearly excited.
"The Panda is all ears."

"I heard, but that's not possible," Wardrobe argued, her quirkiness replaced with a skeptical frown. Even her costume changed from a South American icon to normal.
"Why would he do that? Help monsters like these Psychos?
It doesn't make sense."

"You just have to listen to Psypsy's recording," Ryan said, opening his suit to reveal the wiretap inside. "Our very own CEO hired him to attack the Augusti."

To prove his point, he activated the recording. Atom Cat brimmed with rage, the Panda sat on his ass without a word, and Shortie...

When she heard Psyshock talk about the children, she looked positively murderous. In all his years knowing her, Ryan had never seen her like that.

"But it doesn't make sense, if it were known, it would be disastrous for the company's image," Wardrobe argued, focusing on the marketing side of things. "It could be an impersonator trying to ruin Mr. Manada's reputation, or the Meta could lie to tarnish it. I mean, that's what PR will say."

"Who else could deliver *crates* of knockoff Elixirs to the Meta-Gang?" Felix replied with irritation, fists clenched. "I knew they were snakes, and I still let them bite me."

"But, uh, if that's true," the Panda cleared his throat, a bit afraid. "Does that mean that we know too much? That's

what happens in movies, right? We know too much, so we're all gonna die!"

"Nobody is going to die!" Wardrobe protested, hands on her waist. "We will do things by the book, and take that recording to our manager."

"But what happens if he's in on the conspiracy too?"

"You knew it would happen, when you brought us here," Atom Cat accused Ryan. "That was your plan from the start. And who was that invisible guy?"

"He's a friend," Ryan said. "He's very shy and not as transparent as he seems, but he's a good one. A vigilante."

"Was it why the Panda was recruited?" The Panda asked Ryan, his eyes widening in hope. "You couldn't trust anyone else?"

It...

It was technically true, in a weird way. Ryan was absolutely sure the Panda had nothing to do with any conspiracy whatsoever, because no illuminati in their right mind would hire him. "Exactly, young disciple," he replied, raising a finger at the animal's heart. "I chose you because of this."

"M-my liver?"

"No, your pure heart!" Ryan lightly slapped him in the back of the head. "You still have so much to learn!"

"Okay, okay, this is way above my pay grade," Wardrobe replied after taking a deep breath, glancing at the Meta-Gang. "First thing first, what do we do about these guys? How long will these bubbles hold?"

“Hours,” Len replied laconically.

“Okay, good, that's more than enough time to bring them back to Optimates Tower,” Wardrobe declared with a nod. “Everyone loves a by-the-book arrest!”

“What, haven't you heard?” Felix the Cat said with a tone filled with anger. He had left his family for Dynamis to do good, and the company had disappointed him. “They'll be back on the street within hours if we do that!”

“So what, we kill them?” Wardrobe snapped back. “We can't do that, we aren't vigilantes. We stand for *something*. There are due processes to follow.”

“You would rather stick to your contract and risk letting these guys go? They tried to kidnap children to turn them into soldiers!”

“Hey, hey, everyone calm down!” Ryan said, before the argument could grow more intense. “Look, here's my proposal. We call our beloved manager, he sends help to bring the perps into custody, and we give him the recording. That's why I took it in the first place.”

“I can get behind that,” Wardrobe said with a nod. “I'm sure Enrique will clear this up.”

Atom Cat crossed his arms, glaring at Ryan suspiciously. “You're both in on it. You and Blackthorn.”

“Sorry kitten, it's top secret.”

“You're both in on it, trying to expose Hector.” He marked a short pause. “Good.”

"And obviously, about what you heard today," Ryan glanced at everyone, putting a finger on his mask where the lips should have been. "Shush..."

"The Panda will be as silent as a tomb," his disciple promised, before rising back on his feet. "Can I make the arrest before the cameras? Bring the perps out of the car and into the tower?"

"Oh right, that will be your first arrest!" Wardrobe replied with a cheery grin. "You will see, you never forget your first. And with your new costume, I'm sure you will shoot up the popularity charts!"

"About costumes, why Che Guevara?" Ryan asked, the question had bothered him for a while.

"Because PR never lets me wear it, or Fidel Castro's," she admitted, a little embarrassed. "They say it's too subversive, even if I can survive anything when I wear his uniform!"

Len's head perked up, her communist radar triggered. "Are you a Marxist?"

"Uh, I would say I'm more of a social democrat," Wardrobe admitted, leaving Len disappointed. The fashion designer immediately tried to cheer her up. "But I sympathize! I sympathize!"

Ryan heard his cell phone bleep, and he realized someone had sent him a message. "I have to go."

"What? But you will miss the photo session!" Wardrobe complained, glaring at him. "Quicksave, it would be perfect to introduce your new costume to the world!"

"Sorry, Shortie and I need to bring the kids home," Ryan said, while Len frowned at him. Though Psyshock's temporary demise had not warranted a response from Big Fat Adam, the Meta would probably hit the orphanage again with heavy hitters unless evacuated. "And after that, I have a date."

The unknown caller had sent him an invitation.

That evening, Ryan drove the Plymouth Fury south of New Rome, with Len sitting in the other seat. They made their way past the strip and into a place that could only be called a slum.

Well, maybe he was exaggerating. The place was terribly dirty, the ground littered with used drug paraphernalia, spent condoms, and even bullet casings, but it wasn't as bad as Rust Town. Ryan didn't see any feral dogs scavenging trash cans, and people walked around without the sense of paranoia that characterized the northern neighborhoods. The place was a dump, but somebody kept order.

Ryan parked the Plymouth Fury at the parking lot of a particularly uninviting motel, its wall paint peeling away and its neon sign flickering. The courier noticed the remnants of a pool nearby, long drained away. Only one of the rooms had the lights on, located on the first floor.

Cancel guarded the door. At least it confirmed his suspicions.

"It's here," Ryan said, checking the address sent by the mystery caller.

"I... I know this place," Len frowned anxiously. "They call it Deadland Motel."

"Yeah, it looks pretty dead to me too."

"Riri," she said, looking at him with concern. "They call it this way because... because a lot of people disappear there."

It didn't surprise him. The place was close to Mount Augustus, and isolated enough that the Private Security wouldn't interfere. What surprised him was that Shortie had insisted on coming with him, after she evacuated the children to her underwater hideout. It warmed his heart. "If they wanted to kill me, they wouldn't have sent me an invitation."

"Are you, are you sure you want to do this?"

Ryan glanced at Cancel. "It's the only way to be sure," he replied, before smiling at his partner. "And with you as my backup, I have nothing to fear."

"D-Don't joke about it, please."

"Yeah, but I gotta admit," he smiled beneath his mask, "it's nice to have someone watching my back."

"Yes... I feel that way too." She glanced away. "Please, be careful, alright?"

"I swear."

And after these emotional words, Ryan exited the car, climbed the stairs to the motel's first floor, and made his way towards Cancel. "Hi Greta," the time-traveler waved a hand at her. "Is Mortimer nearby?"

"Oh, hi!" she replied, waving a hand at him with the same cute friendliness as always. "He's hiding in a corner."

"Judas," Mortimer's voice answered, though Ryan wasn't sure if it came from the walls or the ground. "Judas!"

"But have we met?" Cancel asked Ryan with a friendly expression. The courier had never seen her change it, no matter the loops. "I always remember masks and faces."

"Well, you didn't try to kill me yet," Ryan joked.

"Oh, good, I would feel bad if I had missed you!"

"But if you're here to kill me, could we pick something more dignified than a motel?" Ryan asked, pointed north. "I think there are some public toilets two streets away."

"It's fine, we're here for security," Greta reassured him, pointing at the door. "Someone wants to meet you."

As he assumed. With one last glance at a worried Len waiting for him, Ryan opened the bedroom door and walked inside.

To his surprise, the inside looked far cozier and larger than the outside. It was a pretty normal room, actually, including a king-sized bed and various amenities, though Ryan couldn't help but diss the blue wall paint. Someone had set a dining table, including coffee cups, a chessboard, and even cookies.

His host sat on the other side, waiting for him.

"Thank you for coming, Quicksave," Livia Augusti said, as he closed the door behind him. "Or should I call you Ryan?"

Ryan frowned, a bit confused. “You do not know?”

“Not quite,” the mafia princess admitted. “But this is not the first time we meet, is it? How did I call you, before you turned back the hand of time?”

She knew.

Goddammit, she *knew*, and Cancel was three meters away.
“You called me Ryan,” he replied, trying not to show his fear.
“We were casual acquaintances.”

“As I thought,” she replied, her face thoughtful. “*The orange is in the hen house...* I was confused about the meaning of this phrase, but now I understand. It was a message in a bottle. A distress signal thrown into the sea, hoping it would find its way to the right person.”

The Augusti princess poured Ryan a cup of coffee, and invited him to sit.

“Well, your bottle found its way to me,” Livia said with a smile. “Let’s open it together.”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Hi, after a long, long period in the Audible limbo, the second [Vainqueur the Dragon Audiobook](#) is now available on [Audible](#)! Spread the word!

Also, I have access to a limited number of promotional codes, so if you’re interested, say it in the comments or PM me.



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Loïc Fernandes, Eric jian, Gianni Ghiribelli, John Smith, Jay Eskew, Willshaper, David, Moons, Tibstrike, MaikD, Ploxxer, Alexander Dupree, Josh Delgado42, Domenic Stritzl, Not N. Octopus, Hayden Butz, Aaron, Marcin Zimny, Hazza Vanderbyl, Jay Gradon, Hoobie Gomez, Matthew, charlyfu, Cliint, Chris, Paul Rettig, Luke, The3ScapeGoat, Jacob Goodwin, Kristian Oinonen, Bennet Larson, Mikołaj Wiszniewski, Bobby Jones, Phillip Ingram, Ariel Reyz, altus, lione pouet, Nicolas Marty, Bobo Bo, Exrotes, Darti, ScottDR, Error, Hi, Kyle Wong, Henry Chow, Thundabear95, Aqua, torrey deloach, evaOne, Tarun Elankath, Philip Lee, Ivan Delgado, Geffery Dopp, Michael Kevin Karlson, Christian Matthew, Alex, Hi, Hauke, Kaleb Uden, Christoph Kunze, Dax, GraySquirrelEatToast, jacob johannes, House of Pantheon, ParadoxFox, Deshawn, FiveHands, Melanie, Matt M, Caldrick, T3ctonic, Kezrin, Michael Frankford, Brody Brown, Actaeix, Desert Wreck, gamerthemage, dave hutch, Bob, Zachary Venne, AlthePal, MaliMi, Arthur3s, Frank Pisauro, Brent, Slimereaper, Sub Electricall, Warren Zielke, The Knight Commissar, Derrick McDowell, Dorian Lee, Svend, some guy, Ryan Size, BB King, Markus, Ion, Borisalv, HollowIce, Long Le, Matthew Lo, Blah64, Hamis, Tip Top, Mojanks, Adrian Engel, Brenden, Matthew, Steven Thomsen, Josh Huynh, Psy, Mohammed Hajjaj, Lance Linked, Massgamer, afgasd adgasd, i9gv37, Franco Evett - Pig Lord, Harrison Russel, Yeno Memevig, Jake, Finn Ryan, Gio, Nicholas Jensen, Mark Gitthens, T T, Manu, Deinos, maltmana, Alyaseen, Deane L Uptegrove, Dylan, Svarog, Nick Smith, Conner M Tatum, Overlord_Grimm, killbot E, ParoxysmDK, James Deziel, Amaury, michele calderoni, Matt, Kirvin, Jordan Litwin, Magnus Steffen Nørregaard, Jay Gradon, K-Thomas, Justin Jones, Colo T, RedZone,

Nikolas Wojtalewicz, Marcus Pehan, Cole Rosenhein, Iiltigah, Enzo Morvan, Art238, Xegzy, Bon Bon, Richard Barboza, Alexander, Charlie Taylor, LS, Thantos, bob Johnson, Doom, Jeff Gault, Tristan Praedo, Hisokun, George Ive, John, Landon Pearce, shawn, I don't want to say this but, Daniel Hernandez, John Bush, Lukas W. Nielsen, war doggle, Cole Rosenhein, WowExist, P. S. Hoffman, Edwin Jose, Andrew Wilson, Pooya Daravi, Sunerl, Steven Lindsay, Thaco4, Tyler Chesney, NLRUmbra, Kyle J Smith, Rommelfanger Bob, Davvy chappie, Branden Bryan, Micah Brown, Alex Nimmer, David Burchfield, Jordan McDonald, Matthew Powell, Mihai Popescu, Denver Drew, JJ B, Andrew Odom, Danielle Warvel, Colin, George Ive, Welkin2, Ivan Kalinovic, AdAstridPerAspera, Reviv3pls, Andrew Jones, Connor Kogut, Dark Chaos, Saysca, Folk Chanin, Jdosnoen, Konrad2, Bunny Waffles, John Johnson, MaikD, Colby, Jacob B Haire, Pumpkin Mouse, Helsgarde, Harry Williams, Alex Canavan, Hobold the kobold, AQ, Adam Johnson, Daniel Aguirre, Zack Hoeken, Daniel Mackie, Chip Twothousandone, KatarnK, N0T0B0K, Razvan, Calvin, John, Jordan Chan, Heikki Aitakangas, OccultOwlbear, TheBreaker, Localthiccboi, Justi martinez, Thomas Rossiter, Jonathan Caselli, John, Richard Lee, Njordt, Joshua Thompson, PJ LeBlanc, Maxun, Seijax, Demetre Zurebiani, Iron_Giant, Guilherme Silva, Slade Schlaudecker, The Arcane Emperor, Erik Sjöström, RedZone, Vlad the mad lad, Michael Forrester, BadSnake971, ZRhulad, Ryan, Cole Mathews, Scott Bosse, sean mccusker, Timo Reti, Jarre7, Dietz, Thomas Gamble, Nonnuvya Bizniz, Sean Basa, Tagmin, Julien Castellijos, Kasan, Zach Jamison, Zack, Ethan Bell, William Vickers, Njordt, Ilvesmäki, Alexander, Devarya Raman, Marcus Seigman, James Jackson, Preston M, Subliminary, TDMC, Jordan, Kite

7, Alfredo Spuri, Russel Todd, Demetre Zurebiani, Zach, Tate Browder, Brandon Stiles, Minow, Joachim Janssen, Michael S., edmuck, Jade Green, just_a_potato, Victor Newman, Malphas, Kyle Reid, Zagig Yragerne, aezrith ferova, Hulg Gohen, matticide FOWD, Jackietron201, Dark Chaos, Michael Yamashita, Hntpo, Andraste Chevalier, Julien Castillejos, William Johnson, John Evans, Kyoma, Liark Lane, Joey Nguyen, mcanamara ?, HarbingTarbl, Spartanstoryteller, Thordur hrafn, David Ge, IronJim, William, Demetre Zurebiani, hippityhoppity, Magnus Margenfeld, Dertyer, Guy Incognito, Paul Hughes, TaoBio, Soufyan Zerrad, mars kiyu, Iudi, Meredith Leu, Gaëtan Hillion, Bernice0311, Trespitry, Galandry, Eirik, Andrey Kutsey, Scipio, Andrew Rutherford Butler, Aeon, brett thomas, Yiğit Köymen, Thiago Ruiz, Yamibomb112, Imran, Dark Chaos, Tijay Arnie, Comedy Knight, Qwer, Gerrant, Ciara Banks, Bryan Mulligan, William Swearingin, Anonmily, William Brayer, Armo, Aehs, sedael, Darien Benner, Ligma, Michael Buchler, Daniel Spencer Vargas, Gabriel Aptekar, BedlamBlade, Walter, Joko, Dynrakmos, Goggy123, maou99sama, Erostan, Clemens Hochstädter, Noah Rimmer Skov, Jacob Barger, Sam Paley, Ariel reyz, Juppaware, House of Pantheon, Aymeric Penven, Dantalian11, Harold Sandahl IV, Francis Chartier, Kody Ihnat, Samuel Alexander Vall Andersen, Rein Warner, mikael persson, morganmoll, Reviv3pls, Warper 6, 11037, Andrew Holland, Jdosnoen, Xerias, manspider0002, Sebastiano H. C., Zachary D Nickell, Terry Winter, Maalsc, TTG, Oliverthms, Richard Wall, Siphor, Dark Chaos, Jeremy Humphrey, Nikhil Majumdar, Leaored, Cipkenop, Chistopher Waits, Jefferymoonworm, Robert Blank, Ervin Ughy, Phoebe Vale, Shaoraka, Zachary Smith, PonyReader, agoniste, Max Hu, Brycen Legler,

KeyMan BrB, Jonathan Spaulding, Ausner Gentil, Kazzy, Erriballon, Larry Smith, Sanjay, Oliver Gray, Adrian Barter, Alex Rhone, Karthic, Tailor Tylbury, Bob le Poisson Rouge, Colin Ford, Ashley Cameron, Bogdanov Dmitriy, Ivan Elyshev, Anthony, Particlepigeon, Ryan Trueman, Kalle, Jack, Chris, Roden, Andrew Stinson, Thomas Tessier, M Clason, Alex Lindsay, Sadinar, Adam Roundfield, Daniel Everest, Exiled Knight, LinenZero, Tomas Puskas, Kyle Reese, RandomGift, Corgi McStumperson, Peter Christensen-Calvin, James Teeple, Dom Ceremonia, Mikkel Kolding Christensen, Sands, BlackFire13th, Kevin Ramos, Charles handgis, damien, Jeb, Jeb, Sebin Paul, Andrew Kahn, 白酒鬼, Trevor Sales, Calvin Miner, Rory, PbookR, Glader, John Carroll, Quentin, Andrew Parsadayan, Igor Mikulik, RepossessedSoul, James Walsh, Athra, Chris M, Jim of Trades, Koen Hertenberg, Enaz the Great, Alex Pruitt, Saul Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.

56: Heartfelt Talk

For a long moment, Ryan didn't say a single word.

He had put his mask on a side of the table, near the chessboard, and kept looking at his steaming coffee cup. The courier could lose himself in the bitter darkness of the soft, delightful drink.

Anything to alleviate the tension in the room.

"Your cup is not poisoned," Livia said before clearing her throat. She wore a black turtleneck, classy, but casual. "If I wanted you dead, you would be."

"Poison wouldn't work anyway." Ryan shrugged, before grabbing the cookies and drenching them in the coffee. "But there are still two hitmen right outside the door, and people call this place Deathland Motel. Now that I think of it, it kinda sounds like a horror theme park..."

"It's for my safety." Livia put her hands around her coffee cup, to better feel the warmth on her fingers. "My previous self seems to have perished abruptly, from what I can gather."

"It wasn't me," Ryan protested.

"How can I be sure?" She asked with a frown on her face. "I know you lied about your ability to my old self. You told her that you could jump through alternate realities, when you could actually go back in time."

“It was metaphorically true,” Ryan deadpanned before eating the cookie. It was quite sweet, but not all that good.

“Which is another way to say you *lied*,” Livia replied, unflappable. “I would have brought Crypto to this gathering if I could, but he had a hockey-related accident. I presume you were behind it?”

“I warned him!” Ryan protested. “I warned Luigi that if he kept ruining my runs, things wouldn’t go well between us!”

The courier had made it a point to target the truth-teller in every loop, even those where he didn’t join the Augusti. If anything, Ryan considered it preemptive self-defense.

“Which confirms my worries,” Livia said with a frown, looking into his eyes. “You don’t want your secret getting out, and will use violence to cover it up if needed.”

“Speak for yourself, Miss Two Powers.”

She flinched. “I... I don’t see what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, right,” Ryan said, truly tempted to leave the table anyway, consequences be damned. “Look, can you tell me what you want exactly? Or else I will take the door.”

“If you try to leave this room now, I will have no choice but hunt you down,” Livia declared, her eyes full of iron. “Your power is too great to be ignored, and I’m not sure you won’t be a threat to my family in the future.”

The courier glared at her, but she stood her ground.

“Ryan, the *only* reason I haven’t gone to my father yet with my suspicions, is that my previous self seemed to appreciate you,” she warned him. “I even called off Vulcan

when she wanted to track you down. Don't waste this opportunity."

Ryan tried to figure how to deal with this. She didn't remember loops but seemed capable of transferring information from one to the other, which made her incredibly dangerous.

Could he negate her advantage by canceling her power? He could always try to get Cancel to turn against her employer, but it seemed far-stretched and difficult. If Augustus' daughter could truly interact with alternate universes beyond his reach, then even death wouldn't solve the problem permanently. She would get right back to hunting him in the next run, and that wasn't without considering whatever contingencies she put in place.

That wasn't a worst-case scenario, but it was pretty damn close.

"I'll ask again then," Ryan said. He didn't want to sound frustrated, but the whole situation made him incredibly uneasy. "What do you want?"

Livia inhaled, gathering her bearing. "I want the truth."

"The truth?" Ryan repeated the word, as the weight of countless years fell on his shoulders. "The truth caused me so much heartbreak, I guess I gave up on it. Some didn't believe me. Some did, and went mad. Some went as far as trying to destroy me, because they didn't want to forget. And some..."

The courier's thoughts turned to Jasmine.

"Some did believe me, and tried to help. And yet, I kept dying, and they forgot. Over, and over, and over again."

Ryan let out a heavy sigh. “Those are the worst, because I never get used to them.”

Livia’s gaze betrayed a hint of compassion, but she regained her icy demeanor. “I think I understand,” she said. “I cannot say I can fully comprehend what you went through, but I think I see your point.”

“No, you can’t. And be thankful for it.” Ryan grabbed his own coffee cup. “You haven’t told your father, but have you told anyone else?”

“Why?” Her tone turned defensive. “Do you want to silence me?”

“No.” Ryan couldn’t even if he wanted to. “But more than half your ‘*Olympians*’ are murderous assholes. I don’t want any of them to know my true power.”

“If you don’t plan to move against them, then you should have nothing to fear.”

“Oh really?” Ryan deadpanned. “Your father personally tracks down everyone he remotely suspects of being a threat to him. What do you think Lightning Butt will do if he learns I can time-travel?”

“I...” His argument seemed to have hit the mark. “I could talk him out of this.”

“I don’t believe you,” Ryan replied dryly. “And let’s not talk about *Bliss*.”

“This has nothing to do with our conversation,” Livia argued, her body tensing. “Don’t try to change the subject.”

"It has everything to do with it," Ryan insisted, sipping his coffee. "*Bliss* causes sterility in unpowered humans. I used to think Genomes were spared from that nasty side-effect thanks to their enhanced metabolism, but not anymore. Narcinia can create life as she wishes, so there's no way she doesn't know, and she's way too nice not to have corrected that problem already. Hence, it's not a bug; it's a feature."

Livia's fingers trembled around her cup, her facial features crinkled.

"Why would a cartel make most of its customers sterile? It made no sense to me, until I saw your father and his crew. People like Mars look down on normal humans, like cattle." Ryan snorted. "Your father *wants* to kill normies. *Bliss* isn't a product, it's a weapon."

"You think I *wanted* this?!"

The sudden outburst made Ryan recoil in his chair, as anger broke through Livia's mask.

"You don't think I already tried to change that?!" Now it was her turn to snarl at him, bottled up anger rising to the surface. "You don't think I tried to close that death lab a thousand times? You think I want people to associate my family's name with a drug that kills thousands each year? You think I *want* this?"

Ryan said nothing, astonished, as Livia put her hands on her face.

She... she seemed to fight back tears.

"My father won't budge," she said, her voice weak. "He will listen to me on almost everything, but *Bliss*... it's his favorite project. His legacy. Narcinia... that girl could make

the world so much better. She's a miracle. But father... father doesn't want to save anyone. He would rather be king of a cemetery."

Livia no longer looked like the regal, confident daughter of Augustus. The mask had fallen, and beneath, Ryan only saw a young woman with far too much pressure and unwanted expectations thrown on her shoulders.

At this moment, she looked so vulnerable that Ryan's anger vanished. "Livia, you don't have to do this, if you don't want to," he said, taking her hand in his own. Her fingers felt so cold to the touch. "Even if they're your family. You have the right to leave."

"I have to," she replied, pushing away his hand and wiping away tears. "Someone worse will take over the organization otherwise."

Livia took a few seconds to recover her composure, breathing in and out while Ryan watched.

"I just want to protect my family, Ryan," she said. "If... whatever they are, they are still my family. My father... my father is what he is, but he is still my father at the end of the day. Do you understand?"

These words made Ryan flinch, as they brought him back to the darkest days of his childhood.

"I don't want them to die," Livia said with a sigh. "That's all I ask. I want to protect them. From Dynamis, from the Meta. From you, if necessary."

"You won't be able to shield them from the consequences of their actions." The Carnival's threat already loomed over Augustus' empire.

"I know, but I still have to try and protect them. If..." She struggled to find her words, her eyebrows narrowing in bottled-up frustration. "I just want to know you won't threaten them. That you aren't out to kill us. If you can guarantee that, then... then I will keep your secrets, and let you be. That's all."

Ryan opened his mouth, closed it, and then finally decided to reassure her. "I don't want to kill you or your family, Livia."

Now that the courier thought it, wasn't that what he had always wanted? Somebody capable of remembering him? His first instinct was paranoia, yet she had been nothing but helpful in the previous loop. Lightning Dad was a colossal asshole, but his daughter seemed... nice, for a lack of a better term?

"Thing is, I..." Ryan said, trying to find his words. "I always hoped something like this would happen. That someone like you would come along, and remember me. But now that it finally happened, I have no idea how to deal with this. It's..."

"New?" she suggested with a sigh.

"Yes," he said and nodded. "And not in a funny way. I've grown used to controlling everything in a loop, and now, you're threatening to take all my progress away."

"I understand," Livia replied, with a forced smile. "I feel the same way about you. I never met someone immune to my power before. It's... a little scary, and disturbing. I don't know what to expect."

They were both afraid of the other.

Hedgehog's dilemma hit again!

Eventually, after a long minute of thinking, Ryan reached a decision. It was a very risky move, but he had pushed his chips on the table a long time ago. He might as well see the river.

“Alright, if you want the full truth about my power, then I will give it.” He would be as honest with her as he had been with Len and Jasmine. “But trust is a two-way street.”

She considered his proposal for a while, her face thoughtful.
“What do you want in return?”

“I want the truth too.”

“How can I know that you won’t take any information I gave, and then use it against me in your next attempt?”

“What guarantee do I have that you won’t send your army of Genomes after my hide?” Ryan let out a shrug. “Thing is, if neither of us is willing to take a risk, then there’s only one way it will end between us. And...”

He looked at this woman, who reminded him so much of someone else.

“And I don’t want to go there.”

Augustus’ daughter said nothing, mulling it over as she sipped her coffee. Eventually, she reached a decision.

“Fine,” Livia declared, putting down her cup on the table. “I accept your terms.”

“First question then,” Ryan asked, glancing at the walls.
“Why this motel?”

It made her chuckle a little, releasing some of the tension in the room. “That is the first thing you wish to know?”

“It’s cozy but I’m not fond of the wall paint. You should try purple, it goes well with everything.”

“Felix and I used it as our ‘hideout,’ of a sort,” Livia admitted, glancing at the chessboard. “It was a private refuge we used when we wanted to get away from our families. It’s discreet, and the few who know about it keep their mouth shut. Since you’ve joined Il Migliore, I thought it would be a good neutral ground.”

Ryan scoffed. “I will scold the kitten for his lack of taste then.”

“How is he?” she asked, her tone soft as if afraid of the answer. “Felix?”

“Shouldn’t you know with your power?” Ryan asked, before answering truthfully. “He’s fine, if disappointed. Il Migliore isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, but he will recover. I don’t think he will be coming back though.”

“No, he won’t,” Livia agreed with a sigh. “His parents believe he will ‘wise up’ and return to the fold, but I know better. He was always too stubborn for his own good.”

After a short silence, Ryan decided to address the elephant in the room. “How did you remember?”

“You first, Ryan,” she asked, looking into his eyes. “You first.”

“You want the short or the long version?”

“The long one,” she said firmly.

Ryan strongly considered lying to her anyway, but decided against it. Odd as it may be, the courier fulfilled his promises, even if he was the only one who remembered them.

So he told her, without omission.

Livia listened to his explanations with an unreadable face, until he reached the end of his tale. He would have given everything to know what she thought, but her poker face was almost as good as Ryan's own.

"I see," is all she said, once he finished his tale.

"If you want to have me killed, now is the time," Ryan replied. "Or at least, you can try."

"I..."

Livia stopped, and the courier was certain she considered lying to him too.

"You are right, Ryan. I have two powers. Not just one."

But in the end, she was an honorable woman.

"You drank two Elixirs," Ryan said. "Like your father."

"I was the one to do it first," she admitted. "I drank a Blue Elixir, which granted me the ability to see parallel timelines. And with that power, I realized both my father and I could wield up to two powers with no ill side-effects in alternate realities."

"A genetic quirk?" Ryan asked, the princess nodding in confirmation. "What about your uncle and aunt?"

"They didn't inherit the necessary genes. In the realities where they drank a second Elixir, they always went Psycho. And even in my case, a third Elixir would have turned me into a monster."

Livia cleared her throat and adjusted her hair, like a teacher preparing a lecture. "Anyway, my power allows me to see and hear through the senses of alternate *mes*. A limited number."

"How limited?" Ryan asked, as he stole a second cookie.

"Six," the princess said, her eyes squinting. "If you want a metaphor, I can watch up to six plasma screens at once. I can switch the channels, but I cannot turn them off. My power is always active."

"And you realized I could go back in time by talking with these alternate selves?"

"Yes and no," Livia admitted. "Thing is, I don't perceive these other Livia directly. I use a hub. It's hard for me to describe it, but I constantly see myself in two places. The one where I'm at right now, and a blue place where I can select the channels. I have six screens, but I watch them in a room."

Ryan immediately caught on. "And you can interact with that 'blue room'?"

"Yes, I can record voices and notes, like an archive," she nodded with a smile, happy he understood her. "I actually noticed notes I didn't remember writing. I assumed that my alternate selves also had access to this place and recorded information... until I met you."

"You kept notes on me," Ryan guessed. "Notes with dates, about how you met a dashing rogue your power couldn't perceive."

"I wouldn't call you dashing," the princess teased him. Now that they had both opened up, the tension between them had slowly lessened. "But yes. If it had been recorded by an alternate me, then she shouldn't have been able to perceive you. The way we met was also different, and I had the intuition you knew me already."

"But how did you realize I was time-traveling?"

"I don't know anything about video games," Augustus' daughter admitted with a sheepish smile. "So I looked up what your name meant. I quickly connected the dots, and it clicked."

Ryan blinked at Livia, trying to see if she was serious. It couldn't be... "You figured it out, and you aren't even a gamer? There are no words to describe my sheer disappointment."

"I'm surprised you took such a risk with a name like that," she said. "Unless it was another bottle thrown to the sea?"

Maybe. Ryan ignored the question, focusing on her power's mechanics.

"Elements made me think that all true Genomes draw their powers from a higher dimension, that embodies their colors' essence." The more he had thought about that theory, the more Ryan had come to believe in it. "A dimension of energy for Red. The crossroads of all spacetime for Violet..."

"A universe of thoughts and information for Blue?" Livia guessed his theory.

"I think you are like me," Ryan explained. "A part of you, perhaps a psychic presence, exists in that Blue World. It allows you to record information outside space and time, and to see through alternate realities."

"But not my consciousness," Livia realized. "Which is why my memories do not carry over when you overwrite our universe. I wonder why I didn't notice the passage of time in these alternate worlds. Some should have carried on for years, if you don't affect them."

"Because I don't think you actually see parallel universes, or at least not as you understand them," Ryan replied. "I think your power *creates* and *sustains* them."

Livia gave it some thought, before grasping his theory. "You think they aren't actually universes that physically exist, but elaborate simulations?"

"Possibilities that collapse whenever you stop observing them. They only start existing when you use power."

"Mmm, I never saw things like that," the princess admitted. "But that would explain why you don't appear in any of them. You are the controller. The one who decides if the current reality and all its possible branches exist at all. Your power trumps mine."

"Both of them?" Ryan teased her.

"We can check," she said with a smug smile. He had triggered a competitive instinct within her. "I mean, if you want."

Ryan accepted the challenge, raising his hand and moving his fingers towards himself. "Bring it, princess."

He felt something in the back of—

Time seemed to flash-forward, and when Ryan regained consciousness, the white pawn and black knight on the chessboard had moved. Livia, though, seemed *extremely* confused.

“Is that all you got, Violet?” Ryan taunted her.

“That’s very strange,” Livia admitted with a scowl. “Can you try your time-stop on me, Ryan? I wish to check something.”

He did, and she froze like everything else. Unlike her father, she couldn’t move in the stopped time.

“I think I sensed you activate it,” Livia said when time resumed, before noticing a cookie in her hand. “But clearly, I’m not immune to it.”

“Well, your dad is,” Ryan shrugged. “One of you was enough.”

“Oh, really?” Livia blinked a few times in a row. “That... that would explain some things.”

The courier raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“Sometimes, Dad seems to stutter, or stop mid-sentence before repeating himself. Uncle thought it was age catching up to him, but no one dared to confront my father over it. He’s very sensitive about growing old, and I suppose he didn’t want us to worry.”

“It must have been pretty annoying from his point of view,” Ryan said with a smirk as he imagined the scene.

"I think he would be torn between recruiting you for your power, or killing you for being an annoyance." Livia chuckled, before leaving her cookie back with the others. Ryan guessed she was careful about her weight. "If he learns about you at least."

Ryan promised himself he would time-prank Lightning Butt in the future. "Let me guess, you erased time and leapt past it?"

"Is that a reference to something?" Livia asked, and Ryan's glare made her uncomfortable. "Why are you looking at me as if I were pitiful?"

It hurt to be a cultured person while surrounded by ignorance. He would have to do this woman's education one day.

"My enhanced timing told me time moved forward a few seconds, and I'm pretty sure we both played a round of chess," he said, glancing at the board. "You create a temporal anomaly where time flows forward, and since I never experienced a blackout like this one before, I assume it only affects a small area."

"Very good guess," she conceded. "Yes, I create a localized temporal anomaly where time behaves oddly. Events proceed as they should have, had I not used my power, but everyone except me is in a trance following a script. In that anomaly, I am the only one capable of adjusting my actions and applying force to objects, making me invulnerable; and when time resumes normally, only I remember my actions."

Livia crossed her arms. "Or at least... that is how it works with everyone else."

“But not me,” Ryan said with a smirk. “My time-fu is stronger than yours!”

“I can see the results of your actions, but not interact with them,” she admitted with a scowl, her pride wounded. “I put a white pawn forward, and the black knight moved on its own. As if you were a ghost capable of affecting the physical world, but immune to retaliation. Perhaps it is because you partly exist in this Purple World.”

If their powers interacted so weirdly together, Ryan didn’t dare to invite Acid Rain to the table. “So in that temporal anomaly, I am, what, intangible? Invulnerable?” Livia answered his question with a nod, and the courier remembered Ischia Island. “I think you might have saved my life once that way.”

Livia must have tried to ‘skip’ time in an attempt to survive the *Bahamut’s* blast, but her power probably ran out before she could find shelter. While Ryan was already in the bathysphere, and their weird power interference caused the device to move away. Or at least, it was his best guess. He would need more trial and error to figure out how their powers truly interfered with each other.

The princess’ expression turned from curious to sour, her eyes looking at her coffee. “Ryan, why did you join the Augusti in the past, and now work for our enemies? What game are you playing at?”

“Long story, but I agreed to destroy the *Bliss* factory on behalf of another organization,” Ryan said. “Or else they would take things into their own hands, and kill a lot of people.”

She scoffed. “I see.”

"I see you aren't against it." Ryan frowned, as his intuition kicked in. "Last loop, you insisted I go to Ischia Island when you were inspecting the defenses. Even if there was no reason for me to go there. You *wanted* me to sabotage that drug farm."

"I must have suspected something was up with you then," Livia replied while looking away. "Who asked you to do that? Dynamis?"

"No."

She looked into his eyes. "Then who?"

Ryan hesitated. He remembered how she interacted with Shroud last time, and he had the feeling her beef with the Carnival was personal. If she knew, the Augusti would track Shroud down, and the courier didn't want his translucent ally to die. "I can't tell you."

Instantly, he felt the tension rising again in the room. "I see," Livia said with a frosty tone. "Then, how did I die the previous time?"

"You really want to know?" Ryan asked her, and she nodded sharply. "The Meta murdered you with an orbital laser."

The princess blinked as she digested his answer, and then frowned. "You're lying."

"I wish I was," Ryan replied, the memory of that disaster souring his mood. "I'm working towards preventing it."

"It's impossible, I should have seen it coming," Livia protested.

"You kept seeing yourself dying in alternate realities."

“Then that can only mean two things,” she said, arms crossed. “Either the Meta-Gang has a method to counter my power, or they decided to attack me first in every alternate universe I observed. Some of my other selves should have survived otherwise.”

The Meta did have access to Mechron’s bunker and the technology within it, but Ryan considered the second option more likely. Knowing Big Fat Adam, he must have decided to target any precog capable of raising the alarm on his plans to destroy New Rome first.

Unfortunately, this made Livia ask only more questions, rather than less. “How did they manage to get an orbital laser in the first place?”

Ryan weighed the pros and cons of telling her about Mechron’s armory, before realizing the risk was simply too great. Augustus had destroyed it in an act of vengeful fury in the previous loop, but in this one? At the height of his power? This god-wannabe would probably decide to claim the bunker for himself. “I can’t tell you.”

“You can’t tell me?” Livia glared at the courier. “You would rather let Adam the Ogre get his hands on a WMD rather than tell me?”

“Look, it’s not that I don’t trust you,” Ryan protested, “but you will have to tell your father to deal with this, and—”

“My father isn’t perfect, but he doesn’t eat *children* for dinner.”

“That’s the bar you set for human decency?” Ryan snapped back. “You know he murdered Narcinia’s real parents, to use her as a hostage against Leo Hargraves?”

"Her parents were raiders, who deserved what they got," Livia argued, clenching her jaw in anger. "And careful with what you say. Hargraves murdered my mother."

Oh? That explained a few things. Ryan noted that tidbit for later, dead set on confronting Mr. See-Through about it.

"I'm just saying you should look into it, because the source seemed pretty trustworthy." For all his faults, Ryan had grown to trust Shroud over the last loops. The vigilante's desire to do good was genuine, though extreme. "He said her mother wanted to help the world, and that she had the power to do so."

"Who told you that?" Livia asked, her frown deepening. "You won't tell me either? I'm sure it's the same organization who asked you to destroy Ischia Island."

Ryan crossed his arms, standing his ground. "I can't tell you."

"Why?" she raised her hands in incomprehension. "Why Ryan? You say you don't want to harm my family, but you're willing to work with people who are. So why should I trust you?"

"Because I can make everything right."

"And what if you're wrong?" Livia shook her head. "What if you blow up Ischia Island with Narcinia still inside, and it sticks? What if the Meta-Gang manages to kill you permanently? You speak about trust, but you only tell me half the story!"

"Then, what happens if I ask about Lightning Butt's invulnerability?" Ryan replied, tone rising up between them. "Will you tell me?"

"Why would you need to know that, if you don't intend to go after him?" she replied angrily. "I am not going to stay idle while a Psycho plots my murder and who knows how many others, Ryan! So why should I trust you to help when you're set on keeping me in the dark?"

"Because I don't want anyone to die!" Ryan snarled while raising a finger at the princess, at his wits' end. "You included!"

This time, his words silenced her.

"Do you know what it is to be me?" Ryan asked, frustration he had been bottling up for decades simmering to the surface. "To have the power to help everyone, knowing that every time I save, things will stick? That if I leave someone dead when I could have protected them, then it becomes my fault? Do you know how easy it would be to just say, '*fuck them, I don't care anymore*' and never turn back?"

After that outburst, the two fell into an awkward, tense silence. They had reached an impasse.

"I think you should go," Livia said, holding her arms as if shielding herself. "It's late, and people will ask questions."

Yeah, they were done. For now.

Without further words, the courier grabbed his mask and moved towards the door.

"Ryan."

He froze, his hand on the door handle.

"I don't care about the rest of the organization, but if my father, my uncle, and my aunt die because of your schemes,

I will destroy you,” Livia warned him. “Same with Felix, Fortuna, and Narcinia.”

“Fine, I have a list of my own,” Ryan replied with the same icy tone. “Len Sabino, the orphans under her care, my current team, Mathias Martel, Jamie, Ki-jung, Lanka, Narcinia, Jasmine, and my cat. If you guys target any of them, I swear you will never see me coming.”

Livia sighed. “It’s not over. I will call you again.”

“Sure,” the time-traveler replied, as he opened the door and walked out. “Whatever you say.”

As the clock struck midnight, Ryan drove the Plymouth Fury to the harbor.

“Well, here we are,” the time-traveler said, turning to his partner. “You’re sure you don’t want to go with me? I know you hate Dynamis, but they promised me a condo with an unbeatable city view.”

No answer. Len hadn’t said a thing since they left the motel. Perhaps her medication had run off, and she found the surface world tiring.

Or perhaps she expected Cancel and the Killer Seven to crawl out of the woods to attack them. But so far, Livia hadn’t sent anyone.

“I know you think you need to overdose on antidepressants for them to work, Shortie, but please, follow the treatment,” Ryan pleaded. “It’s for your own good.”

“Riri.” Len looked into his eyes, not bothering to hide her concern. “Why did you tell her so much? You can’t take it

back now."

Why?

Ryan could say he had no choice. That with Livia's power, it was better to be truthful and try to build a good relationship, rather than go for the kill. He could say that he wanted things to change, even if it meant taking a risk.

But that would have been a lie.

Thing was, his reasons ran deeper than that.

An invincible psychopath trying to push his daughter into a situation she wasn't comfortable with, and turning her into a target because they couldn't harm him directly?

How could Len ask him *why*?

"Because I've seen it before," Ryan said, looking at the Mediterranean Sea. "And it didn't end well the first time around."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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Aleksander ŻołĄdkiewicz, Peter Edlund, Laurence Caraccio, Jacob Ellis, Blaek East, Deepsealife, Kristian Huse, Ethan Immer, Lululelolo, Isaac Weibel, Bob Mijano, Mike, Max Lopo, Jerzylo, Rory Daniels, Saaski, David Hansson, Haprahoh, mikeju, riley st john, Sam Miller, osiykm, Joe Giannuzzi, Phantom, Eric Liu, Phillip Bempong, lockx, Ben Lenk-Ostendorf, Thomas Have, Matt Hauer, GR15AJKE, Joe, Steven, Gavin Olsen, Derek Allen, Nicholas Johnson, Dargon, David Burchfield, Julien Fellegara, Kayden, thkiw, Andriette Brittz, redslash5, FiveHands, B. Gazzola, bisque, Toesniffer, Paul, DaShoe, Abhichon chandrasen, Nock, Nikhil B, Kiernan Lynch, Connor Alexander, ar1357, Oliver Wolfe, NightWhisper, Samuel Smith, Aldhere, staticimports, Jacob, Sam McNamara, Jarrod Broome, Rolf Bork, Callum Brocklehurst, Samuel Borges, Random, Joe, Dardy Noongar, Clayton Carson, Joe Giannuzzi, Lance Linked, Jonathan Kutz, Gerald Monroe, Stuart Dye, Hades the god, Theodor Björkman, DerWipe, Grosbilljunior, martin, Nether_Lava, Imo Chukwuemeka Daniel, GenericKane, Jason Oniemola, Sharath, Cullen Humphries, Dillon Mills, Augustus, Joseph, Puri Iresan, Im the smallest peach, Abhichon chandrasen, MaikD, Matt Labrum, Robert, s476, Eneri, TKLD, depression 2.0, Daniel Hughesdon, Anders Svensen, Jordan, Oakenbear, Vega, K-Thomas, Eric Vistnes, Jose, Davvy chapie, Joey Nguyen, Skovboa, Lucas Hansen, maniac_ian, samuel baldauf, Sebin Paul, Liz Griggs, Colo T, BluEarth, MaliMi, Marcus Österberg, Platinum Star, Sam, Orm, DaQualyn Singleton, Rheklr, evilperson41, Jake V, Lloyd kostuik, Corwin Brewer, Loïc Fernandes, Eric jian, Gianni Ghiribelli, John Smith, Jay Eskew, Willshaper, David, Moons, Tibstrike, MaikD, Ploxzer, Alexander Dupree, Josh Delgado42, Domenic Stritzl, Not N. Octopus, Hayden Butz, Aaron,

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57: The Island of Dr. Tyrano

Ryan had to give it to Dynamis. The company spoiled its heroes rotten.

Enrique had granted the courier a full penthouse suite, located on the Optimates Tower's twenty-fifth floor. Ryan slept in an apartment-sized bedroom, with a plasma screen TV and an unbeatable picturesque window view of the city. The suite was fully stocked with amenities and tastefully decorated, with no inch of ground left without a carpet; each piece of furniture had been carefully selected to create an atmosphere of opulent relaxation. The bathroom included a private pool with a Jacuzzi included, and even a bar.

The suite itself was only part of the package though. Ryan had a dedicated staff available at all times to fulfill all his whims, from the mundane to the truly bizarre. The courier had tested the waters and learned almost nothing was off-the-table for him, from drugs to prostitutes; so long as none of his excesses made their way to the media anyway. And the cherry on top of the cake, the walls and windows were soundproof.

Of course, the suite was filled with cameras spying on him, but Ryan hacked them five minutes after taking over.

On the morning of May 11th, the courier finished dressing in his new costume, when he heard someone ring the bell.

“Somebody call security, the poor are at the gates!” he declared through the intercom, though a camera system showed him Wardrobe and Atom Cat waiting on the other side. “I can’t stand the stench of the middle-class!”

“Does Your Majesty want cake for his morning breakfast?” For once Felix didn’t wear his face-mask, revealing his true face to the world... and quite the handsome one too! He looked like a masculine version of his gorgeous sister.

“Hi, Ryan!” Wardrobe said, much more politely. “Can we get in? We have a tight schedule today!”

Ryan lowered himself to let these guests inside his lair, even if Atom Cat looked too much like a *nouveau riche* for his refined patrician tastes. The splendor of his suite immediately floored his teammates.

“How is it that your place is bigger than mine?” Wardrobe asked, green with envy, as they made their way into the main room. Ryan’s sofa was larger than most king-sized beds, and faced a state of the art home cinema. “I thought only Pro Leaguers could get a penthouse suite?”

“I have special needs,” Ryan replied, trying to sound as foppish and pompous as possible. “I fall ill without three hundred square meters to live in.”

“I have a big one too,” Felix said, his dirty, plebeian mind unimpressed by the luxurious penthouse. “I suppose Enrique wanted to make us feel welcome.”

That, and to bribe them. Ryan hadn’t gotten anything like this suite in his previous Dynamis Run, probably because Enrique didn’t feel the need to placate him. “What did Greenhand say when you gave him the recording?”

"He said 'thank you', and sent us on our way," Felix replied with a scoff.

Disappointing, but not surprising. Blackthorn probably needed more time to make a move against his patriarch.

Unfortunately, Ryan wasn't certain they had it with Psyshock still at large. On one hand, his demise had caused Adam to throw away all caution in his attempt to unlock the satellite, but Psyshock also provided near-limitless cannon fodder to throw at the bunker's defenses. Though Ryan and Len warned residents like Paulie to escape the district, the courier had no idea if it would slow down the Meta-Gang's progress.

Ryan remembered that Vulcan's disastrous assault on Rust Town happened on May 12th, with Psyshock blasting everyone to kingdom come with Mechron's mech. It meant that even with Psypsy, the Meta shouldn't unlock the bunker's full power before that date, or else they would have used the *Bahamut* on the invaders. After May 12th though, this loop would enter uncharted territories.

And that was without taking Livia into account.

"Though I saw Wyvern go into his office right after us," Atom Cat added. "She looked rather pleased too. I wonder why."

"If you want to hear all the hero gossip, you have found your gal," Wardrobe said with a wide smile. "Do you know Blackthorn and Wyvern are an on-and-off item?"

"No way!" Ryan said with shocked surprise. "But what about Vulcan?!"

"I thought they had a passionate love-hate relationship going on too, but no! Devilry is into girls though, but Wyvern

politely let her down when she made a pass at her." The stylist looked at the two boys with her big, beautiful eyes. "Are you both...?"

"I'm straight," Felix said quickly, "and not looking for romance."

"I'm flexible," Ryan said with a seductive voice, "and available."

"I thought you were dating the Underdiver?" Wardrobe looked both curious and slightly disappointed. "The romantic tension is palpable between you."

"It's..." The courier looked away. "It's complicated. I'm looking for something new."

Truth was, when Ryan woke up this morning, his drowsy mind had wondered why Jasmine wasn't in the bed.

And then he remembered, and he felt the pain of losing her all over again.

Ryan knew he shouldn't have grown attached to a woman or lowered his guard, but the damage was done. He didn't want to forget Jasmine, not after she made him promise not to, but the courier only knew one way to numb the emotional pain. Filling the gaping void with distractions; better to keep running forward than sit alone with his regrets.

"Is that a Batman-Catwoman thing where you fight on two different sides of the law, and you want to be together, but the world conspires to keep you apart? We can work with that, you know!"

"Hey, Kitty!" Ryan abruptly changed the subject and asked his second-favorite cat. "Something has been bothering me for a while. Did anybody ask you how Lightning Butt's invulnerability works?"

"You can't evade me forever, Ryan," Wardrobe said, determined to learn everything about his romantic life.

Felix snorted at Mob Zeus' nickname, though it put him in a bad mood. "Enrique already beat you to it. No idea, and he murdered everybody who could possibly harm him."

"Do you have a list of them?" Ryan asked. With the information he had gathered from his previous loops, he could perhaps find the true nature of Mob Zeus' invulnerability. He wanted peace with Livia, but he had the feeling he might have to confront Lightning Butt at one point in order to achieve his Perfect Run.

"I know a few, but the only person with the full list is Mercury, the organization's spymaster," Felix replied.

"I thought that talking skull controlled gambling dens and money laundering?" Ryan asked. "Come to think of it, I wonder why they still launder money when there are no taxes to pay."

"It's because Mercury's division is a submarine," Atom Cat replied.

"He can breathe underwater better than bugs?"

"That's not funny Ryan," Wardrobe said as she sat on the sofa, though she forced herself not to smile at his pitch-black joke.

As it turned out, Shortie's bubbles were an experimental technology, and not that reliable. Mosquito's water prison ended up malfunctioning, perhaps due to his peculiar biology, and caused him brain damage from a lack of oxygen.

Then again, what did Ryan expect? Communists could never make good products.

"Don't know, I never tried to drown him," Felix mused. "Augustus uses the laundered money to infiltrate European communities that oppose him. Mercury funnels dirty money into 'legitimate' businesses that then take over companies, institutions, farms, etc... he even managed to infiltrate some of Dynamis' contractors from what I heard. Don't kid yourself, every branch of that organization supports a criminal takeover. Every last one."

Atom Cat then crossed his arms while Wardrobe put on the TV and checked the news. "And... as I told Enrique, I think there's something wrong with Augustus."

"You mean besides the sociopathic narcissism?" Ryan asked, though he shared the same intuition.

"He has been strangely lethargic in the last few years. Beforehand, he used to track down some foes himself, to remind the masses that he's a tough psychopath you don't want to mess with, but now he lets Pluto do it for him and hasn't left his villa in years. Dad told me he seems to forget the world exists for minutes at a time, and he keeps an electrical halo around himself whenever he's in public. When I asked Livia why, she wouldn't answer."

"He's sick?" Wardrobe asked with a frown.

"I dunno, he's supposed to be invulnerable." Felix shrugged.
"Maybe it's just age or depression."

Ryan didn't think so. The courier must have annoyed Lightning Butt for four years with his time-stops, but it literally took an orbital laser for the mob boss to get out of his house. The courier had seen the signs on the wall; the sick, sullen face Mob Zeus hid beneath his bright halo, the way his family members were uneasy around him...

Something was wrong with New Rome's Godfather.

"Hey, look!" Wardrobe interrupted their discussion, a finger pointed at the TV. "They're talking about us!"

Ryan glanced at the plasma screen, as the news showed a recap of yesterday's events. The main video showed the Panda proudly bringing the Psychos into custody, Wardrobe answering journalist questions while Atom Cat ignored them, and Enrique congratulating everyone for making New Rome a safer place. Someone had also managed to find a photo of Ryan in his old costume, and Dynanet theories proliferated on him.

Truly, the headlines said it all: "*The Menagerie: Il Migliore's newest golden children!*" "*New hero team deals a heavy blow to Psychos everywhere!*" "*Who is Quicksave?*"

"The Menagerie, seriously?" Atom Cat asked with a heavy sigh. "I should have called myself Atom Smasher."

"Felix, even marketing wouldn't let you use such a silly name," Wardrobe said with a smirk. "I heard rumors they want to pitch us as a team, young and hip. I will be the leader, as the senior Pro Hero, and you'll be my padawans."

“Yuki, no!” Ryan protested, horrified. “You know what happens to mentor figures in hero stories? Don’t become my Obi-Wan, please!”

“I know, it seems like a bad idea, but think long-term!” Wardrobe insisted. “I can stage my retirement with a Merlin costume, as you are inspired by my demise to become true heroes! And then, I can make a surprise comeback tour dressed as Jesus!”

Felix clearly didn’t understand her evil scheme, but Ryan thought it made perfect sense. “Anyway,” Atom Cat said. “Time to go. We have to go to the Dynamis HQ next door and meet with Dr. Tyrano.”

“The Elixir expert?” Ryan asked, suddenly curious.

“Yeah, he wants to study our powers.” Felix shrugged again. “The Panda is already there for a thorough checkup.”

“And then afterward, we go to Star Studios,” Wardrobe said with a bright smile. “We’re going to appear in the stinger of *Wyvern’s Flight II!*”

“Before we go.” Ryan looked at Wardrobe. “Yuki, I have something for you.”

“Oh, a gift?” She smiled at him. “I love gifts! I never have enough of them! What kind of gift?”

“Let me tell you of its backstory first. I was about to go to bed, wearing only my boxers, when I was struck by a surge of inspiration. A wild Dionysian spirit possessed my body, and forced me to put on the bowler hat.”

“You should have kept your scarf,” Wardrobe replied, worried for his mental stability. “I warned you. I warned

you!"

"Yes, but it's alright. Because my muse inspired me to repay the debt I owe you. You, who had made this perfect costume! I had to return the favor!" Ryan moved into his bedroom, and returned with his gift. "The media call us the Menagerie because we have an animal theme going on. Timmy is a panda, Felix is a cat, I have a rabbit plushie. I figured that, even if you can turn into an animal mascot, I had to make something for you. I remembered you had a few scandalous magazines in your office, and it clicked."

Ryan presented her with his newest creation: a homemade costume for his favorite stylist.

His marvelous creation, inspired by his very own rabbit plushie, included a headband with brown rabbit ears, a red necklace with a yellow ribbon, and a black velvet leotard. Pairs of black tights, high heels, and golden bracelets completed the set.

In short, it was a Playboy Bunny Costume.

Felix blinked repeatedly, and then looked at Yukiko with apprehension. This foolish plebeian probably thought the stylish hero would take offense, for this scandalous, 18+ costume left almost nothing up to the imagination.

"A Puff-Puff costume!" Wardrobe squealed in joy. "How did you know I didn't have one?"

But she was a woman of culture above all else.

"Wait, Yuki, you like that?" Felix asked Wardrobe, astonished, as she examined the costume with a joyful face.

"I *love* kinky costumes," she replied. "I just never get to wear them."

"Of course you don't, it's indecent!"

"But it's made of velvet!" Yuki's fingers touched the bunny ears, her eyes widening in rapturous surprise. "And the ears, they're real fur! Mink? Mink."

"I always keep mink fur in my car trunk," Ryan replied proudly. "You never know when you might have a clothing emergency."

Atom Cat looked at him strangely. "There are still wild minks in Italy?"

"There *were*," Ryan whistled ominously, before focusing on his new BFF. "I wanted to make the *Dragon Ball* costume, but then I remembered you couldn't use anything copyrighted."

Wait, did copyright still function if the country where it was registered no longer existed? Yuki's power made no sense.

"Ryan, you are adorable and I love it," Wardrobe replied before grabbing the costume. "I'll put it in my room and try it on tonight."

"No way Dynamis will let you dress like that in public though," Felix stated the obvious.

"Wyvern wears a leotard just fine," the stylist pointed out.

"Yes, but it isn't a playboy bunny costume, and didn't you complain that Dynamis markets you as a kid-friendly superhero before?"

Wardrobe instantly deflated. “Oh, yes, that’s right, I forgot about it... it will clash with my current branding.”

“Wait, wait, I know a way to market it,” Ryan said, struck by inspiration. He couldn’t let his new BFF down. “Yuki, you are transitioning from the Little League to the Pro Circuit. You are leaving the innocence of childhood behind, for the grim and gritty reality of crime-fighting.”

“A dark age phase...” Wardrobe muttered to herself. “And then when I become too grim and controversial, I emerge from the darkness with something classy and elegant! Like a bodysuit with a cape!”

Ryan summarized her marketing strategy in one sentence. “A seamless transition from kid’s mascot, to adult icon.”

“You know what, I don’t think I’m comfortable wearing this in public yet, but I will totally wear it in private!” Wardrobe kissed Ryan on the cheek. “Thanks. You really shouldn’t have.”

“Wardrobe, there are beautiful things in this world... and you’re one of them,” Ryan admitted, struggling to hold back tears. “I felt so alone before meeting you. The last bastion of culture in a world gone mad.”

“I felt the same way too,” she replied, with tears in her eyes. “When I joined... When I joined, they asked me to wear synthetic fibers. Synthetic fibers! No respect! No respect!”

“It’s okay, Yuki, it’s okay,” Ryan said while hugging Wardrobe, letting her head rest on his shoulder. “Cry on my cashmere suit. Do you feel the softness? Do you feel better?”

Atom Cat watched the scene without a word, his face blank and his eyes squinting. Ryan felt attacked. "Hey Kitten, stop judging us."

"Please don't reproduce," Felix deadpanned. "New Rome won't survive three of you."

In the previous loop, Ryan had long talked with Vulcan about Lab Sixty-Six, the birthplace of knockoff Elixirs. She particularly disliked the Genius behind the operation, the so-called Dr. Tyrano; so when the courier learned they were supposed to meet him, he hoped to get a free tour of the mystery lab.

But as it turned out, Dynamis afforded their head science honcho two floors for his experiments, and the group had an appointment in Lab *Sixty-Five*.

Even there, security was tight. Automated cameras monitored everything in the Dynamis HQ building, from the entrance lobby to the parking lot. One needed keycards to access each floor individually, so no thief could access everything even if they had stolen the necessary key. Guards in power armor waited before all elevator doors while drones patrolled the corridors, assisted by infrared and motion-detection systems.

Even Ryan would have a hard time sneaking in undetected, and it would certainly take more than one loop. An open assault or suicide run would be easier.

When they passed through the blast doors leading to Lab Sixty-Five, the time-traveler expected to enter some kind of dimly-lit mad scientist's lair. He was slightly disappointed. While the lab included mainstay features like liquid-filled

tanks containing what appeared to be dinosaur embryos and operation tables, it was well-lit and clean.

Though the scene before them made up for the place's blandness.

"Sifu, save me!" The naked Panda had retreated to a corner of the lab, putting an operation table between himself and some kind of humanoid dinosaur. A monstrous, horned dog with scales instead of fur barked at the scene. "He wants to cut me open!"

"I only need a lung!" The humanoid dinosaur hybrid reminded Ryan of a two meters tall T-rex, albeit with human-sized arms, black scales, and crimson eyes. The strange mutant wore a white lab coat and tiny glasses optimized for his head shape, but most importantly, he carried a scalpel and a syringe in each hand. "Stop struggling, or I will have to use anesthesia."

"You're not vivisecting the Panda!" Ryan instantly froze time and disarmed the dinosaur, tossing his weapons aside. "He's the last of his kind!"

"Yeah, back off, doc!" Felix warned, hands raised as if willing to use his power inside the lab.

"Oh, hi Mr. Tyrano!" Wardrobe waved a hand at the saurian with a bright smile.

"Oh, hi Yuki!" the scientist replied with a deep reptilian voice, stopping his Panda harassment to look at Ryan. "You, from your power, I assume you must be Cesare Sabino?"

Ryan instantly flinched, his playful mood replaced with frostiness. "How do you know that?"

“Sabino?” Felix asked with a frown. “Isn’t that the Underdiver’s family name?”

Wardrobe gasped in shock. “No way, you are—”

“We’re not blood-related!” Ryan quickly said, raising a finger at his BFF. “Don’t you dare write fanfics about us!”

“What, really? You are adopted?” Dr. Tyrano didn’t hide his disappointment. “Such a shame, I would have loved to compare samples from various Genome relatives. It is a rare opportunity.”

“Wait, you took Len’s DNA?” Ryan asked, squinting suspiciously at the Genius.

“The Private Security takes DNA scans of everyone in their custody,” Felix reminded him.

Dr. Tyrano shrugged it off. “Doesn’t matter, I will still need a sample anyway.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” Ryan replied, slightly bothered by this scaled man. The courier loved attention, except when it involved being carved open on an operation table. It happened to him enough times already! “I’m a drug so addictive, you won’t be able to get enough of me.”

“You have a Green power in addition to your Violet one?” Dr. Tyrano asked, completely missing the point. Clearly, humor was a mammal-only feature. “Then, I will need blood or hair, though sperm can work too. Some people prefer ejaculation to extraction.”

“What, Quicksave, you didn’t do a DNA test when you joined?” Wardrobe asked.

"No, it's against my religion."

"You should reconsider," Dr. Tyrano insisted, his strange reptilian dog leaping into his arms. "Violets are the second rarest powers in circulation after White Genomes! Think about science!"

"Yeah, nope," Ryan replied, while the Panda breathed easy now that he no longer interested the scientist. The courier patted his sidekick on the shoulder, before looking at the dinoman's strange pet. "What is this?"

"It's Tricerador, one of my creations," Dr. Tyrano answered, petting the abomination against nature behind the horns. "Half Labrador, half triceratops."

"So it's like the platypus of dinosaurs?" Ryan asked, his mood softening as he scratched the beast's belly. The animal made a saurian sound, but wagged its tail like a dog. "Can you make a dinocat?"

"I tried to splice a Persian cat and a velociraptor, but the end result died," the mad scientist replied. "But I, Dr. Tyrano, swear that each household shall have its own dinosaur one day! And I would have already done so, if management didn't pester me about that T-rex hunting safari!"

"What, they want to create a reserve where rich people can hunt dinosaurs, like lions?" Felix asked.

"Ridiculous, right?" said the man who tried to cut open a Panda one minute ago.

"For a moment, I forgot we lived in a world where everything is for sale."

In any case, Ryan immediately forgave the doctor for his terrible first impression. Someone wanting to make dinosaur pets couldn't *possibly* be a bad person, no matter what Jasmine could have said.

"Felix, don't blame Dr. Tyrano, he is a misunderstood genius," Wardrobe declared, with her hands on her waist. "He's the one who made me my hero costume."

"A techno-organic symbiote capable of mimicking the shape of pre-recorded costumes," Dr. Tyrano explained almost absent-mindedly, while his Tricerador escaped his grip to wander around the lab. "Anyway, since you are new I want to test your powers in a controlled environment. See if there are potential interactions, record the energy readings, etc..."

"By dissecting one of our teammates?" Felix mused, while the Panda cowered.

"He fully regenerates whenever he switches from one form to another!" Dr. Tyrano all but shouted. "Even Wyvern needs time to heal naturally, but not this werebear! With his ability, we could have an infinite, renewable source of organs!"

"The Panda... the Panda was abducted by someone like this once." The poor animal seemed to relive a particularly nasty PTSD-induced episode. "They thought they could make aphrodisiac from his blood. The Panda... the Panda had to flee."

"Now, I have to figure out where the extra organic material comes from by studying the transformation," Dr. Tyrano said, completely oblivious to his animal cruelty.

Ryan needed to distract him, before he harmed his sidekick. "Well, there isn't much to check," he lied to the scientist. "I

can stop time, my pandawan can shapeshift, and my cat can blow up pebbles.”

Wardrobe chuckled. “You can stop time and there is nothing interesting about that?”

“About the pebbles part, after our last battle, I realized I could modulate my explosions.” By now, Felix ignored all of Ryan’s cat jokes, much to the courier’s displeasure. “Charge weapons, delay the blast by a few seconds, and then throw them.”

Dr. Tyrano nodded a few times as he listened to the explanations, as if they confirmed his own observations. “As I thought, you probably charge solid matter with a unique form of energy, causing it to detonate afterward.”

“Red Flux?”

Ryan flinched as Dr. Tyrano’s head abruptly snapped in his direction, so fast it fooled even the Genome’s enhanced sense of timing. “How do you know that?”

“Well, I’ve been studying powers with my last Genius girlfriend,” the time-traveler said. “We kinda figured out Genome powers come from alternate dimensions, one for each Elixir color.”

“Fascinating.” Now the courier had to take a step back as Dr. Tyrano started invading his personal space. “I came to the same conclusions, but to have them confirmed by an outside researcher...”

Goddammit, now Ryan could smell the dinosaur’s warm reptilian breath, and Felix the Cat delighted in his unease. “That’s not so funny when you’re the victim rather than the perpetrator, uh?” Atom Kitten mocked the time-traveler.

"So you suggest the werebear's extra organs come from an alien green dimension made of organic matter?" Dr. Tyrano focused on Ryan and completely ignored the jab. "I would be delighted to pick your brain open and compare notes."

"I do have a question of my own actually," Ryan said, pointing a finger at the dinoman's tail. "Aren't you a Blue, rather than a Green?"

"I am a Genius specialized in cloning, splicing, and gene therapy. My current appearance is the result of an experimental transformation serum. It's purely temporary."

Felix hesitated, as if afraid to ask his question. "Why, Doc? What was the point?"

"Because I wanted to turn myself into a dinosaur," the Genius replied like it was the most normal dream in the world.

"Oh God, you're a furry," Ryan realized. "I guess we'll never be friends."

"You need fur to be a furry," Wardrobe pointed out. "It's in the name."

"What's a furry?" The Panda asked naively.

Ryan looked at him with a gaze of pure compassion, and quiet appreciation for the hero's sheer luck. How could he survive in the wild so long? "Your innocence must be protected, my young student."

"Hey, I'm not the one judging you on your appearance," Dr. Tyrano complained.

"But seriously, it all makes sense now," Ryan said. "I always wondered how you managed to make knockoffs at all, but your power should give you a heads up."

"I couldn't make Elixirs," the dino Genius admitted. "Not truly. What I did was synthesize a specific resource that mimicked the properties of a true Elixir. It's a shoddy imitation, and an imperfect one. It took years to create the Hercules serum from Wyvern, and even then I could only replicate a subset of her ability, namely her enhanced strength."

"And you never managed to copy my power," Wardrobe mused with a smile.

The scientist grumbled before giving back Ryan his personal space, making circles in the room with his hands crossed behind his back. "Because besides the usual Genome health enhancements, your Elixir didn't change much about your genetic code. The mechanics that allow you to channel multiple abilities transcend the sphere of flesh."

"I believe the Elixir mostly serves as an intermediary between a Genome and the dimension providing their esoteric powers," Ryan stated. "They also support their host by subtly guiding them with their ability, or in the case of Psychos, pushing them to consume more Elixirs."

Felix coughed, interrupting the discussion. "Excuse me, but... hosts, guiding? You make it sound as if Elixirs are alive and intelligent."

"Yeah, they are," Ryan replied, much to his teammates' shock. "Sort of. They're closer to viruses."

"Except they do not use RNA or DNA to transmit information," Dr. Tyrano pointed out. "Though they

manipulate ours."

"Sorry," Wardrobe said with a forced smile, "you are losing me."

"They're like aliens who do not work the same way life on Earth does," Ryan explained the best he could. "We don't understand how Elixirs carry information, but *they* understand and manipulate how our bodies do. Enough to focus on modifying humans only, and ignoring animals."

"Exactly!" Dr. Tyrano shouted, happy to find someone with whom to brainstorm. "After being used, the Alchemist's Elixirs bond to an *homo sapiens'* cells on a molecular level, rewriting the DNA to make their host the vessel of a unique power. And no powers are exactly the same, though they may be variants, which implies the Elixir selects the ability from a collective database and makes it unavailable to new hosts."

Yeah, Ryan figured as much after extensive testing during his previous loops. Even when divided into doses distributed to a group, an Elixir always bonded to one person only.

Ryan could never bring himself to give someone two Elixirs at once though, not even in a research loop. Nobody deserved to transform into the new Bloodstream.

"Unfortunately, when you have more than one, even from the same color, they start to conflict," Ryan continued, while his teammates clearly struggled to understand. "They edit the same genes. Think of it as two writers fighting over a script. They keep rewriting the other's work until the sentences don't make sense. And you can only have two powers at most."

"After which, the original two Elixirs in the host's cells cannibalize the newcomers," Dr. Tyrano finished, he and the courier working in perfect synchronicity. "They repurpose new Elixir injections towards stabilizing the unstable genetic code, but only for a while before they start fighting again. Psychos instinctively know that, as the Elixirs in their bodies influence them to collect more in a doomed attempt to reach an equilibrium."

"What about Mongrel?" Felix asked. "He could use more than two abilities when I fought him."

"Ah, I can already answer that question!" Dr. Tyrano said triumphantly. "From the samples gathered from his custody, I can attest that this Psycho consumed an Alchemist-made White Elixir, followed by almost all knockoffs available on the open market."

"So he's a White with the power to have more than two powers?" Atom Cat asked, while the Genius nodded. "That's cheating."

"Instead of cannibalizing newcomers, the original Elixir seems to force them to play along like a referee. It allowed his body to channel more than one ability, but unfortunately didn't protect him from Elixir conflicts, mutations, and addiction. The substances don't destroy each other, but they still conflict. Truly fascinating."

Such was the tragedy of Mongrel. He had earned an overpowered ability in theory, but lost the mental faculties needed to use his limitless potential.

"Do you think the Psycho condition can be cured?" Ryan asked Dr. Tyrano. He had given up after facing roadblocks in his understanding of Elixirs, but perhaps the saurian knew more than he did.

“Of course it can be!” The genius lambasted the time-traveler. “Nothing is impossible!”

“Yeah,” Felix said. “Augustus has two powers without any side-effects as far as I know.”

“Oh, could the Panda get two powers?” Naive Timmy’s eyes widened in hope. “One for each form?”

“Possible, though unlikely!” Dr. Tyrano said, seizing the opportunity for a free mad experiment. “We can always try, but you will need to sign a discharge first.”

Ryan lightly slapped the Panda in the back of his skull, much to his surprise. “Ouch, Sifu, what was that for?”

“Your real power is there, arrogant young disciple,” Ryan said, pointing a finger at his sidekick’s heart. “Do not be greedy, you already have the greatest power of all!”

“Y-yeah, right,” the Panda said and nodded, but misunderstood his master’s wisdom. “I should master it first, before thinking of gaining a new one.”

“There are rare cases of individuals with two powers and no side-effects,” Dr. Tyrano said. “Augustus is the most famous, but not the only case on records. Either these lucky few possessed specific genes, or their Elixirs modify different parts of the DNA sequences without conflicting. Since unlike Psychos, Augustus’ powers haven’t formed an obvious synergy, I believe they coexist independently.”

“I think I get it,” Wardrobe said, having struggled to follow the discussion so far. “You have two creators, but instead of fighting, they each design a different part of the ensemble?”

"And if an equilibrium is possible, then it can, in theory, be replicated," Dr. Tyrano declared with enthusiasm. "Imagine, giving two powers to every Genome with no side-effect? I could become a Blue/Green and maintain this transformation permanently, joining my bountiful intellect with a powerful saurian body!"

"But you need to figure out the reason why there is an equilibrium at all," Felix pointed out. "All your points are mere hypotheses. For all you know it depends on the Elixirs used rather than anything innate in the host."

"Yes, yes, and unfortunately the few individuals with two powers in Italy refused to cooperate." Dr. Tyrano shrugged. "In any case, we do not yet understand Elixirs enough to cure the Psycho condition yet. But if Mechron understood enough about powers to enhance and reverse-engineer them, then why not us?"

Ryan's thoughts turned to the bunker below Rust Town, and his last visit there. The courier remembered entering a room with animals kept in Elixir-colored liquid, and Big Fat Adam said the armory included knockoff production facilities. Perhaps even a cure for his power degeneration.

He really needed to explore that place, after purging the Meta from it. "I would love to exchange notes on Elixirs, and especially your brain-copy project too."

The last part caused Dr. Tyrano to snort in anger. "Does everybody know of it nowadays? I'm afraid you need a Level 5 clearance before I can even talk to you about it. The CEO already gave me an earful about security yesterday."

Felix instantly tensed, while Ryan simply shrugged. "Well, my scaled friend, how can I gain one such clearance and build a strong bond of sciencehood between us?"

“I will petition management, but the procedure usually takes months.” Dr. Tyrano snorted with disdain for Dynamis’ bureaucracy. “Anyway, talking is time wasted, and I have a busy schedule. Go into the testing chambers and strip. You are all older than eighteen, right? My lawyer is very adamant about that part.”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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58: Family Business

“You’re not a human,” the film scriptwriter said. “You are a panda who drank a human-shifting Elixir.”

Ryan remained silent a moment, before exchanging confused glances with the Panda and Atom Cat. All three of them sat in chairs next to a cardboard cutout showing Wyvern transforming into a dragon, and faced two Dynamis screenwriters with very strange ideas. “I’m sorry?” the Panda asked, sinking in his chair while in human form. “That’s not my tragic backstory!”

“Yes, yes, we understand, but...” The first scriptwriter reminded Ryan of an accountant, his greedy eyes hidden behind glasses; he had traded his artistic soul for a suit, and it wasn’t even made of cashmere. “It won’t sell.”

“What my colleague wants to say is that it’s not *inspirational* enough.” The other, meanwhile, was a walking Hollywood cliche. Some thirty-something year old guy who thought wearing a sweater and sneakers made him look trendy. “Your public persona is marketed towards young children, and your story... I’m sorry to say it, but it’s depressing.”

Ryan kinda agreed with them on that front. When the Panda told everyone about how he became a superhero, the courier had expected a funny adventure. Instead, he listened to an epic personal journey straight out of a Rocky movie.

"I thought it was pretty inspirational," Atom Cat argued.
"There were so many twists and turns..."

"Yes, but people don't buy tickets to see a hero struggle," Four-Eyes said. "They go to a movie to have a good time. Everybody says they hate power fantasies, but they sell well."

"Which is why I think you're a goldmine, Quicksave," hip writer said. Ryan looked at the pass around the man's neck, finally learning his name was *Kevin* of all things. "We can make so many cool scenes with your power, I think you might become the next action movie franchise."

"I'm more of an R-rated black comedy material, to be honest," Ryan said with a shrug.

Felix glanced at the Panda, growing more and more annoyed. "What do you think?"

"The Panda is glad to get a movie at all, to be honest," the manbear replied.

"Do you want to be portrayed as..." Felix struggled to find the correct wording. "An uplifted mascot?"

"Also, that's not how Elixirs work," Ryan pointed out. "We had an exposition scene like two hours ago."

"Moviegoers don't care about how it works or doesn't work," Mr. Four-Eyes said. "But a bear becoming a human will appeal to young children better than the other way around."

"I understand your skepticism, but that's because you haven't read the full '*Pandamania*' script," Kevin argued with a smile. "The movie starts with an eight-year old boy —"

"I'm out of here," Felix said abruptly, rising from his seat and looking at Ryan. "Coffee break?"

"Coffee break," the courier replied, before patting the Panda on the back. "Want something, my young pandawan?"

"Nothing, thanks Sifu," the Green Genome replied, a bit embarrassed. "Coffee gives me ulcers."

Ryan and Felix left the Panda alone with the corporate madmen, walking through Star Studios' warehouse six. After Tyrano's extensive testing, the team went there to both film a stinger scene at the end of the latest Il Migliore movie, and discuss possible plans for individual franchises. Countless engineers, actors, and technicians worked inside these walls, and though Il Migliore was Dynamis' cash-cow, the company's cinema branch produced everything from romantic comedies to action flicks.

Ryan had expected Vulcan to wreck the place, but the Genius was strangely quiet during this loop. A shame. He would have enjoyed a little chaos, since Dynamis focused entirely on bland money-makers rather than more innovative movies.

Wardrobe was busy acting as Wyvern's stuntwoman, wearing the superheroine's costume while she floated in front of a green screen; computer engineers then replaced Yuki's face with a CGI of her template. The more he learned about Wardrobe's power, the more Ryan thought the 'copyright' limit was only her way to systematize it. From what he understood, her power instead decided if a persona was 'available' for copying, or if it belonged to someone else. Since Dynamis allowed her to cosplay as Wyvern, she could do so, even if the persona was copyrighted.

It would also explain why she could dress as Augustus. Lightning Butt piggybacked Zeus' myth so much, people had started to conflate the two personas together.

"You know, kitten, something has been bugging me about Dr. Tyrano," Ryan admitted, as they made their way to the nearest break room.

"His dinosaur obsession?"

"No, the name," Ryan explained. "Shouldn't it be Dr. Tyranno with a second 'n'? Like *Tyrannosaure*?"

"I thought only the french wrote it like that," Felix replied with a snort. "Besides, it's his true name: Alain Tyrano."

"The dinosaur scientist's family name is Tyrano?" Ryan asked with an eyebrow raised. "That's like calling your son Van Doom, and he grows up to be a supervillain."

"Yeah." Much like the rest of the building, Dynamis put care into making the break room as trendy and aesthetically pleasing as possible. Equipped with a window view of the park outside the studios, the hall included leather sofas, a round table for conferences, and even a holographic fireplace. The duo walked towards the nearest coffee machine, waiting behind a line of caffeine addicts and overworked trainees. "So what's your plan, Quicksave?"

"Bold of you to assume I have one," Ryan replied. "Usually, I just wing things until they work out. The only plan that can't fail, is the one you didn't plan for."

"You know what I mean," his teammate said with a frown. "Why did you join Dynamis exactly? I can tell you aren't the celebrity type, and that you're playing a long game of some kind."

“So are you, kitten.” They finally reached the machine, Ryan putting fifty Euro cents in the coin slot. The machine quickly started pouring a cappuccino inside a paper cup. “What made you want to leave the family fold?”

“*Bliss*,” he replied while asking for a normal coffee.

“Not milk? I’m disappointed.”

“If I change my superhero name, will you stop with the cat jokes?”

“No, I won’t.”

“You’re the worst,” Felix sighed as he grabbed his cup, motioning at a sofa near the window. Both heroes sat on it, peacefully looking at the green scenery beyond the glass. “I left because of *Bliss*.”

Yeah, Ryan figured as much. “Because they force your sister to make it?”

“Partly,” Felix replied with a frown. “Just how much do you know about me? Are you some sort of professional spy?”

“If I were, I would drive an Aston Martin,” Ryan joked, enjoying the smell of his cappuccino. “I know you’re the son of Mars and Venus, and that you temporarily shared a flat with Zanbato, Sphere, and Chitter.”

“Did Enrique ask you to watch me?” Felix asked, misunderstanding the situation. “Make sure I’m not a reverse-mole supplying info back to my family? Because he’s already doing a fine job of keeping me out of any real action anyway.”

That made sense. Knowing Blackthorn, he probably considered Atom Kitten more valuable as a potential hostage or intel source than as a hero. "Nothing of the sort," Ryan replied, sipping the coffee. "I have a soft spot for people fleeing a toxic environment."

"Bloodstream?" Felix chuckled at seeing Ryan's reaction, delighting at one-upping him for once. "I did my homework too."

"You know the worst part?" Ryan asked, as his thoughts turned to Len. "Even dead and buried... he still holds his daughter under his sway, and I don't know how to break it."

Felix waited a few seconds before asking the question burning on his lips. "Did you kill him?"

"No, but I arranged for his demise." Atom Cat flinched at Ryan's blunt confession. "Do you hate your parents, Felix?"

"Not enough to want them dead, but I wouldn't mind seeing them taken down a peg. They have a lot of blood on their hands, and they're dragging my sisters into the '*family business*'. They forced one to make drugs, and convinced the other to join the Killer Seven." Felix shook his head in disappointment. "I thought my departure would force them to reconsider their choices, but Augustus' grip is too strong."

From what Ryan had gathered, his departure did shake his family, but they chose to blame Dynamis or hope he would return to the fold. Nobody in the Augusti seemed likely to turn their back on the organization, except Vulcan, who had never been loyal to begin with.

Atom Cat frowned upon glimpsing at something on the other side of the window, and Ryan quickly identified what. A very

familiar rat observed the duo from beneath a bush, before quickly fleeing across the studio's park when spotted.

"Chitter," Atom Cat said with a frown. "She's always watching me."

"You were close?" Ryan asked, wondering if a rat swarm would suddenly appear to destroy the studio.

"So you *don't* know everything."

"No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me soon!"

Felix snorted, but relented. "Zanbato and I were best friends once. Enough that we ended up sharing a flat for a few months, when I decided I should have my own place."

"What changed?"

"Someone stole *Bliss* batches from Mercury's division, the one where Zanbato works. The casinos' staff distributes it to clients, either for recreational purposes or to blackmail them. I helped Zan with the case, and it turned out the thieves were intelligent rats."

"Chitter," Ryan guessed.

"Yeah. We tracked the animals to their mistress and..." Felix stopped for a moment, looking into the distance. "It was... it was a horrible sight, man. She was squatting in an abandoned apartment infested with rodents, and she..."

"Hey, easy kitten." Ryan put a hand on his teammate's shoulder. "Don't force yourself if it's too hard."

"It's... It's fine." The would-be hero regained his composure. "You know *Bliss* can even affect Genomes? When we found

her, the stuff had given her an overdose. She had blood pouring out of her nose and eyes, Ryan. Mold growing on her skin. If we hadn't found her and rushed to a hospital, she would have died. And when the docs saved her life, do you know the first thing she asked for?"

Ryan frowned, having already guessed. "More Bliss?"

"More Bliss. That poison hadn't just destroyed her life, Ryan. It enslaved her body and soul." Atom Cat made a disgusted face. "That was a fucking wake-up call for me."

"But not for Zambato?"

"Zan..." Felix's expression turned into a contemptuous sneer. "Jamie *thinks* he's a nice guy, but he doesn't know what freedom feels like. He owes his entire existence to the Augusti, and he can't fathom a life outside it. Yeah, he went the extra mile to keep Ki-jung clean, but he was just trying to assuage his guilt. He doesn't want to support the *Bliss* business, but at the end of the day, he does as he's told."

The renegade finished his cup and tossed it into the nearest trash can with astonishing accuracy.

"It opened my eyes," Atom Cat continued his tale. "I talked to Narcinia, and she admitted she never wanted to make that drug. But our parents always guilt-tripped her back into it whenever she attempted to stop. '*It's for the greater good of the family, honey,*' or '*addicts kill themselves because they can't help themselves.*' And Jamie, he let Ki-jung fall into the mafia lifestyle rather than keeping her away from it. After I realized just how deep it went, I couldn't stay anymore."

"For all it's worth, I think you made the right choice," Ryan said, the story echoing a lot with his own. "You have the

right to dump toxic people out of your life.”

“If it was just me, Ryan...” Felix sighed. “My family kills so many innocents, and it corrupts good people too. I thought Dynamis could help me change that, but now... now, I don’t know what to do anymore. From what I’ve seen so far, they’re just as bad in their own way.”

“Things can change,” Ryan said, trying to cheer him up. “No matter how bleak.”

His teammate scoffed in response. “You sound like a self-help booklet.”

“That doesn’t make my words untrue,” the courier replied with seriousness. “It can always improve. But you have to keep trying even if you fail, again and again. That’s the hard part.”

He wasn’t sure if these words were meant for Felix or Ryan himself, but he had to say them anyway. Both fell into an uncomfortable silence, neither knowing what to say next, and none wanting to return to the scriptwriters.

And then, calamity struck.

“Felix!”

Her shrill voice sent a shiver down Ryan’s spine, like death crawling out of the underworld. Felix had the exact same reaction, his eyes widened in horror as he turned his head to look behind. “Tell me I’m dreaming...”

“Oh no, you aren’t!” Fortuna walked towards their sofa, wearing a fashionable golden shirt and skirt that exposed her legs for everyone to see. She smirked triumphantly

when everyone ogled at her, glancing at Ryan as if expecting him to do the same. “Our paths cross again!”

Much to her fury though, Ryan ignored her entirely to focus on the keycard dangling from her neck. Where did she get a pass?

Oh, wait, stupid question. Of course a pass would magically fall into her hands!

“How the hell did you get in?” Felix asked his sister, clearly far from happy to see her.

“The studios held a lottery, with the winners gaining a guest pass,” Fortuna replied. “And that’s no way to greet your beautiful sister.”

“And Dynamis let you in?” Felix almost choked.

“Of course the corpos let me in, why wouldn’t they? Look at me. I’m *me*.” Fortuna put a hand on her waist. “Though they tried to poach me, and I had to promise I would consider it. Do you realize what you made me do, you ungrateful brat?”

“I didn’t ask you to come, sis.”

“You left me no choice!” Fortuna complained. “Neither of you answer messages!”

“Wait, neither of you?” Felix looked at Ryan with suspicion.
“How do you know my sister?”

“That madman almost hit me with his car!” Fortuna complained. “And when I demanded he bring me and Livy home, he drove away like a savage!”

"And I regretted the '*almost*' part ever since," Ryan deadpanned.

"H-how dare you say something like that!" she protested, before making a haughty face. "But I guess I will forgive you if you invite me for coffee. I have expensive tastes though, but hopefully you aren't as poor as you lo—"

"Is she always like this?" Ryan asked Felix, Fortuna glaring at him in response.

"Unfortunately," Atom Cat replied with a heavy, *heavy* sigh.

"No wonder you ran away from home."

"I should have known you would make the pair, you're both infuriating!" Fortuna crossed her arms. "Felix, I'm here to bring you home."

"Then you will leave disappointed," the hero replied angrily. "I told you. Unless you leave the hit squad, we have nothing to say to each other."

"We aren't a hit squad, we're bodyguards!" Fortuna argued. Clearly she didn't understand the seriousness of her situation. "We protect the Olympians. It's just that sometimes, we do it preemptively!"

"By murdering people who Augustus thinks *might* become a threat? How long until you confront someone who can negate your power and your luck runs out?" Atom Cat snarled. "You're an assassin, Fortuna, and that's all you will be to me unless you walk away from this *shit*."

"What about Narcinia then? Do you know how heartbroken she has been since you left? What about Livy, you selfish ass?" Fortuna accused her brother. "We've seen the news,

how you fought with Psychos in Rust Town. Don't you think we're all worried for you?"

"I can take care of myself," Felix said as he rose from his seat, his tone dripping with venom as he faced his sister. "Now get out or I will show you the door myself."

"I'm not leaving without you!"

The two started arguing so loudly they completely forgot about Ryan's existence, with Fortuna accusing Felix of having abandoned their family, while her brother blamed her for joining the Killer Seven. The technicians looked at the scene with embarrassment, with a few members of the security staff wondering if they should intervene.

Ryan let the two siblings argue while he enjoyed his cappuccino, only for his phone to start ringing. "Oh geez, another unknown number," the courier mumbled as he picked the call. "It's getting cliché."

"Quicksave?" The voice on the other side belonged to a man, and sounded somewhat familiar. Ryan was certain he heard before, but he couldn't put a name or face on it.

"The one and only, but I'm in-between jobs right now," Ryan warned. Come to think of it, he never received that call in the previous loops. He wondered what had changed? "To whom do I owe the pleasure?"

"My name is Leonard Hargraves. We crossed paths four years ago, do you remember?"

Ryan immediately froze in place, checked that the two siblings couldn't hear him, and then answered. "How could I not?"

"I understand we don't have the best history together, but one of our own recommended we contact you." Ryan heard noise in the background, like someone talking to the Living Sun on the other side of the line. *"Is Atom Cat with you?"*

"Perhaps," Ryan replied while squinting. "What do you want with us?"

"I think you know already, but fine. My team just arrived in town, and I wondered if you were both available to meet with us. From what I understand, we all want to cure New Rome of the cancers that infect it."

Yes, they did.

"About time somebody cleaned up the trash."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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59: Corpoalition

Ryan felt a ping of nostalgia as he drove on the highway.

It had been more than a month worth of loops since he first arrived in New Rome, and he missed driving into the wasteland, *Mad Max*-style. The world seemed open to him, all roads leading to a different quest. The courier could never anticipate when he would face a random encounter, whether it was a band of road warriors engaging him in a car chase or a mysterious hitchhiker out for blood. As much as he enjoyed civilization, Ryan was a creature of the road through and through.

The Carnival's rendezvous point was located near the ruins of Pompei, south of New Rome. It had been quite easy for Ryan and Felix to slip away after the Fortuna incident. Nobody blamed her brother for wanting to take a breath of fresh air after their very public argument.

Ryan felt a little bad about lying to Wardrobe though. He could tell she hadn't been fooled by their excuses, and knew something was up.

"Something has been bothering me," Atom Cat said on the seat next to Ryan. The Plymouth Fury followed the Neapolitan coast, the sea on one side of the road, and cliffs on the other. "The Psychos have infiltrated Dynamis, right? If so, they probably have access to my DNA-tracker. They can follow us."

“They *could*.” And in a past loop, they did. “But now they can’t.”

“How so?”

“Well, I’m not a Genius with a capital ‘G,’” Ryan quoted Jasmine, “but I’m still a genius.”

The time-traveler had wondered how the tracker worked; how could you track a genome by recording their DNA after all? However, after his discussions with Jasmine in the previous loop, the answer became obvious. Dynamis didn’t track Genomes through their genes, but by the Flux radiation they passively released.

So Ryan modified his car to keep the Flux radiation within its confines, using the method Jasmine pioneered. Of course, it was a poor man’s substitute for his ex’s power armor. Staying in the car wouldn’t cause Ryan to open a gate to the Purple World, but it would make the passengers invisible to Dynamis’ radars.

Hopefully, at least. Ryan still looked into his rearview mirror from time to time.

Felix didn’t ask more questions and looked out of the window, his eyes gazing at the Mediterranean Sea. Ryan could tell his friend appreciated the silence. His sister’s visit had put him in a foul mood.

Speaking of Fortuna, she started sending messages to the courier once again. Much to Ryan’s surprise, only half of them called him an ass and other names; the other half included questions about Felix’s wellbeing.

Aww, she cared!

The constant ringing of Ryan's phone started to bother Atom Cat. "My sister again?"

"She's very persistent," Ryan said. "I know I'm smart, funny, and handsome, but my popularity surprises me sometimes."

"Fortuna's power causes almost everything that can go well for her, to do so," Felix replied with a sigh. "She has never paid for anything, she gets gifts out of nowhere, and she always meets men desperate to worship her. After a while, it became a self-reinforcing loop of narcissism... and I think you broke it."

Wait, that was it! Men threw themselves at Fortuna, so she took them for granted and crushed on the few ones immune to her charms! If Ryan behaved like the perfect gentleman to soothe her narcissistic ego, she would lose interest and leave him be! All he had to do was treat Lucky Girl for dinner, and overwhelm her with affection until she found another distraction. Kill her with kindness.

"Ryan," Felix said, apparently reading Ryan's mind as the courier typed a response on his phone. "Can you do me a favor?"

"If it's about the cat jokes, then you're asking too much."

Atom Cat looked at Ryan, their eyes meeting. "Don't fuck my sister."

Ryan lost himself in the blue hue of his friend's irises, as he prepared an appropriate answer. "Which one?"

"I'm serious, Quickie."

"Don't worry," Ryan replied, putting a hand on his kitten's shoulder. "If I had to fuck the whole family, I would start

with you."

Felix recoiled in surprise, much to the courier's amusement. "Shut up and drive," the hero said while looking at the road.

After a short hour's drive without getting ambushed by the Meta, the duo finally reached their destination. A lookout-point on a rock, providing an unbeatable view of Pompei. Even the world's end couldn't damage the ruins more than Vesuvius did, and while they briefly served as a raider gang's hideout, they had remained untouched by the wars.

Leo the Living Sun was already present, hovering above the lookout's edge while in his shiny form. What a showoff. Though Ryan's eyes couldn't help but ogle at this perfect fiery form, and that lithe, flaming ass. The courier had slept with men, women, robots, monster girls... but never a sun.

Yet.

A roguish woman with freckles and long auburn hair waited nearby next to an American bike, Ryan recognizing her as Ace, the Carnival's main teleporter. "Damn, that's really them," Atom Cat gasped in admiration, as Ryan parked the Plymouth Fury. "I'm a big fan."

"Thank you, Felix." Unlike his favorite kitten, Ryan didn't flinch as Shroud appeared on the backseat. "Truth be told, we wanted to talk to you for a while."

"How long have you been here?" Felix asked, spooked.

"Far too long," Mr. See-Through replied, as he opened the car door. "You drive like a madman, Quicksave."

"Thanks for the compliment, but there's only three of you?" Ryan asked as the group exited the car to join the other

Carnival members. “You weren’t kidding about the turnover.”

“We’re six, with the others already at work in the city,” Shroud replied, sighing at the courier’s unimpressed silence. “I warned you we needed more time to gather our allies. Mushroom, Radiodead, and the Cossack are in France right now and won’t arrive before a few days.”

“I wish I could open portals that far,” Ace said upon hearing them, before smirking confidently at the newcomers. “But don’t worry, we still pack a punch. What we lack in numbers, we make up in quality.”

“Easy for you to say, you have a freaking sun on your side,” Ryan mused. While the Meta had them greatly outnumbered, they did have greater individual *firepower*.

The sun incarnate looked at Quicksave with a mix of amusement, and a tiny bit of respect. “Greetings, Ryan,” he said with his sexy, sexy hero voice. “I wanted to thank you for the help you provided to us so far.”

It felt so strange to meet this man again. From his point of view, it had only been four years, but for Ryan, it had been centuries since Bloodstream’s demise. And yet this event remained forever engraved in the courier’s mind.

Ryan couldn’t quite put a word on how he felt about the Carnival as a whole. On one hand, they separated him from Len for countless loops, but on the other hand, they saved him from Bloodstream, and he owed them a life debt. In the end, he leaned towards appreciation. Now that he had reconnected with Len, he would let bygones be bygones.

However, he had also grown to like some Augusti members during his loops, and the Carnival planned to destroy their

organization one way or another. What Livia said about her mother's death also bothered Ryan, who wanted to investigate.

The courier had come to New Rome to reunite with Len, but now... he had the feeling he couldn't leave the city, even after the Meta-Gang's destruction. A war was brewing, and too many lives were at risk.

"You were a Carnival plant all along?" Felix asked his teammate, interrupting his thought process.

"I'm more of a wild card," the courier replied. "A one-man wrecking ball."

Shroud chuckled. "At least you aim in the right direction. Honestly, at first I thought you came to New Rome to pick a fight with us."

"I still haven't apologized for what happened with Bloodstream," Leo said, sounding genuinely apologetic. "I hadn't seen you, and when I launched that blast—"

"The alternative was worse," Ryan interrupted the humanoid sun. After all, he had lived through it once. "Bloodstream was sick and had to go for the good of everyone else. The end."

"I see..." Leonard sounded surprised by the courier's response, but didn't push the subject further. The courier had literal centuries to emotionally process the events.

Felix glanced at Ryan with sympathy. Instead of offering vague bullshit, he simply patted his teammate on the back without a word, for which the courier was thankful. Though paparazzi would probably mistake the scene for something else, if they saw it... "As for you, Atom Cat, I congratulate

you for your choice,” Leonard said, nodding at the younger hero. “It must have been hard to leave your family behind and stand for what is right. It takes great courage.”

“You said you wanted to meet me for a while,” Atom Kitten said, a little embarrassed. The scene reminded Ryan of an amateur boxer meeting Mohammed Ali by happenstance. “Don’t tell me you wanted to poach me too?”

“Pretty much, yes,” Shroud said.

“I wouldn’t use the term poach, but we are always on the lookout for new recruits, and I feel you have great potential.” The Living Sun marked a short pause, as if considering his next words. “There’s… also the matter of your sister, Narcinia.”

“My sister?” Felix instantly tensed up. “What about her?”

Instead of answering yet, Sunshine looked behind the group as a new car approached the lookout. A black Maserati parked near the gathering, and two familiar faces stepping out of it.

“Quicksave, Atom Cat.” Blackthorn removed the dust off his suit as he walked towards them, Wyvern acting as his bodyguard. “Things make much more sense now.”

Felix didn’t seem all so happy, as he glared at the Carnival. “You called them?”

“We didn’t,” Shroud replied, arms crossed. “They did. Blackthorn contacted us a few days ago.”

“There was a time when our two organizations considered allying against Augustus,” Enrique said, his tone utterly

monotone. "Until Don Hector scrapped the proposal, as he always does."

"Are we all present?" Sunny Boy asked.

"Almost," Enrique replied, raising his sleeve to look at a Rolex watch underneath. "Though I hope you understand your mere presence threatens us all, Hargraves. If Augustus learns you are in town, he will climb down from his mountain and hunt you down like a dog."

"He will try," the Living Sun replied. "I made my decision long ago. I will not die before Augustus' empire collapses and he faces justice for his crimes."

"I am more worried about him going after us by association," Blackthorn replied dryly before raising his eyes. Ryan heard a loud noise approaching from the coast. "But at this point, I guess it is inevitable."

A heavily-armed helicopter, which Ryan recognized as a Boeing CH-47 Chinook, flew towards the group and prepared to land. The Dynamis logo was painted on the main door, which opened before the aircraft could land.

A towering figure emerged from within the metal husk, almost two-meters and a half in height. This Genome was more machine than man. A bulky, black power armor protected most of his body, except for the head, which was covered by a glass dome. A skull, though, would have been a better term. The Genome's flesh seemed to radiate with a crimson glow kept contained by the suit, and leaving the bones visible like X-rays. The armor seemed to have even more weapons than Vulcan's, including an energy minigun incorporated into the right arm, and rocket launchers on the shoulders.

Ryan instantly recognized that colossus for what he was, just by reading the stance and body language.

A warmonger.

"You called him?" Wyvern asked Enrique with a horrified face.

"I had no choice," the manager replied. While he tried to keep his composure, Ryan noticed the rose on his suit shifting, as if answering the Green Genome's hidden unease. "We cannot win without his resources."

"Who is this guy?" Felix asked, a little intimidated by the colossus' fearsome appearance.

"Alphonse Manada, Dynamis' VP." Wyvern clenched her jaw, her eyes betraying her unease. "Alias Fallout."

Fallout, Fallout... "The butcher of Malta?" Ryan asked, having heard the rumors.

"He dropped a nuke on Augustus in a failed attempt to kill him," Shroud confirmed, before correcting himself. "Or rather, he was the nuke."

Wyvern nodded in confirmation. "Hector exiled him to Sicily afterward, under the pretext of an 'oversea assignment.' I didn't know he had returned."

Dynamis' Vice-President stepped down from his helicopter, the ground faintly shaking under his sheer weight. "Brother, Hargraves," he politely greeted the people present with a deep, mechanical voice, before noticing Ryan and his cat. "Who are they?"

"Quicksave and Atom Cat," Enrique replied.

“Quicksave?” Alphonse recognized the nickname, but for all the wrong reasons. “Bloodstream’s brood?”

Ryan tensed, but surprisingly, Blackthorn immediately came to the rescue. “He’s the one who provided the recording. I do not trust him, but our goals align so far.”

“I see.” Alphonse Manada examined Ryan closely, the courier waving a hand at the borg in response. The vice-president didn’t even acknowledge the gesture, all business. “And his sister?”

Ryan glared at the tincan, while Enrique answered, “I let her go.”

“You let her *go*?” When Blackthorn wouldn’t respond, even under his elder’s fiery gaze, Dynamis’ VP shook his skull. “You have always been too soft for your own good, brother. About time I came back to the mainland.”

“What do you want with Len Sabino?” Ryan asked, a dangerous edge in his tone.

“That is none of your business,” Alphonse Manada replied angrily.

“Her technology is impressive, you will agree,” Enrique said hastily. “After her stunt with her bubble prisons, I wondered about hiring her for security purposes. An undersea prison might be the best solution to keep Psychos under lock and key.”

Ryan could smell a lie when he heard one, but Leo Hargraves coughed and took over the discussion.

“Gentlemen, please. We gathered you to discuss how to deal with the various criminal groups in the city, and we strongly suspect Dynamis might be supporting them.”

“Suspicious?” Felix snorted.

“Quicksave provided a recording where the Meta’s second-in-command declares having been hired by our CEO to harass Augustus’ forces,” Enrique explained calmly, Wyvern crossing her arms in quiet fury. “Considering Psyshock showed an intimate knowledge of top-secret Dynamis projects, and other circumstantial evidence, I assume the intel is genuine.”

“It is,” Shroud confirmed. “I have scouted the Meta-Gang’s territory, though I could not get close to their headquarters without the Land noticing me. They used repurposed Dynamis drones, and some of their unpowered mooks carried laser weapons.”

Though it clearly infuriated him to do so, Enrique kept digging his company’s grave. “I asked Devilry to investigate, and some of our technicians have been reported as missing. I believe either our CEO directly sent them to supply the Meta-Gang with Genius-made tech, or Psyshock used the opportunity to enslave them.”

Alphonse Manada listened to everything in silence, and when he finally spoke, it was with a tone of pure, unrestrained disgust. “Our father has betrayed our trust, and that of all of New Rome. We have *nothing* to do with this mess, I assure you.”

“Good,” Ace said, before clearing her throat. “Well, it’s bad, but hopefully that means we won’t have to fight?”

“We intend to hit the Meta and destroy them, before turning our attention to the Augusti,” Leonard declared. Ryan noticed that he avoided mentioning the bunker to the corpos, which was wise. Perhaps they hoped to destroy the

base before the Manada siblings noticed its existence. “Will you interfere?”

“No,” Enrique replied.

“Yes,” his brother said, causing everyone to glance at him. “I will not stand by and let someone else clean up our father’s mess. I will personally remove that stain on our reputation.”

“Ah, I see now brother,” Blackthorn guessed. “You suggest a coordinated strike?”

“Il Migliore will support us?” Leonard asked.

“They and my elite security team,” Alphonse added. “We will surround the Psychos and wipe them all out, even if we must fight these animals street by street.”

“Now he’s speaking my language,” Felix whispered to Ryan. Indeed, the courier was surprised by the borg’s decisiveness. Though he was clearly a closet supervillain considering his fashion sense and bloodthirsty behavior, the courier might consider calling upon him in a future loop if things went well.

“I have some reservations,” Sunny Boy said. “If the Meta-Gang has infiltrated your organization all the way to the top, then the more people involved, the greater the risk of a leak.”

“We will only inform our most reliable heroes and officers,” Enrique argued. Which, when reading between the lines, meant *‘those loyal to us and not to our CEO.’*

“A wise choice, but you forget a detail,” Shroud argued. “Psyshock will use hostages, and he can transfer his mind from one body to the next.”

"He can do that?" Wyvern asked with a frown. "I wondered why he killed himself fighting Quicksave's group, but this makes more sense."

"Unfortunately, we have no means of properly canceling his ability," Shroud sighed, taking this personally. "He has started transforming homeless people into thralls and giving them weapons. A frontal assault will lead to casualties, while a small strike team can decisively behead the Meta's leadership."

Ryan clenched his fist, as he felt an ominous sense of *déjà-vu*. It was the first Rust Town raid all over again.

"There will be a conflict in the streets even if you miraculously defeat Psyshock and Adam," Wyvern pointed out with a grim face. "The latter can barely keep his men under control, and without his unifying presence, they will probably rampage around."

Enrique cleared his throat, commanding everyone's attention. "Both strategies are not necessarily exclusive. The Carnival can focus on hitting the Meta's leadership while our larger force surrounds their headquarters and contains Adam's men."

After a short moment of silent consideration, Leo Hargraves glanced at his teammates. "What do you think?"

"I could quickly transport groups around town," said his teleporter. "Like during our battle with Mechron. If we coordinate properly, I think we can hit them hard before the Meta-Gang can prepare a counterattack."

Though Shroud remained silent, Ryan sensed his gaze on his back. The glass manipulator probably weighed the pros and cons of involving Dynamis directly. On one hand, it would

make destroying the bunker easier, but on the other, it increased the risks of discovery.

Eventually, the risk of Big Fat Adam getting his hands on orbital weaponry was too overwhelming to ignore. "When would you be ready?" Sunshine asked the corpos.

"Tomorrow," Alphonse declared.

"That's way too soon, Al," Enrique protested.

"The longer we wait, the greater the risk of discovery," the Vice-President replied with a grunt. "Father will grow cautious once he learns I have returned."

"We can quickly mobilize, especially since Devilry is with us," Wyvern told her manager. "By the time Hector learns who our target is, he will have no choice but to go along. I'm sure he will protest, but in the end, he can't publicly support Psychos. Results will speak for themselves."

"Brother." Alphonse turned towards Enrique, his tone heavy. "Once we deal with the Meta and make them talk, you know what we must do. I can forgive Father's cowardice, but treachery? Never."

For the first time since Ryan had met him, Blackthorn let out a long, heavy sigh. It reminded him of a condemned sinner bracing himself for judgment day. "I hoped it wouldn't come down to this, Al."

"Father had his chance. For our company to survive, Dynamis needs new management. A firmer one." Alphonse observed his brother and waited for him to commit. "Do I have your support?"

Blackthorn marked a short pause, before cautiously answering, “Yes.”

Wyvern’s eyes narrowed as she listened. “Enrique, are you suggesting...”

“A coup,” Blackthorn confirmed. “Once the Meta are dealt with, we will remove Don Hector from office whether he likes it or not.”

“It will be a civil war,” Wyvern warned. “Hector won’t go down without a fight, and our heroes—”

“Will make the right choice, or pay for the consequences,” Alphonse Manada said with an angry growl. “Corruption, fame, and greed have poisoned our ranks for too long; they let the Meta and the Augusti make fools of us. It’s time we purge the rot away, Wyvern. We cannot rebuild a functional post-war government on these foundations.”

Blackthorn glanced at the Carnival. “Where do you stand on this issue?”

“We will see,” Leonard replied. “After what he did, Hector needs to be deposed, and we will act to protect innocents from the crossfire.”

“However, this seems like a private matter between you boys,” Ace said with a smile. “And we have our own fish to fry.”

“Augustus?” Alphonse snorted. “You miscalculate, Hargraves. He’s our common enemy, and once Father is out of the picture...”

“*If* we succeed, brother,” Enrique pointed out.

“Yes, yes,” Alphonse Manada snorted, as he returned to his helicopter. Clearly, he had made up his mind long ago. “We will keep in touch. Brother?”

“I will serve as a liaison between everyone,” Blackthorn replied.

“Thank you.” And without wasting time, Alphonse climbed back on his helicopter and flew away. Ryan couldn’t explain why, but that man’s behavior reminded him of Augustus... and he didn’t appreciate it one bit.

“I like him,” Atom Cat said, glancing at Alphonse’s helicopter vanishing in the skies. “He gets shit done.”

Wyvern clearly didn’t share his opinion. “He does, but he doesn’t know when to stop either. If Alphonse becomes CEO...”

“I know,” Enrique replied. “But the die is already cast.”

“Felix, can I talk to you for a minute?” Leonard asked Atom Cat.

“About my sister?” the hero asked, as Sunshine invited him to walk away from the group for a private discussion. The living sun probably didn’t want the others to eavesdrop. Shroud, meanwhile, started discussing with Ace about the operation, bouncing off ideas how they could coordinate to surround Rust Town.

Ryan decided to interrogate Shroud about Livia’s mother, only for Blackthorn to focus on him next. “Don’t think I have forgotten you, Romano.”

“Of course you haven’t. Without false modesty, I’m unforgettable.”

“You planned all of this,” the manager accused the courier. “I can feel it in my bones. Yet I still do not understand your end goal. Nothing in your file indicates you went out of your way to settle a grudge against the Meta-Gang until you arrived in New Rome.”

“Do I need a reason to hate the Meta-Gang?” After what Hannifat Lecter had done in the previous loop, the time-traveler simply wanted him dead on principle. Ryan had promised Jasmine that he would kill *Whalie* in every single restart from now on, and he would follow through.

“I do not believe hate is your only motive,” Enrique said, his tone sharp and icy. “You have a hidden agenda, though I cannot fathom it yet.”

“Does it matter, Enrique?” Out of all the people present, Wyvern seemed to swallow the pill the least gracefully. “We have more pressing problems.”

“Hence why I let it slide so far,” the manager explained himself. “But make no mistake Romano, you will explain yourself once the dust has settled.”

Wyvern scratched her head. “Once the dust settles... your words say it all, Enrique.”

“Do you regret it?” Blackthorn asked, his tone softening. “You can still sit this out.”

“Never.” The heroine shook her head. “I joined Il Migliore exactly to run operations like this, and I’ve been waiting for your father to retire for years. If anything, I should rejoice that we can finally act as heroes, instead of pretending that we are. However...”

“You dread to see Alphonse in charge.”

"I want to protect New Rome, not see it turned into a battlefield. Your brother doesn't stop until all his enemies are dead."

"He can't be that bad?" Ryan asked, the embarrassed silence that followed quickly telling him otherwise. "Can he?"

"None will say Alphonse doesn't believe in a cause bigger than himself," Wyvern said with a forced smile. "But if his father hadn't sent him into exile, Dynamis and Augustus would still be at war. I want to see the Augusti crumble as much and their drug factory on fire, but it won't be without civilian casualties. It's... I'm torn. I'm truly torn."

"Unfortunately, the more I consider it, the more I believe a conflict is inevitable," Enrique said with a hint of regret. "Our respective visions of the future cannot coexist."

Ryan's thoughts turned to Livia, and her desire to reform her organization. "You could wait for Augustus to retire. The next person in the line of succession might be friendlier."

"I thought we could reach an agreement with Augustus' daughter once she took over the organization, yes," the manager conceded. "But the situation is too unstable. Augustus' kind never goes into quiet retirement; once he learns our father sent the Meta-Gang after him, and he *will* know, he shall strike back. And let's not talk about his feud with Hargraves."

"I just don't get it," Wyvern said, hands on her waist. "Why would Hector risk so much by allying with someone like Adam?"

"My father believes he can buy everyone's loyalty, if the price is right," Enrique replied. "Money or knockoff Elixirs, it

makes no difference for him.”

“But why does he prevent us from striking while hiring monsters to do it in secret?”

“I suppose my father believes he can outlast the competition while secretly weakening it. At least, until Augustus’ tumor kills him, and Dynamis can strike his organization without fear of retaliation.”

Ryan, who had stopped paying attention to the conversation, abruptly froze in place. “Come again?”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Hi there guys, I have recently uploaded a new story, a Greek Myth LitRPG called Kairos. You can check it by clicking on [this link](#), if you're interested.



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60: Lucky Break

Felix the Cat didn't say a word on the way home. Not a single one.

Ryan drove the two of them back to the Optimates Tower in the early evening. Their group and Enrique had decided to leave the gathering separately, to avoid raising suspicion before tomorrow's operation. Eventually, the courier parked his car in front of the tower's gates, but Atom Cat made no move to exit it.

"Hey, kitten, I know it must feel terrible," the courier said. "Believe me, I understand what you're going through. So, uh, how about we go watch a *Star Wars* movie with Yuki and Timmy to cheer you up? Think of the memes!"

Felix briefly looked at Ryan, his gaze completely hollow, before he opened the car's door. The young hero walked towards the Il Migliore tower in awkward silence, head down and hands in his pockets.

Yeah, he wasn't feeling well and wanted some alone time.

Ryan couldn't blame him. Learning that Lightning Butt had murdered his adoptive sister's parents, before turning her into a drug wizard and spitting on her birth mother's legacy must have been... harsh.

The courier wasn't sure how to reach out to his friend. At least, not until he was ready to open up.

Ryan watched Felix disappear into the Optimates Tower, before driving away. He still had a few errands planned before tomorrow, including dealing with a constant annoyance. “Shortie?” the courier called out while putting on the Chronoradio. “Shortie?”

“*I’m here, Riri,*” she answered on the other end of the line.

“We’re getting rid of the Meta tomorrow,” Ryan said, as he drove south of the city. “Il Migliore and the Carnival agreed to attack them together.”

“*Good.*”

“But something bothers me. I have the feeling the Manada are after you specifically, and not because you want to overthrow the bourgeoisie.”

Len remained silent for a brief moment. “*I... I did attack one of their facilities. Though they deserved it.*”

“I can’t explain why, but I have the intuition it was about something else.” Alphonse was clearly pissed Enrique had released Len from custody, and Blackthorn still kept the Genius under close surveillance afterward. “They were also under the delusion I was your brother, and I think it factored in their decision to hire me.”

“*You think...*” Len cleared her throat on the other side of the line. “*You think it has something to do with Dad?*”

Ryan couldn’t confirm it, but his gut told him so. “Maybe. I get the feeling the company has skeletons in its closet.”

“*Of course they do Riri, their wealth is built on blood and suffering,*” Shortie replied with anger, before calming herself. “*What about the brain-duplicating tech?*”

"I have an idea about how we can get it," Ryan said, his fingers tightening on the driving wheel. He had left the northern neighborhoods for the southern ones, closer to Augusti's territory. "But it's risky."

Len marked a short pause, but seemed determined to help. "*I'm listening.*"

"We know from the recording that Hector Manada lent the technology to Psypsy for research purposes," the courier reminded his best friend. "Which means it's probably in the bunker."

She quickly guessed his plan. "*Which has access to the sea, and will be under siege tomorrow. The Meta will be distracted.*"

Len could slip inside the bunker, grab the technology, and leave. Ryan had the intuition Hector's sons would destroy it should they get their hands on it, if only to remove a threat to their inheritance. "But it will be very dangerous, Shortie."

"I can... I can take care of myself. I will do it, Riri." Another pause. *"And... after it's done... after it's done, you should come."*

"Shortie, are you inviting me to your place?" Ryan teased her.

He could almost see her flustered on the other side of the line. *"Y-yes, but not like that. I... I set up a room for you down there. You will be safer with us than at Dynamis. I just don't trust them."*

Neither did Ryan, but for now, the road to the Perfect Run demanded he take the risk. "I appreciate the offer, Shortie,"

he said from the bottom of his heart. “I can tell you’re better. You sound more... confident?”

“*I’ve... I’ve been following the treatment,*” she admitted. “*Reduced the antidepressants. Pace them better. It’s... I don’t feel better, I don’t think so. But I feel less worse.*”

“Good. It’s good.” Maybe... maybe he could find a way to help deal with her depression across the loops? If he could carry her consciousness across time, so would the treatment. Hopefully.

“*I... I’ll be in touch.*” And with these words, Len abruptly cut the communication.

Progress was slow, but it was still progress.

Eventually, Ryan reached his destination, a classy, overwhelmingly fashionable bistro located near New Rome’s strip; from the outside, it looked like a carbon copy of the famous Parisian brasserie *The Fouquet’s*. A valet offered to park the car, but the courier would never let anyone drive it; his Plymouth Fury was too good for the plebe. It forced him to reach the restaurant’s entrance on foot, where his date awaited him.

“Finally!” Fortuna complained, hands on her waist. She wore the same lavish, scandalous golden dress that she did at Jamie’s party. “You were almost late!”

“But I wasn’t,” Ryan replied, taking the spoiled brat’s hand and kissing it like a true gentleman, much to her surprise. “I could never make a goddess wait.”

Since he needed a distraction and she kept pestering him, Ryan finally agreed to a date with the luckiest woman in the world; though it was only a smokescreen for his devious

plan to kill her romantic interest in his person. His goal was to be as unbearably perfect and affectionate as possible, until it became suffocating.

But no plan survived contact with the enemy, and Fortuna had brought a third wheel.

“Ryan.” In contrast to her friend’s outrageous outfit, Livia Augusti wore a modest, sleeveless crimson dress and golden bracelets. While Fortuna breathed glamour, the mafia princess embodied refined nobility. “Good to see you again.”

“Oh, I didn’t expect you,” Ryan said, trying to hide his unease while he glanced at Fortuna. “I thought we were having a date?”

“We are, but you will also make it up to Livy for leaving us stranded the first time we met,” Fortuna replied with haughtiness. “You will spoil the both of us.”

“Of course, a divinity like you only deserves the best,” Ryan lied while offering his arms to both women, “and that’s me.”

Livia smiled in amusement as she took his arm, while Fortuna took a little more time to touch his sleeve. “Oh, it’s cashmere!”

“You like it?” Ryan asked, surprised. “It’s genuine cashmere wool.”

“There is no such a thing as budget cashmere,” Fortuna replied, as if he had said something stupid. “Either it’s perfect, or it isn’t.”

Damn, they actually had one thing in common, *taste!* Who would have thought?

The trio walked into the restaurant, guided by lackeys through wooden double doors. The deco was in the purest 18th century French style, with flattering candlelight illumination and exquisite decoration. It truly deserved its name of *Le Parisien*. Ryan had reserved an isolated table near the window, so Fortuna could look down on people outside. He knew she would appreciate the gesture.

He also noticed that each of the tables were separated from the others by walls, to maximize privacy. The guests could speak without worry of being spied on.

“I am glad you finally accepted your place in the universe,” Fortuna told Ryan, as a *maître d'hôtel* invited them to sit and distributed the menu cards. “You have a lot to make up for.”

“And I truly apologize for it,” Ryan lied through his teeth. “I saw you, Fortuna, but until you talked with your brother, I hadn’t *seen* you.”

He took Fortuna’s hand into his own by surprise, much to her shock.

“When I saw your passion at trying to reconnect with your brother, I... I was moved to tears.” Through skills honed through countless restarts, Ryan seemed about to cry for a moment. “Your heart of gold, it blinded me!”

“I’m glad you finally noticed,” she replied, utterly flustered. Meanwhile, Livia hid her face behind the menu card, clearly struggling not to laugh.

“Can you forgive me for my atrocious behavior towards you?” Ryan asked with pleading eyes. “Because I can never forgive myself.”

"That depends on this date," Fortuna replied while regaining her composure. "If it goes well, I will consider it!"

"I understand," Ryan said, before calling the closest waiter. "Darling, an *Assiette de Fois Gras et de Saumon Frais* for my beloved."

Fortuna gasped. "How do you know I love them? Did you ask Felix?"

Yes, he did, but a true gentleman always lied with a smile. "I just wondered what the perfect woman would want, and it clicked."

"Of course it did!" Fortuna replied with charming modesty, while Livia could no longer resist and let out a laugh. "Livy, what was that for?"

"Sorry," the princess said with a smile before lowering the menu. "I find you adorable."

"You are adorable too, Livy." Fortuna put a hand around Livia's own in a sisterly way. "I'm glad you agreed to come. You needed it."

"Thanks," the princess replied, though her smile turned sadder. "I need a distraction, with all that's happening lately."

"Ryan, your mission for the night is to cheer her up," Fortuna all but ordered the courier.

"I will do my best," Ryan replied with a smile. "You're quite close I see."

"Our parents were very close," Livia explained. "We were all but raised together."

"You could say our fathers were partners-in-crime!" Fortuna chuckled at her own joke, but not as loud as Ryan. He immediately felt dirty; it was terrible, even by his standards.

"I have a delightful menu planned for you," the courier said. "On one side, you have French cuisine, and on the other, everything else."

"I can only applaud your taste, but I'm surprised you invited us here," Fortuna said while waiters left to prepare their orders. "I thought you were poor, and the menus here at *Le Parisien* climb into the thousands of Euros."

"I am well-off," Ryan replied.

"How well-off?" his date kept asking with a suspicious frown.

"Millions of euros stashed in various banks," Livia said, causing Fortuna to gasp. "I've tracked down some of his bank accounts at major corporations. I was actually surprised."

Well, one of the benefits of time-travel was that Ryan knew which ventures would pay off. He even found the long lost *Templars' Treasure*, though it took him years and many adventures.

Everyone in Italy used the euro because of its availability, with power blocks from post-war corporations like Dynamis to Augustus himself backing up its value. However, it only really applied to Italy. Some other post-war emerging nations used their own variant of the euro, but with a wildly different exchange rate; and a few warlords had started minting their own coins. Dynamis also spoke of eventually introducing their own coin to replace the euro in the next five years, though Ryan wasn't sure if they would follow through.

"My, I thought you were a toad, but you are actually a prince!" Fortuna complimented Ryan.

"Only your kiss can reveal my true form," the courier replied with honeyed words. When in doubt, he would flatter her shamelessly! "If you wish for a coach, you only have to ask."

"Thank you, but I already have a yacht."

Ryan realized that this was a silent invitation from Fortuna to ask about her life, and he did.

"My, you must be extremely talented to purchase something like that at your age," the courier stated, though she probably won it from the lottery or something. "If I were to guess, you have the soul of an artist and the skill of an entrepreneur."

Much to his surprise, Fortuna seemed quite embarrassed, adjusting her hair with her hand. "I actually sculpt in my spare time."

"You do?" Ryan asked, genuinely surprised.

"I'm studying applied arts at Juventas University." That post-war, corporate-sponsored university? Ryan heard of it, though as far as he knew only corporate managers and affiliates could pay the exorbitant tuition fees. "Here is some of my work."

Fortuna searched in her dress and brought out a gold-plated cell phone, before showing Ryan pictures of her creations. For a second, the courier expected modern, incomprehensible sculptures, but instead her work took inspiration from Renaissance artists. She had crafted multiple lifelike sculptures of angels and mythological

figures, with a statue of Livia as the goddess Athena being her masterpiece.

“It’s amazing,” Ryan said, and for once he was entirely genuine.

“It truly is,” Livia said with a nod.

“You like them?” Fortuna fished for compliments, her confidence replaced with anxiousness. Much to Ryan’s surprise, she was quite sensitive about this subject. Enough to make that unbearable narcissist nervous.

“You are really talented,” the courier continued, reassuring her. “I’ve seen a lot of self-proclaimed artists, but you have real talent.”

“Thanks,” the blonde said with an embarrassed smile, a hand in her hair. “I’m considering making it a career.”

“But I thought you already had a job for the Augusti?” Ryan asked with a frown.

“Oh, it’s only temporary,” Fortuna said quickly. “I fill in because my brother can no longer protect Livy, as he should.”

“And I thank you for the attention,” Livia replied, genuinely touched.

“Because you deserve it,” Fortuna replied with kindness. Ryan realized that while her narcissism made her frustrating, she was also completely honest and kind in her own way. “I know your role is... stressful. You need all the help you can get.”

Livia looked down on her plate as the waiter brought them the starters, without saying anything. Fortuna looked at her friend with concern, and Ryan realized that the two were a lot closer than he thought. He had never seen the Lucky Girl behave like that with anyone else.

Come to think of it, Fortuna had dared walk into a Dynamis facility to try and convince her brother to return, but Ryan wondered if it was entirely on behalf of her family. Maybe she actually did it for Livia's sake?

Huh, the brat wasn't entirely self-centered. She rose up in his esteem.

"I'm surprised you don't advertise your sculptures," Ryan changed the subject, trying to lighten the mood. "I mean, this is the first time I've heard about them."

"Oh, I didn't tell many people, not even my brother. I know they will be popular." Though she tried to sound confident, Ryan could tell she wasn't from the slight hesitation in her voice. "But I don't want my work to be public yet."

"Why so?" Ryan asked, but much to his surprise, Fortuna hesitated to say it out loud.

"Her mother can reshape faces thanks to her power," Livia explained. "Hence the name Venus."

"I don't want my work to be compared to her," Fortuna finally admitted. "I mean, even my face is one of her masterpieces! Felix's too!"

That explained a few things. Ryan immediately zeroed in on the problem. "You don't want the only thing that's really yours to be 'commodified' by your family?" he guessed, as

they started enjoying the starters. “Otherwise they will say like mother, like daughter?”

“Yes...” Fortuna trailed off. “Yes, that’s exactly that. And that’s the only thing where my power cannot help me. So it is all mine.”

“You don’t love your parents?”

“I love them,” Fortuna said, though her smile turned a bit hesitant. “I love them, and they love me too.”

“A bit too much?” Ryan guessed the problem.

“Yes, they’re smothering!” Her tone switched from vulnerable to angry. “*‘Fortuna, you should work harder to take over our branch of the family!’ ‘Fortuna, you need to prove yourself to become the new Diana!’ ‘Look at your sister, she is already an Olympian!’* And it is never enough!”

Livia gave Fortuna a glance of sympathy, and Ryan understood why they were so close. They were both the prisoners of their parents’ expectations.

“Mom wants me to take over her business, but I said no,” Fortuna told her date. “She still thinks I will change my mind.”

“Why don’t you try to present your sculptures anonymously?” Ryan suggested. “I mean, all good artists have a sexy secret alter ego.”

“Oh, maybe, I am certain people will love them...” Lucky Girl didn’t sound so confident when she couldn’t rely on her power.

"Do you have hobbies, Ryan?" Livia asked, trying to steer the conversation somewhere else.

"I mostly adopt lost cats," the courier joked. And blow stuff up too, but it might kill the mood.

"That reminds me, we've found your cat," Livia declared. "He was snooping around Vulcan's apartment."

"Eugène-Henry?" Ryan straightened in his chair.

"Wait, the cat we chased when we first met belongs to you?" Fortuna asked, astonished. "It has to be fate."

"Vulcan wasn't happy to have an uninvited guest, but the cat won her over," Livia said with an amused smirk. "As if he knew her well."

Ryan could read between the lines.

Before the silence could get any more awkward, Fortuna received a phone call and loudly sighed. "Trouble?" Livia asked, though she didn't sound worried at all.

"It's Mom," Fortuna complained, as the phone kept ringing. She put a hand on Ryan's arm. "I'm sorry, I have to answer. Can you take care of Livy in my absence?"

"For you?" Ryan smiled. "*Anything.*"

"You're adorable," Fortuna replied, before rising from her chair and leaving for an isolated private booth. Leaving Ryan and Livia alone.

As Augustus' daughter had planned.

"You wanted us to talk again," the courier guessed.

"Yes," the princess replied with a strained smile. "You dated her in the previous loop, didn't you? Vulcan. That's why your teleporting cat hangs out with her."

No point in denying it. "Yeah."

"Why didn't you try again?" the princess asked with a frown. "To date her. This time, she dislikes you."

"Jasmine, *my* Jasmine, made me promise not to replace her," Ryan said, his eyes glancing at his champagne glass. "I don't want to see it that way, but... the person I dated is gone. The current Vulcan is a stranger with her face, and none of the memories."

Livia's eyes softened. "I... see. That's what you said before, about people forgetting you never getting any easier?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I try not to get too attached to anyone, but I forgot myself last time."

"Then what about Fortuna? What is she for you?" There was a hint of reproach in her tone.

An ungodly annoyance. "It's all part of my diabolical plan to make her give up on my person."

Livia raised an eyebrow in skepticism. "By being the perfect gentleman?"

Well yes! The more Ryan gave Fortuna the cold shoulder, the more she harassed him! Ergo, the opposite should make her stop! "I don't expect you to understand my brilliant logic."

"Do not break her heart, Ryan," Livia warned him, her voice no longer friendly. "Fortuna is my best friend, and while she

looks otherwise at first glance, she is a sensible soul inside.”

Ryan was a bit skeptical, but she knew her friend better than he did. “I admit I like her more now that she showed a little kindness.”

“She is under a lot of pressure, more than you know,” Livia said. “The main reason why she joined the Killer Seven is to protect me. So I do not feel alone. I owe her for this. Even if you think there will be no consequences for hurting her feelings due to your power, I guarantee you that I will not forget it.”

Ryan joined his fingers, his face serious. “Why are you here, princess? The real reason.”

She crossed her arms, her gaze turning to steel. “The Carnival, Ryan,” Livia said, her tone venomous. “It’s about the Carnival.”

Here they were. The real reason for her presence. “I suppose this is why you wanted us to meet in a public place, with your unbelievably lucky friend nearby? You thought I would have you assassinated if we met in private?”

“I keep seeing the Carnival in New Rome lately, fighting the Meta-Gang,” Livia said. “It’s them, right? The people who asked you to blow up the Bliss factory. You brought them to the city. I can’t see your actions, but they still make ripples.”

“Yes, it’s the Carnival,” Ryan admitted. No point in hiding it anymore.

“I warned you, I told you I would let you be as long as you didn’t target my family,” Livia reminded him. “And I have. But you are willing to collaborate with the people who murdered my mother.”

“It was an accident, from what I heard.”

“Who told you that, Hargraves?” She grew angrier by the second. “Do you trust him?”

More than your father, princess.

During their first loop together, Felix had told the courier that Augustus once confronted an early incarnation of the Carnival during his rise to power. Shroud, on Ryan’s behalf, had expanded on the story after the meeting with Dynamis. Leo Hargraves had returned to the Costa family’s farm for Narcinia’s birthday, as he had promised, only to find the place in ruins. The Carnival swiftly attacked Augustus, only to be pushed back after suffering terrible losses.

And Augustus’ wife Juno had been caught in the crossfire.

“I cooperate with the Carnival and Dynamis to get rid of the Meta, that is all,” Ryan said. “If anything, I convinced them not to target your family to focus on the fatter problem.”

“I get killed in alternate universes where I snoop around Adam the Ogre’s operations,” Livia admitted. “They’re planning something big, aren’t they? Something so terrible they’re willing to risk angering my father to keep it quiet.”

“Yeah. But if all goes well tomorrow, they won’t be able to pull it off.” Her comment made Ryan wonder if Adam’s decision to fire the *Bahamut* had truly been as impulsive as he pretended. “Afterward, I will get rid of the Bliss Factory and hopefully you will never hear from me again.”

“You brought the Carnival here, Ryan,” Livia argued. “Everything they do from now on is on your head.”

"They would have come anyway, I just pointed them in the right direction. Namely, Hannifat Lecter's." Ryan looked at her in the eyes. "I stand by what I said, princess. Don't harm my friends, and your people will make it out alive."

"In this loop, or in the next?" she asked the hard question.

"I can't say yet," Ryan admitted. "I will do my best, but I can't guarantee anything for this one. But I am a man of my word."

The princess frowned at him, skeptical. "Didn't you go farther into the future?"

"I've lived lifetimes, but mostly in short bursts. Never more than months between two save points." Ryan looked away. "With one exception, but I don't want to talk about it. It was so bad, I decided not to do a long loop ever again afterward."

"So you don't know how it will end?" Livia shook her head. "That's the only guarantee I have? Your word things will be alright eventually?"

"You would prefer information?"

"That would be a start," she admitted.

"I know your father has a brain tumor." The Augusti princess flinched at his blunt admission, her face turning into a blank mask. "The Manada told me."

She raised a wall of silence between them.

"Fine, don't talk about it if you don't want to. Your silence is an answer in itself. I thought Elixirs cured you of these things, but I assume it's because he took two of them? Or

perhaps he already had it before gaining powers, and now the tumor is as invulnerable as he is?"

No answer, though the tension kept rising.

"You know, Narcinia's father, her real father, could have cut it out?" Ryan asked. "The Carnival told me Lightning Butt killed him because he could cut anything with a knife. Even an invincible man."

"Ryan." Her gaze had turned hollow. "Don't say any more words."

"What I mean to say is... I think I understand why you're not trying to confront your father right now." A brain tumor could worsen his mood, and an invincible lightning god on a rampage would be a disaster. "I lived through something similar."

"You don't know anything," she replied harshly.

"My adoptive father Bloodstream was a ticking bomb." Ryan scowled, as he remembered some of the worst moments of his childhood. "He was an Elixir addict, and Len... his daughter, she drank one. Near the end, we were on the run, and I had to be the one searching for supplies because he brought too much attention. Every time I left him alone with Len... I thought I might return to find her dead."

Livia tensed, but didn't say anything.

"Look, what I mean to say is... I'm not your enemy, Livia," Ryan said, as Fortuna returned from her call, oblivious to the situation. "I just don't know how to prove it to you."

"Prove what?" Fortuna asked, before noticing Livia's unease. "Livy? Livy, are you alright?"

"I..." Livia regained her composure and forced herself to smile. "It's okay, Fortuna."

"You're not okay, Livy," Lucky Girl said with concern. "I can see it on your face."

"No, it's alright," the princess lied. "I'm just tired... I will call Sparrow to bring me home."

"You're sure?" Fortuna asked with a frown.

"Yes, it's... it's better that way." Livia kissed her lucky friend on the cheek, before giving the courier a formal nod.

"Thanks, Ryan. I appreciated our talk."

"It's alright," he said, trying to find the right words. "You're not alone. Don't forget that."

"I won't." Ryan would have done anything to know what Livia thought, behind that blank face. "I swear."

She left the restaurant five minutes afterward, leaving the two 'lovebirds' alone.

The date was quite alright afterward, though much less amusing than before. Ever the gentleman, Ryan paid for everything and drove Fortuna home.

"Is this your place?" he asked, stopping his Plymouth Fury before a huge, high-end condo complex.

"Yes, it's one of my apartments." Fortuna joined her hands together, with no trace of her exuberant pride. "I apologize for what happened with Livy. She's not having a good time."

Gee, really?

“It’s all Felix’s fault!” Fortuna complained loudly. “He broke her heart, and left her alone to... to play lap dog for a gardener!”

Yeah. Livia’s position clearly isolated her, and she had few friends to whom she could confess her true feelings.

“I am really thankful for your attempt to cheer her up. She truly needed it.” Fortuna’s face turned thoughtful. “Ryan?”

“Yes?” the courier answered, knowing what would follow.

“I really hesitated,” she said. Somehow, her tone reminded Ryan’s of an executioner’s. “I really hesitated for a moment. But...”

Yes, yes, yes, Ryan thought. Say it won’t work between us, and we’re better as friends!

“But I have decided to forgive you,” Fortuna said with a merciful expression. “I will forgive you for your boorish behavior.”

A short silence followed.

“Oh my, thank you,” Ryan said, outwardly happy and inwardly disappointed. Had his plan worked too well? “I couldn’t have lived without your forgiveness.”

“I know, but you have it. I even enjoyed myself.” Fortuna smiled and joined her hands, without saying anything else. He had the feeling she wanted to ask him something, but wasn’t sure how to say it.

“Well, I guess I will walk you to the door and then leave,” Ryan said, moving to open the car’s door.

It remained locked.

Ryan frowned as he checked on the other doors. None of them opened. The Plymouth Fury also refused to start, even if five different backup systems should prevent that kind of problem.

“So that’s how it is,” Ryan muttered to himself.

“Is there a problem?” Fortuna asked with a smug smile.

“Do you have ten minutes to quickly show me your sculpture collection?” Ryan asked with a charming smile. “I don’t want to bother you.”

“Oh no you do not,” she reassured him, the very picture of false modesty. “You do not bother me at all.”

This time, the car door opened normally.

Damn it, her power was busted!

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Next, the Rust Town raid, Dynamis version!

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Samuel Smith, Aldhere, Jacob, Sam McNamara, Jarrod Broome, Rolf Bork, Callum Brocklehurst, Samuel Borges, Random, Joe, Dardy Noongar, Clayton Carson, Joe Giannuzzi, Lance Linked, Jonathan Kutz, Stuart Dye, DerWipe, Grosbilljunior, martin, GenericKane, Jason Oniemola, Sharath, Augustus, Joseph, Puri Iresan, Abhichon chandrasen, MaikD, Matt Labrum, Robert, s476, Eneri, TKLD, depression 2.0, Daniel Hughesdon, Anders Svensen, Jordan, Oakenbear, Vega, K-Thomas, Eric Vistnes, Jose, Davvy chapie, Joey Nguyen, Skovboa, Lucas Hansen, maniac_ian, samuel baldauf, Sebin Paul, Liz Griggs, Colo T, BluEarth, MaliMi, Marcus Österberg, Platinum Star, Orm, DaQualyn Singleton, Rheklr, evilperson41, Jake V, Lloyd kostuik, Corwin Brewer, Loïc Fernandes, Eric jian, Gianni Ghiribelli, John Smith, Jay Eskew, Willshaper, David, Moons, Tibstrike, MaikD, Ploxzer, Alexander Dupree, Josh Delgado42, Domenic Stritzl, Not N. Octopus, Hayden Butz, Aaron, Marcin Zimny, Hazza Vanderbyl, Jay Gradon, Hoobie Gomez, charlyfu, Cliint, Chris, Paul Rettig, Luke, The3ScapeGoat, Jacob Goodwin, Kristian Oinonen, Bennet Larson, Mikołaj Wiszniewski, Bobby Jones, Phillip Ingram, Ariel Reyz, altus, lione pouet, Nicolas Marty, Bobo Bo, Exrotes, Darti, ScottDR, Hi, Kyle Wong, Henry Chow, Thundabear95, Aqua, torrey deloach, eva0ne, Philip Lee, Ivan Delgado, Geffery Dopp, Michael Kevin Karlson, Christian Matthew, Alex, Hi, Hauke, Kaleb Uden, Christoph Kunze, Dax, GraySquirrelEatToast, jacob johannes, House of Pantheon, ParadoxFox, FiveHands, Melanie, Matt M, Caldrick, T3ctonic, Kezrin, Michael Frankford, Brody Brown, Actaeix, Desert Wreck, dave hutch, Zachary Venne, AlthePal, MaliMi, Arthur3s, Frank Pisauro, Brent, Slimereaper, Sub Electricall, Warren Zielke, The Knight Commissar, Dorian Lee, Svend, some guy,

Ryan Size, BB King, Markus, Borisalv, HollowIce, Long Le, Matthew Lo, Blah64, Hamis, Tip Top, Mojanks, Adrian Engel, Brenden, Josh Huynh, Psy, Mohammed Hajjaj, Lance Linked, Massgamer, afgasd adgasd, i9gv37, Franco Evett - Pig Lord, Harrison Russel, Yeno Memevig, Jake, Finn Ryan, Nicholas Jensen, Mark Gitthens, T T, Manu, Deinos, maltmana, Alyaseen, Deane L Uptegrove, Dylan, Svarog, Nick Smith, Conner M Tatum, Overlord_Grimm, killbot E, ParoxysmDK, James Deziel, Amaury, michele calderoni, Matt, Kirvin, Jordan Litwin, Magnus Steffen Nørregaard, Jay Gradon, K-Thomas, Justin Jones, Colo T, RedZone, Nikolas Wojtalewicz, Marcus Pehan, Cole Rosenhein, liltigah, Enzo Morvan, Art238, Bon Bon, Richard Barboza, Alexander, Charlie Taylor, LS, Thantos, bob Johnson, Doom, Jeff Gault, Tristan Praedo, George Ive, John, Landon Pearce, shawn, I don't want to say this but, Daniel Hernandez, John Bush, Lukas W. Nielsen, war doggle, Cole Rosenhein, WowIExist, Edwin Jose, Andrew Wilson, Pooya Daravi, Sunerl, Steven Lindsay, Thaco4, Tyler Chesney, NLRUmbra, Kyle J Smith, Rommelfanger Bob, Davvy chappie, Branden Bryan, Micah Brown, Alex Nimmer, David Burchfield, Jordan McDonald, Matthew Powell, Mihai Popescu, JJ B, Andrew Odom, Danielle Warvel, Colin, George Ive, Welkin2, Ivan Kalinovic, AdAstridPerAspera, Reviv3pls, Andrew Jones, Connor Kogut, Dark Chaos, Saysca, Folk Chanin, Jdosnoen, Konrad2, Bunny Waffles, John Johnson, MaikD, Colby, Jacob B Haire, Pumpkin Mouse, Helsgarde, Harry Williams, Alex Canavan, Hobold the kobold, AQ, Adam Johnson, Daniel Aguirre, Zack Hoeken, Daniel Mackie, Chip Twothousandone, KatarnK, N0T0B0K, Razvan, Calvin, John, Jordan Chan, Heikki Aitakangas, OccultOwlbear, TheBreaker, Localthiccboi, Justi martinez, Thomas Rossiter, Jonathan Caselli, John,

Richard Lee, Njordt, Joshua Thompson, PJ LeBlanc, Maxun, Seijax, Demetre Zurebiani, Iron_Giant, Guilherme Silva, Slade Schlaudecker, The Arcane Emperor, Erik Sjöström, RedZone, Vlad the mad lad, Michael Forrester, BadSnake971, ZRhulad, Ryan, Cole Mathews, Scott Bosse, sean mccusker, Timo Reti, Jarre7, Dietz, Thomas Gamble, Nonnuvy Bizniz, Sean Basa, Tagmin, Julien Castellijos, Kasan, Zach Jamison, Zack, Ethan Bell, William Vickers, Njordt, Ilvesmäki, Alexander, Devarya Raman, Marcus Seigman, James Jackson, Preston M, Subliminary, TDMC, Jordan, Kite 7, Alfredo Spuri, Russel Todd, Demetre Zurebiani, Zach, Tate Browder, Brandon Stiles, Minow, Joachim Janssen, Michael S., edmuck, Jade Green, just_a_potato, Victor Newman, Malphas, Kyle Reid, aezrith ferova, Hulg Gohen, matticide FOWD, Jackietron201, Dark Chaos, Michael Yamashita, Hntpo, Andraste Chevalier, Julien Castillejos, William Johnson, John Evans, Kyoma, Liark Lane, Joey Nguyen, mcanamara ?, HarbingTarbl, Spartanstoryteller, Thordur hrafn, David Ge, IronJim, William, Demetre Zurebiani, hippityhoppity, Magnus Margenfeld, Dertyer, Guy Incognito, Paul Hughes, TaoBio, Soufyan Zerrad, mars kiyu, Iudi, Meredith Leu, Gaëtan Hillion, Bernice0311, Galandry, Eirik, Andrey Kutsey, Scipio, Andrew Rutherford Butler, Aeon, brett thomas, Yiğit Köymen, Thiago Ruiz, Yamibomb112, Imran, Dark Chaos, Tijay Arnie, Comedy Knight, Qwer, Gerrant, Ciara Banks, William Swearingin, Anonmily, William Brayer, Armo, Aehs, sedael, Darien Benner, Ligma, Michael Buchler, Daniel Spencer Vargas, Gabriel Aptekar, BedlamBlade, Walter, Joko, Dynrakmos, Goggy123, maou99sama, Erostan, Clemens Hochstädter, Noah Rimmer Skov, Jacob Barger, Sam Paley, Ariel reyz, Juppaware, House of Pantheon, Aymeric Penven, Dantalian11,

Harold Sandahl IV, Francis Chartier, Kody Ihnat, Samuel Alexander Vall Andersen, Rein Warner, mikael persson, morganmoll, Reviv3pls, Warper 6, 11037, Andrew Holland, Jdosnoen, Xerias, manspider0002, Sebastiano H. C., Zachary D Nickell, Terry Winter, Maalsc, TTG, Oliverthms, Richard Wall, Siphor, Dark Chaos, Jeremy Humphrey, Nikhil Majumdar, Leaored, Cipkenop, Chistopher Waits, Jefferymoonworm, Robert Blank, Ervin Ughy, Phoebe Vale, Shaoraka, Zachary Smith, PonyReader, agoniste, Max Hu, Brycen Legler, KeyMan BrB, Jonathan Spaulding, Ausner Gentil, Kazzy, Erriballon, Larry Smith, Sanjay, Oliver Gray, Adrian Barter, Alex Rhone, Karthic, Tailor Tylbury, Bob le Poisson Rouge, Colin Ford, Ashley Cameron, Bogdanov Dmitriy, Ivan Elyshev, Anthony, Particlepigeon, Ryan Trueman, Kalle, Jack, Chris, Roden, Andrew Stinson, Thomas Tessier, M Clason, Alex Lindsay, Sadinar, Adam Roundfield, Daniel Everest, Exiled Knight, LinenZero, Tomas Puskas, Kyle Reese, RandomGift, Corgi McStumperson, Peter Christensen-Calvin, James Teeple, Dom Ceremonia, Mikkel Kolding Christensen, Sands, BlackFire13th, Kevin Ramos, Charles handgis, damien, Jeb, Jeb, Sebin Paul, Andrew Kahn, 白酒鬼, Trevor Sales, Calvin Miner, Rory, PbookR, Glader, John Carroll, Quentin, Andrew Parsadayan, Igor Mikulik, RepossessedSoul, James Walsh, Athra, Chris M, Jim of Trades, Koen Hertenberg, Enaz the Great, Alex Pruitt, Saul Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.

61: Death Warrant

It was May 12th, and Team *Quicksave the Pandas* had assembled.

As he drove towards Rust Town, Ryan hoped this battle would go better than Vulcan's doomed assault against the Meta-Gang. The time-traveler had gathered everyone he could call upon, provided all the necessary intel, and he wore a cashmere suit. Everyone would soon move into position, Shortie included.

The die was cast.

Atom Cat remained silent at the car's front seat, having outfitted his costume with a dart bandolier. Ryan thought knives were classic for a reason, but the idea of someone getting beaten by explosive darts amused him to no end. The Panda and Wardrobe stayed at the back, the former whispering a song to himself, and the latter examining Ryan with her big, beautiful eyes.

"Yuki, I know you designed my new mask," Ryan said, "but this is getting a little creepy."

"You went on a date yesterday," Wardrobe said with a smile. "I can feel it."

Did she have a gossip radar or something? Then again, Ryan had returned to his penthouse suspiciously late into the night.

In the end, the ‘ten-minute visit’ lasted half an hour. Lucky Girl had incredible taste, both for interior decoration and her sculpture hobby, to the point the courier would introduce her to Wardrobe. He had the feeling they would get along fantastically well. However, while Ryan had enjoyed the ‘date,’ his master plan had utterly failed. Lucky Girl just sent him a message saying she would ‘allow’ him to invite her again.

“It was nothing serious, Yuki,” said the courier, “so I’m still open to new romantic applications.”

“Sorry, I really like you Ryan, but I’m already in an exclusive contract with someone else.”

“Really? Congratulations!” the time-traveler replied with a warm smile. “That’s wonderful!”

“Thanks, she’s super nice, you will love her,” Yuki said with a grin. “But we’re talking about your love life. Is she in Il Migliore? Is it Len?”

“I will leave you to your endless speculations, watching as you go down the rabbit ho—” Wardrobe’s costume instantly transformed into a cosplay of Sherlock Holmes, hat and pipe included. “Hey, that’s cheating!”

“Hm...” Wardrobe observed Ryan, making deductions in her mind. “If I had to make an elaborate guess... I would say Atom Cat’s sister Fortuna, and it didn’t go farther than a chaste kiss.”

Atom Cat emerged from his silent reverie to look at Ryan in disbelief. “What?” he asked.

“That’s awesome Yuki,” the Panda congratulated Wardrobe. “How did you figure it out?”

“Elementary, my dear Panda!”

“You know Sherlock Holmes never said that in the Conan Doyle novels?” Ryan complained, but Wardrobe ignored him.

“We know she was pestering him for a date, and from his expression, he clearly considered it a chore before being pleasantly surprised,” Yuki explained, her mannerism mimicking Sherlock Holmes’ most famous movie adaptations. “Hence, he accepted out of a sense of obligation, perhaps hoping to subtly discourage her. His hairstyle is also well-groomed and his smell remains the same. Thus, we can assume the absence of physical intimacy.”

“I hate Yellow Genomes,” Ryan said, glowering while ignoring Atom Cat’s baleful glare. “I hate them so much. Also, why didn’t you use this costume before? You could have cracked the whole conspiracy in minutes!”

“I don’t like this costume,” Wardrobe replied, changing back to her normal clothes. “If I wear it for too long, I develop a craving for cocaine, tobacco, and violins. That’s not good for my health.”

“Ryan, I warned you,” Felix said, infuriated. “I asked you man to man, friend to friend.”

The courier looked into his second favorite cat’s eyes, and decided to tease him some more. “I just want us to become family, Kitten,” the courier said softly. “Is that so much to ask?”

Instead of turning red as Ryan had hoped, Felix answered with a fiendish smile. “Ryan, your adoptive sister,” he spoke with the same teasing tone as the courier, “she’s single, isn’t she?”

When Felix struck back, he hit hard! “I see the kitten is young, but he has claws.”

“I’m just saying, we *could* become a family, Quickie. But if you take, you have to give back too.”

“That’s great!” Wardrobe said, finding twisted joy in the scene. “You marry each other’s sister, and then your kids will have a teen romance! I can see the drama!”

Ryan looked back at the road. “You discovered my only weakness, Kitten. You are a troll worthy of respect.”

“Thank you, now drive,” Felix replied. “If the Meta don’t kick your ass today, I’ll do it myself afterward.”

“Oh, we’re going to Rust Town?” Wardrobe asked with a frown. “I had the feeling we would go there, but Enrique refused to tell us until we arrived.”

“I guess now the cat is out of the bag, we could check our intel,” Ryan said, Felix rolling his eyes. This reminded the courier that he should sneak into Jasmine’s foundry and recover Eugène-Henry after the raid.

Felix brought out his phone, having recorded files on it.

“Adam Fontaine, alias Adam the Ogre, alias the Brooklyn Cannibal,” Atom Cat read the report while showing Wardrobe and the Panda a picture of Hannifat Lecter. “The USA issued an international arrest warrant after he was suspected of murdering four people in Brooklyn, but he escaped to Europe on the Genome Wars’ eve.”

“Wait, he was a cannibalistic serial killer *before* getting his Elixirs?” Ryan asked. Every time he thought Hannifat couldn’t get worse, he was proven wrong.

"Yeah, Adam was a psycho long before he went Psycho. Orange/Violet. He can turn his skin into a highly-resistant carbon alloy, granting him enhanced strength and tank-like resilience; additionally, his stomach has been turned into a pocket dimension where he can store almost anything." Felix paused briefly. "Huh, he has almost the same power as Dad, though way weaker."

"Mars has an armory dimension, right?" Wardrobe asked. "I really like his war god costume. Very classy."

"Except unlike Adam, he has a large range," Felix said gruffly, before quickly changing the subject. This time, he read them the report on Adam's bodyguard. "Frank the Mad, identity unknown. Suffers from schizophrenic delusions where he identifies as a WWII commando, Vietnam veteran, US secret service agent, and an Area 51 super-soldier experiment. However, his testimonies contradict real events, and he becomes aggressive if called out on the inconsistencies. Orange/Red, his body is made of metal and can consume more to grow in size; also absorbs kinetic energy."

Ryan frowned. "He can only consume metal? Not stone or ivory?"

"Only metal," Felix replied, a little confused by the question.
"Why?"

Because of how Frank's power had reacted to Augustus.

Ryan had heard the rumors that Augustus' body was in temporal stasis, which sounded plausible since he could act in the courier's frozen time. However, then he shouldn't age and a tumor wouldn't threaten his life. As for the other possible colors, if Augustus was a White Genome, then his

invulnerability should react differently to powers and normal attacks. Yet it didn't.

The courier remembered the end of his disastrous Augusti Run. Frank the Mad and Augustus had briefly traded blows, and the Psycho's power had automatically reacted. It tried to absorb Lightning Butt, though it failed.

The fact Frank's power reacted at all meant Augustus' body was made of something that registered as metal, albeit one the Psycho couldn't consume easily. This excluded the spatial stasis hypothesis. But then, how could it explain the immunity to the time-stop, and well, everything? Perhaps Lightning Butt had consumed a Yellow Elixir turning him into a Roman deity metal statue?

Yellow or Orange, Ryan thought. The courier had the feeling he had all the pieces of the puzzle, but he needed to assemble them the right way.

He barely listened to the conversation afterward, though much to his amusement, he learned that Psyshock's real name was *Francis Grey* of all things. The group passed the Private Security checkpoint without trouble; either they were the first heroes on the scene, or a few patrols had been warned to let them through.

Instead of driving straight to the Junkyard though, Ryan drove to the north of Rust Town and its industrial district. The plan called for Dynamis to surround the Meta-Gang from all sides, and knowing Psypsy, he must have taken the courier's prank personally. Better to lure the Psychos to an unpopulated area.

"Raid should start in thirty minutes," Atom Cat said while checking the time. Rust Town was eerily silent as they drove, the air suffused with tension. Either Psyshock had

already brainwashed the locals, or they could sense a fight would start soon and stayed home. Old neon lights flickered dangerously as the sun rose in the skies.

No, Ryan realized, a *sun*. Leo Hargraves traveled through the skies like a missile, aiming straight for the Junkyard at a fighter jet's speed.

By then, the courier had reached an abandoned gas station north of the area, vast swathes of concrete covered in oil stains. The place looked like a graveyard, facing a series of abandoned projects and crumbling industrial buildings. A figure stood on one's roof, hands pointed at the Plymouth Fury.

Sarin.

A second after Ryan noticed her, she unleashed a blast of concussed air straight at the car. "It's time, boys and girls!" the driver whistled as his car swerved to avoid Miss Chernobyl's blast. The attack hit the concrete pavement and blasted it to bits, while Ryan kept his car on the move.

Almost immediately, a pack of customized Dynamis dog drones broke through the buildings' doors, having waited in ambush for the group.

"Panda!" Ryan shouted, as his team prepared for battle.
"Show them your training!"

"Yes, Sifu!" The young apprentice opened his door and jumped out of the car, having fully shapeshifted before he hit the road. His bestial form tackled the drones, while Sarin kept bombarding the car from her sniping point.

By now, Hargraves had hit the Junkyard like a cruise missile, but he was only the vanguard. A swarm of helicopters flew

above Rust Town from the west, led by Alphonse Manada's own vehicle. Wyvern, Devilry, and other fliers followed in their wake.

The Meta-Gang's response was swift and brutal. Missiles surged from the Junkyard and demolished some of the helicopters; probably the doing of Psyshock's mech. Immediately afterward, tremors shook all of Rust Town, before turning into a full-blown quake. The weakest buildings collapsed under the strain, forcing Sarin to fly away from her current position. Acidic clouds spread across the skies, threatening to engulf the entire district.

The battle for Rust Town had begun.

Now that he didn't have to dodge Sarin's blasts, Ryan abruptly stopped the car near the gas station. He and his remaining teammates quickly stepped out of it, the whole place smelling of gasoline. With a whistle from the courier, the Plymouth Fury's autopilot took over and drove it to safety.

"Now," Ryan said, as he brought his coil gun and Desert Eagle out of his suit, wielding one in each hand, "who goes first?"

"Me, me!" Wardrobe's suit changed into a cosplay of Frankenstein's Monster. Lightning surged through her body, allowing her to move at an impressive speed. She powered through a hail of gunfire from a Dynamis drone and smashed it to paste with her bare hands.

Less cheerful, Atom Cat grabbed darts and threw them at Sarin. Hazmat Girl blasted them midflight, causing the projectiles to violently detonate and throw her back against a crumbling building. Ryan opened fire on her, trying to open a few holes in her suit.

However, as acidic raindrops fell from the heavens above, Ryan realized he had a date of his own.

A feeling of dread went down his spine, as he pointed his coil gun behind him and pressed the trigger. Acid Rain had teleported behind him, knives in hands, but had to duck out of the way to dodge the courier's own projectile. The coil gun's bullet grazed her cheek and narrowly missed her head, a drop of blood falling on the ground.

"You thief!" she snarled angrily, raising her weapons threateningly. "You bar the gates!"

"You always try to stab me in the back when we meet," Ryan taunted her, having grown almost accustomed to it. "You don't have to be so shy!"

"I'll carve you open, back and front!" Acid Rain snarled as she threw a knife at his head with deadly accuracy. While the courier dodged, Atom Cat attempted to grab the Psycho and blow her into nothingness, but she quickly teleported away before he could close the gap.

Sarin jumped from her observation point and landed on the street, opening fire at Ryan and Atom Cat. The courier quickly stopped time, grabbed his Kitten, and moved them out of the way. Hazmat Girl's blast hit the gas station and detonated whatever was left of the gasoline within in a fiery detonation. The blast tossed Ryan and Atom Cat onto their chests on the ground, while the Panda and Wardrobe were too busy with the drones to assist them.

Sarin prepared to fire another blast, only for an invisible blade to behead her. Her hazmat suit collapsed while rusting gas escaped its confines, and shields of glass formed above the various heroes to protect them from the acid raindrops. This gave Ryan and Felix precious time to rise back up.

“We have to kill Acid Rain,” Shroud warned as he appeared next to Ryan, acid raindrops turning him visible. Soon, the rain threatened to transform into a downpour. “Her power will kill thousands—”

“Left!” Ryan shouted a warning as he sensed Acid Rain’s power activate.

The Psycho teleported back into sight, two submachine guns in hand. She unleashed a hail of gunfire at Shroud and his companions, the Carnival member raising a multilayered barrier of glass to protect the group.

“Open the gates, you thief!” Acid Rain snarled with a maddened face, her projectiles unable to force their way through the barrier. “You won’t keep that place away from me!”

When she ran out of bullets, Shroud reshaped his defense into a volley of deadly shards, while Ryan assisted him with bullets and Atom Cat with explosive darts. Acid Rain tossed the machine guns away and teleported away before any projectile could hit her. The more he observed her lightning speed in action, the more Ryan grew convinced her teleportation ability came with enhanced spatial awareness; the same way his own power provided an enhanced sense of timing.

Explosions shook Rust Town, and Ryan noticed flashes of crimson light coming from the Junkyard. Frank the Mad came into view, now the size of a ten meters tall giant and smashing a transformed Wyvern through whatever buildings hadn’t yet collapsed after the quake.

Kaiju battle!

Ryan would have fanboyed, if his entire team's life wasn't on the line. A shiver went down his spine, as he sensed Acid Rain teleport all around them at blinding speed. In the blink of an eye, Shroud, Ryan, and Atom Cat found themselves surrounded by falling grenades.

Shit!

Ryan froze time to save his allies, grabbing as many grenades as he could and tossing them away before they could explode. But ten seconds were far too few, and while he could spare Felix and himself the worst of the bombardment, two grenades exploded right next to Shroud. The detonation blew the glass manipulator's right arm off and shattered his armor, sending him crashing to the ground.

Immediately, his control of the glass shards faltered and the heroes' rainshields collapsed into dust. Ryan sensed acid raindrops eat at his cashmere suit, much to his chagrin.

Worse, Acid Rain exploited the cooldown to appear right in front of Felix and stab him in the chest with two knives by surprise. The young man collapsed to his back, two knives still embedded in his body.

Though he thought he had grown numb to these things, Ryan panicked. "Felix! Mathias!"

"I'm on it!" Wardrobe broke away from her fight with the drones, leaving the Panda to manage them, and rushed at the wounded.

"Right!" Ryan shouted a warning, Acid Rain teleporting right next to Wardrobe with a gun in hand. Thankfully, Yuki's costume changed into a ghost bedsheet before the

teleporter pressed the trigger, the bullet phasing harmlessly through her head.

He had to distract that bastard. “I’m the one you want, blondie!” Ryan challenged Acid Rain, though she teleported out of his bullets’ path. “I’m leaving for the Purple World and stranding you here!”

The taunt worked, Acid Rain reappearing in front of him and opening fire with her gun. “You selfish punk, you think you can keep it all for yourself?”

Ryan froze time to dodge, before engaging the Psycho in a gunfire version of whac-a-mole. The Panda had smashed the last drone with his bare paws, while Wardrobe had changed her outfit to that of a nurse, dragging the wounded away from the battlefield.

She’s too fast, Ryan thought, as he frantically attempted to hit Acid Rain and failed every time. And unlike Lightning Butt, his projectiles couldn’t change direction mid-flight. He could have brought Paulie’s Facehugger missile, but decided against it. Such a weapon was ‘safe’ to use when the courier fought the Meta solo, but with teammates? The risk of the Psycho purposefully leading the projectile towards an ally was too great to ignore.

This may have been a miscalculation.

Thankfully, Acid Rain ran out of projectiles before he did. In the blink of an eye, she disappeared and reappeared to his left, nearly beheading Ryan with a katana.

“The Ultimate One favors me!” she snarled, forcing the courier to back down to avoid a strike. She didn’t give him any time to aim, or even think of a joke. “It wants me to win!”

“Sifu, I’m coming!” The Panda attempted to flank Acid Rain and save his master, paws raised. “Panda Roll!”

With inhuman speed, Acid Rain dodged the attack and raised her blade to behead the slower animal. Realizing the danger, Ryan abruptly stopped time to force her to disappear, but the second time resumed, the Psycho eviscerated the Panda by surprise, spilling his bowels all over the ground.

However, this gave Ryan a brief time window to aim, and he managed to hit Acid Rain in the stomach with the Desert Eagle. The Psycho vanished before she could collapse, but some blood droplets remained behind.

“Sifu...” the Panda gasped, a hand on his stomach while his bowels spilled all over the pavement.

“Young apprentice!” Unfortunately, before he could even reach the Panda, Acid Rain teleported above Ryan and struck him in the head with a steel pipe. The courier’s world briefly blurred and he dropped his guns, only to get hit in the chest before he could recover his breath.

“Once you’re dead, I can finally go back!” Acid Rain started pummeling him with two steel pipes, one in each hand. She had no style and no skill whatsoever; she didn’t need them. She was pure savagery and speed. Even Ryan’s enhanced sense of timing struggled to keep up the pace, and the acidic raindrops had started burning the skin below his costume. “I can go all the way back! You think you can keep my family away from me? You’re killing me!”

But while the courier couldn’t match her inhuman speed or strength, he more than dwarfed her in sheer skill.

Using a boxing move, Ryan sucker-punched Acid Rain in the stomach, right where his bullet had hit. The Psycho let out a scream of pain, but the courier kept pummeling this weak point, blood tainting her white shirt. She lost her breath, and dropped one of the steel pipes on the ground.

“Sifu!”

Acid Rain looked at her left, as the Panda flanked her. He had shapeshifted back into a human, and as Dr. Tyrano guessed, it had fully healed him.

The Panda lunged at a distracted Acid Rain, fist raised, and shapeshifted in the middle of his attack. Instead of a human punch, the Psycho took a full bear paw to the chest, some ribs breaking with a sickening crack. The blow tossed her backward like a ragdoll, but she teleported away before hitting the pavement.

Ryan sensed her teleport again above the Panda, a knife in hand. She fell upon the beast like a guillotine, but the courier grabbed her wrist before she could hit him and tossed her to the ground with a judo move.

She teleported away again, trying to stab Ryan from the left. This time, slowed down by her wounds, he managed to avoid Acid Rain’s stab and punched her in the face.

“The more I get into a situation, the better at it I become. And now...” Ryan grabbed the steel pipe on the ground. “I got the hang of you, Rain Woman.”

Illustrating his words with action, Ryan hit her in the face, sending teeth flying. The Psycho took a few steps back, while the Panda and his master flanked her from both sides.

"Ah... ah..." Acid Rain panted in exhaustion, searching inside her pocket with a hand and raising her knife at the duo with the other. Blood flowed from her chest and mouth, her wounds taking their toll on her. "I... send me... send me there..."

She raised a grenade at the heroes.

"Send me there!" the Psycho snarled, threatening to detonate the bomb. "Send me there, you son of-"

Boom.

Before Ryan knew what happened, Acid Rain collapsed to the side, blood flowing from the back of her skull. A shadow had risen behind her, a rifle in hand.

"Good grief, poor old Mortimer thought she would never stop teleporting around," Mortimer said, as he reloaded his rifle. "You alright, kid?"

"Sifu, who is this guy?" the Panda asked, a little shocked by the assassin's surprise appearance. "He... he looks like a supervillain."

"Because he is one," Ryan said, while glancing down at Acid Rain's corpse. Considering the downpour started to dissipate, she wouldn't get back up. "You should stop doing that, it's almost vexing."

"Lady Death's got no owner, corpo; only dealers," Mortimer replied with a shrug. "Anyway, you should check on your friends. I think your nurse dragged them behind a pile of concrete."

"Just to be sure, you aren't going to fight us?" Ryan asked. Since Sunshine had made a very public appearance, the

courier worried Augustus had sent the Killer Seven to attack the Carnival and everyone present. Then again, the assassin wouldn't have helped in that case.

"What? No, Fortuna would whine like a baby if poor old Mortimer did that. By the way, you have all my respect for not having strangled her yet. I admire your self-control."

"Then why are you here, my kill-stealing friend?"

Mortimer snorted, before sinking into the pavement. "Miss Livia sends her regards."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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62: Quest Complete

“I’m losing him!” Wardrobe panicked.

It didn’t take long for Ryan and the Panda to locate their allies, who had turned the rubble of a collapsed building into a shelter. Cosplaying as a masked surgeon, Wardrobe had raised an improvised hospital tent from whatever material she could find.

She had managed to stitch up Atom Cat’s stab wounds the best she could, but Felix remained in a state of shock.

Shroud, meanwhile, was losing blood at an alarming rate in spite of her best efforts. Acid Rain’s grenade had not only blown off his right arm, but impaled his thigh with shrapnel.

“Can’t you do CPR?” The Panda asked a stupid question.

“CPR can do almost anything,” Yuki replied, “but not give someone their blood back!”

“But there has to be something you can do!” the Panda panicked. “You could turn into *Christ!*”

“I can’t solve every problem by cosplaying as Jesus!” Wardrobe protested, quickly losing her nerve as her efforts failed. “Who can heal any wounds? I can’t think of the right persona!”

“I think I can help,” Ryan said while searching inside his suit for a knife and wires, to perform improvised surgery. However, even an optimist like him thought saving Shroud

would be a long shot. The vigilante had lost an incredible amount of blood; if he wasn't a Genome, he would have perished already.

The courier blamed himself for this mess. Ryan was used to fighting alone with no regard for collateral damage; he didn't do so well in a team, where he had to avoid friendly fire. The courier should have trained with his team before the battle, learned to coordinate better with the group.

Right before Ryan could start a last-chance surgery, he sensed an odd feeling down his spine; for a second, he thought Acid Rain had survived the headshot, only for a violet tear in space to open near the group. The Carnival teleporter Ace and someone dressed as a plague doctor stepped through, immediately flinching at their wounded teammate's sight.

"Move away," the plague doctor ordered, whom Ryan identified as the Carnival member Dr. Stitch. He opened a black bag he carried around his waist, to reveal an assortment of tools and strange organic devices. He quickly grabbed one of them, a horrifying white tumor with tendrils sticking out.

"W-why do you carry that on yourself?" the Panda asked, resisting the urge to vomit.

"My expertise is in viruses and bacterias," Stitch replied, the tumor wriggling within his fingers. He quickly applied it to Shroud's wound, the tumor grafting itself to the vigilante's flesh. "My bacteria colony will help repair—"

"No time for mad science exposition," Ace cut in, before focusing on Ryan and the Panda. "You two, report."

"Sarin has been blown away, and Acid Rain's skull blown out," Ryan said. He couldn't resist making terrible jokes when stressed.

"Good, Wyvern and Devilry are handling Frank for now, so we can assume the perimeter is secured," the teleporter said with a nod, while Stitch and Wardrobe cooperated to save Shroud. "You can still fight, right? Then you come with me. Stitch and Wardrobe will go to the infirmary and treat the wounded."

"We should take Wardrobe," Ryan protested. "I mean, Whalie is as big as a whale, and Yuki's Japanese. She's his natural predator."

Ace seemed somewhat amused by his joke, but remained serious. "We have many fighters, but not enough people to treat the wounded."

"How are things going?" The courier asked, while Ace opened a portal towards what looked like a Dynamis hospital camp. Wardrobe and Stitch quickly dragged the wounded through the rift.

"Worse than expected, but still good," the teleporter replied, closing the portal and opening another. "Leo and Mr. Wave blew up the Meta's mech, but Adam barricaded himself inside his underground base. We're fighting his remaining men door-to-door, and Psyshock is throwing brainwashed suicide bombers at us."

As Ryan had expected, failing to kill the brainjacker caused casualties to increase exponentially. Most importantly, he could read between the lines.

Sunshine couldn't destroy Mechron's base without killing the Meta-Gang's hostages, and now, they had to clean the

bunker up with an old-fashioned assault. Which meant Dynamis had learned of its existence.

If the enormous casualties wouldn't force Ryan to restart, this change would. Though they had provided valuable help during this loop, the courier didn't trust Dynamis with Mechron's technology. Too many corrupt elements in their ranks.

Ace opened a new portal, Ryan and the Panda passing through. In the blink of an eye, they left the toxic open atmosphere of Rust Town for the suffocating claustrophobia of Mechron's bunker.

Ryan didn't recognize the room, some kind of industrial warehouse with metal arms and cables dangling from the ceiling. Assembly lines dedicated to robot manufacturing had been repurposed into improvised barricades; the air smelled of ozone, and ominous red lights pulsed from the ceiling. The corpses of both Psychos and normal humans lay on the ground, torn apart by heavy weaponry.

Fallout and armored members of the Private Security had formed a line, bombarding the Meta-Gang's barricades. To Ryan's surprise, none of their enemies were mutated; they were all dog drones, brainwashed technicians, and enslaved denizens of Rust Town. Most of them carried Dynamis-made firearms, but a few wielded strange weapons with Mechron's logo on them.

Most nightmarishly, all of them wore suicide belts, and the Meta-Gang had tied up people *to* their barricades. Not only did Psyshock throw brainwashed slaves at Dynamis, he dared use his few remaining sane prisoners as human shields.

“I’m just saying, that’s why I’m against automation,” a Private Security member in power armor declared, as he blasted a hound drone with a laser minigun. “First they steal our jobs, and then they try to steal our lives!”

“Yeah, and I’m paid three thousand a month when these things cost a quarter of a million to make,” another guard added, using a flamethrower to torch Psyshock’s brainwashed cannon fodder. “That’s the real economic inequality!”

“Shut up and keep fighting,” Alphonse grunted, raising a hand at a technician threatening him with a rocket launcher. His metal fingers shone with nuclear energy, before blasting the attacker apart with a gamma ray.

While the Panda smashed through a barricade with a roar and Ace fled through another portal, Ryan approached Dynamis’ VP. “How are things going, Atomic Cancer?”

“The brainwashed thralls blow themselves up if we approach them, and they use their free-willed captives as shields,” Alphonse grunted, completely ignoring Ryan’s nickname for him. “Disgusting.”

“We have to take down Psyshock.” Ryan turned around, noticing Enrique Manada behind them. The corpo kept one knee against the ground, surrounded by thin, nearly undetectable vines spreading through the bunker’s corridors. “He is the backbone of their defense. If he falls, the rest will follow.”

“Greenhand?” Ryan asked, quickly lowering his head to dodge a stray bullet. “You’re here too?”

“Surprised, Romano?” the grass manipulator replied dryly, fingers on the vines. Unlike Ryan’s, the corpo’s cashmere

suit remained fully intact.

"I thought you were more of a pencil-pusher, bravely commanding from the rear."

"You thought wrong." Enrique turned to face his brother. "Al, I've located Adam and Psyshock. Second room to the right. I suspect it is the base's command center."

This worried Ryan greatly. If the Meta already managed to access the bunker's mainframe, it meant they might access the *Bahamut*. Knowing Big Fat Adam, he would press the trigger as soon as he could.

"I will carve a straight path," Alphonse said, his metal hands shining with radioactive energy. "Brother, you guide us. Quicksave, cover our rear."

"Does anybody have a spare gun?" Ryan asked, having lost his own during the fight with Acid Rain.

"Take mine," Enrique said, searching inside his suit and tossing a Beretta at Ryan. The courier claimed it as his own, though with a clear lack of enthusiasm. "What, Romano? Not good enough for you?"

"I'm disappointed it's not gold-plated."

"You have strange stereotypes about my social position, Romano."

"Enough prattle," Alphonse said, before putting his hands against the right wall. The heat increased as he channeled energy through the metal, melting it away. Within seconds, Fallout had shaped a hole big enough to allow the trio to progress.

After a few minutes of improvised digging, the group melted their way into a large room shielded by a colossal blast door. As Enrique had guessed, the area looked like the bunker's central mainframe; large screens covered the walls, while ten colossal server towers served as pillars holding up the ceiling. A single blast door served as the entrance, red lights flickering as tremors shook the complex.

The most noteworthy part of the area, though, was the gargantuan biomechanical construct at the center. The machine, easily the size of an elephant, reminded Ryan of a human brain, albeit completely blue and outfitted with thick wires, alien implants, and electrical pylons protruding outward from the cerebrum. A mass of nerve-like wires connected the structure to a metal pedestal supporting the biomechanical brain, while a crimson force field shielded it from the outside world.

Psyshock had intermingled with the machine like a bloodsucking flea, his tendrils intertwining with the nerves. Hannifat Lecter stood in front of the force field, his skin covered in an alloy carbon and his eyes glancing at the screens above.

"You know, Psyshock, I think it's time to go Old Testament on them," Hannifat Lecter ordered his second-in-command, as he watched Dynamis' forces break past their defenses on the screens. "Bomb Sodom and Gomorrah back to the stone age."

"I can't, I need more time to crack the firewalls—" Psyshock froze, as he and his commander noticed the newcomers. His cold voice turned furious when he saw Ryan. "Little Cesare... you and your sister ruined everything."

"Thanks," Ryan said, pointing a gun at the brainjacker while Alphonse raised his hands at Adam. "It's always a pleasure."

"Fontaine, Grey, time to surrender." Even with all the chaos happening around them, Blackthorn remained icily polite.
"Release the hostages, you're surrounded. There is no escape."

"Perhaps," Big Fat Adam replied with a false smile, before revealing an item hidden behind his back, "but I got one last trick up my sleeve."

A bottle full of a black, swirling liquid, with Mechron's symbol stamped on some kind of colored glass. An Elixir, as black as a starless night.

A Mechron-made Elixir.

"You know what they say!" Adam said, raising the bottle and preparing to throw it at the group like a Psycho-making grenade. "If you can't beat them, join them!"

Ryan froze time, calmly raised his gun, and shot the bottle while it was still in Adam's hand.

Much to his shock, the liquid moved in the stopped time. Like a living blob of black oil, it surrounded the Ogre's fingers, melting the carbon armor and seeping through his skin.

When the clock struck again, Big Fat Adam let out a scream of pain, as the ooze swallowed his arm and progressed through his body. "Sir!" Psyshock shouted in alarm, as the Black Elixir slowly covered all of its host's body like a mantle of darkness.

Fallout immediately unleashed a blast of energy at the mutating Psycho with enough power to vaporize him. Adam raised his blackened hand, and an invisible force canceled the atomic ray. It simply stopped existing past a certain point.

Hannifat Lecter wished he had died though. His screams turned deafening, as the Black Elixir melted his skin and flesh, leaving only blackened bones and organs. The Psycho's body couldn't assimilate the Black Elixir, and it devoured him alive.

"What is this sorcery..." Blackthorn muttered to himself, horrified by the sight. Meanwhile, his more ruthless elder brother increased the output of his blasts, to no avail; the Black Elixir's power trumped his own.

Adam's skeleton shambled, the black ooze manipulating the bones like a puppet. The undead's body degraded at an accelerated pace, organs dissolving... and yet it could still form words.

"You... you... open..." The voice didn't belong to Adam.
"You..."

The corpse raised a melted finger at an astonished Ryan, black ooze leaking from the emptied eye sockets. Blackthorn quickly forced the courier behind him, as if to shield him. Aw, he cared!

"You... you... must open..."

Adam was no longer in control.

The *Elixir* was.

"Open... the gate... send me... send me... to the Black... it is..." The voice turned from pleading to agonizing, as Adam's jaw and throat started to dissolve. "This dimension... is not... send me... back..."

Afterward, even Hannifat Lecter's enhanced body could no longer resist the degradation. The words turned incomprehensible, as the corpse collapsed into a puddle of black oil; having consumed its own host, the sinister substance dissipated into nothingness. Of the Meta-Gang's leader, not even dust remained.

"Well, it was one hell of a slimming cure!" Ryan joked, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

After a brief moment of silence, Fallout attacked Psyshock next. One of his nuclear rays hit the force field, unleashing a pulse of energy that shorted out half the screens. Yet the defensive barrier held.

In response, parts of the ceiling opened to reveal automated gatling turrets, all of them opening fire on the group. Ryan briefly stopped time and pushed Enrique out of the firing line, sparing him a volley of bullets to the face. Fallout's armor shrugged off the projectiles, while Dynamis' VP increased his power's output; he unleashed a sustained ray of focused nuclear energy at the forcefield, until Ryan had to cover his eyes to protect himself from the light. An unstoppable force fighting an immovable object.

The unstoppable force won.

The forcefield shorted out, and Psyshock barely had the time to leap out of the biomechanical database before Fallout hit it. The blast vaporized the giant brain, organic and mechanical parts alike, and continued its way through the wall behind. Steel and glass both melted before this

almighty power. All screens and lights turned black, leaving only Alphonse Manada's radiance to provide lighting, and the turrets abruptly stopped firing.

With the dexterity of a spider on the run, Psyshock used his tendrils to jump across the room and attempted to bypass the trio. Ryan froze time and shot the tentacles supporting his weight, causing the Psycho to crash on the ground before he could escape.

"Didn't you hear, Psypsy?" Ryan taunted him, shooting a tentacle before Psyshock could smash his skull with it.
"Today, we have fried squid on the menu!"

The rose on Enrique Manada's suit grew thorn tendrils, until the plant had become a floral squid as large as Psypsy himself. Its roots restrained the Psycho, while the flower unleashed a burst of colored smoke right in his face. Psyshock struggled for a moment, before his whole body went limp.

"I knew Dynamis' perfumes were low-quality, but not to the point of causing someone to faint," Ryan mused out loud.

"I used a genetically altered brand of aconitine," Blackthorn replied, which Ryan identified as a plant-based neurotoxin. "Since Psyshock needs to die to activate his body-transfer, hopefully keeping him in a state of unconsciousness should disable it."

"And since Psypsy is almost entirely made of nerves, it's doubly effective against him, even with his enhanced biology!" Ryan had to admit the idea was brilliant. Enough to shamelessly copy it in a later run.

"We do our research too, Romano," Blackthorn said dryly.
"You do not have a monopoly on intelligence."

"Fallout to all teams," Alphonse Manada spoke through an intercom in his suit. "Adam is dead, and Psyshock is neutralized. Move to secure the site."

"Any idea what that was?" Ryan asked, glancing at the spot where Big Fat Adam had perished. It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy, but the entity had singled the courier out among the group, much to his confusion.

Blackthorn shook his head in disgust, and if the courier wasn't mistaken, a hint of remorse. "It was our early days all over again."

"We had worse results," Fallout replied while receiving a response through his suit's intercom. Unlike his sibling, he couldn't care less. "The drones and robots have deactivated, but Psyshock's thralls are still fighting. I must order a full wipeout."

Much to Ryan's surprise, Blackthorn immediately protested. "Al, they are not our enemies, they are victims."

"I do not like it either, but the lives of our soldiers take priority," Alphonse replied coldly. "And the thralls fight to the death."

"Guys, I can stop time," Ryan declared, both Manada siblings looking at him. "I can disarm and incapacitate people safely."

"Yes, Al, let us try to capture as many as we can first," Enrique asked his sibling. "We may be able to cure them later."

"You and your sentimentality..." Alphonse grunted, before barking orders through his intercom. "You have ten minutes. No more."

"You heard him, Romano."

"Yeah, Greenhand," Ryan said, as they rushed through the hole in the wall. "Frankly, I'm a bit surprised. I thought you wouldn't care about casualties."

"We can't always make the world a better place," Enrique replied with a shrug, "but we have to try anyway."

In the end, Ryan saved as many people as he could. He disabled suicide belts in the frozen time, disarmed more fighters than he could count, saved dozens of lives.

But he couldn't save them all.

When the courier emerged from the bunker through the half-melted blast doors, the battle had ended in a decisive Carnival/Dynamis victory. Troopers had secured the Junkyard, forming a defensive perimeter and establishing sniper nests atop the trash walls. The fact Leo Hargraves had torched half the area didn't bother them.

Since he couldn't see the giant Kaiju battle and the ground had stopped shaking, Ryan assumed both Frank the Mad and the Land had been defeated. Most of the Meta-Gang's cannon fodder had been restrained, bound either by iron chains or cocoons made of countless paper sheets bound together; either the Carnival or Dynamis had a paper-manipulator on their payroll. Ace opened portals left and right to let troops through, the Panda proudly carried a drugged-out Psyshock in his arms to containment, and Leo Hargraves circled above Rust Town to survey the area. The message couldn't be clearer.

The Meta-Gang was no more.

Ryan should have felt happy about it, but the raid left him with a bittersweet feeling. Yes, he had fulfilled his promise to Jasmine and ensured Hannifat Lecter wouldn't fire an orbital laser at New Rome. But Dynamis now knew about the bunker, and Augustus would learn of the Carnival's presence soon enough. One problem had been solved, but so many others remained.

And one quickly called the courier.

"Romano." Enrique emerged from the bunker, his rose back on his suit. "We have business ahead of us."

"Is it about the Beretta?" Ryan asked. Frankly, he would return it on principle. The courier only accepted the best, and that gun wasn't all that great.

"You may keep it for now," the corpo replied with a scoff. "This is not over yet."

"Stragglers to deal with? Can I run them over? I love doing that."

"Leave the mooks to our troops." Enrique raised his eyes, as Leo the Living Sun floated down to their position.
"Hargraves."

"Enrique, Quicksave," Sunshine greeted both of them as he landed on the ground. "I assume the bunker is secured?"

"Yes, it is," Enrique replied, looking at the Living Sun's head.
"You knew about it."

Sunshine remained silent a split second, but was too much of a shining knight to lie. "Yes."

“As I thought,” Enrique replied, not truly surprised. “I suppose you worried that word of this place might reach my father or Augustus. Wise, but troubling.”

“You know this technology is dangerous. It ended the world once.”

“In the right hands—”

“There are no right hands, Enrique,” Leonard interrupted Blackthorn, and Ryan was sorely tempted to agree.
“Mechron’s legacy has to go.”

“Perhaps. In any case, we can decide what to do with this bunker like civilized people, *after* we deal with the problem at hand.” Enrique crossed his arms. “What about you?”

“I neutralized the Land with Origami’s help,” the Living Sun replied. “And I’m confident we captured or killed almost every Psycho active in Rust Town. The only ones unaccounted for are Incognito and Gemini. They must have used their powers to slip amidst your troops and escape.”

“I do not worry about these two. Without Adam to provide direction, they will be nothing more than a nuisance. We’ll catch them eventually.”

“Then we should be done,” Leonard said, arms crossed. “Or are we?”

“There is still one last source of concern,” Enrique said as a noise echoed from above. Ryan raised his eyes, noticing a helicopter preparing to land. “We found the evidence we needed, and Alphonse wants to arrest our father before he can organize a counter-coup. We’re going to the family manor, and we will clean up this mess once and for all.”

"I will go there first," Sunshine said, preparing to take flight.
"Make sure he does not get away."

"Do not engage and wait for us," Blackthorn commanded, Leo flying away with a nod. Once the Living Sun was gone, Enrique turned to look at Ryan. "Considering you planned all of this, I thought you might wish to be present as well."

"Plan?" Ryan chuckled. "I don't plan, I adapt."

"You truly take me for a fool, Romano," Enrique replied with a frosty tone, "but suit yourself. I warned you back then, once the day is done, we *will* have a talk."

"I will drive to our destination," Ryan said with a shrug. "No offense, but my ride is classier than yours."

"Move quickly then," Enrique said, straightening his suit as his helicopter blew dust in all directions. "History won't wait for you."

If only he knew.

Without wasting any more words, Ryan walked out of the Junkyard and whistled as loudly as he could. His Plymouth Fury self-drove to the trash labyrinth's entrance, spooking a few Dynamis troopers, but Ryan prevented them from committing suicide by raising his hand in peace.

The second he sat on the driver's seat, Ryan turned on the Chronoradio. "Shortie? Shortie?"

For a short while, Ryan worried the answer would never come, but it did. "*Riri? Riri, can you hear me?*"

"Thank God, you're alive!" The courier let out a sigh of pure relief before looking at the skies. Enrique's helicopter flew

east of Rust Town after Leo Hargraves. “Where are you? Are you alright? Is everything okay?”

“*I'm... I'm fine,*” she replied while the courier followed Enrique's helicopter. *“Under the sea. I fled through the tunnels when Dynamis invaded the lower levels. And I...”*

Ryan's fingers tensed on the driving wheel.

“*I have it,*” Len declared, a quiet sense of triumph in her voice, *“I have the braintech.”*

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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63: End of Disc One

Ryan had to give it to Hector Manada. In spite of being far richer than Augustus, he didn't show it.

The CEO of Dynamis lived in a three-floor manor of yellow stones within walking distance of his company's HQ, north of New Rome. The property was big, but nothing compared to Mount Augustus; the architectural style reminded Ryan of South America's 19th century properties, though Hector had also gathered a sizable collection of mesoamerican artifacts in his garden. Statues of Aztec gods lined the path to the house, like a private guard. And of course, the property crawled with Private Security guards with top-of-the-line weaponry.

When Ryan arrived, Sunshine and Enrique's helicopter had already landed in the garden. Security guards checked on the courier, but let him pass unmolested; apparently, the siblings had forewarned them.

Alphonse Manada had joined his brother, both backed by an elite security team. Leonard Hargraves had landed on the grass, though he somehow didn't set it on fire even while in his sun form. Even Ryan had taken the time to change himself back to his old costume, Acid Rain having savaged the cashmere suit. One didn't confront a final boss without looking nice.

But the scene quickly disappointed Ryan.

Hector Manada wasn't raising a submachine gun to die in a blaze of glory, Scarface-style. He didn't look worried about the urban warfare happening a few districts away from his house. In fact, he didn't seem troubled at all.

For Hector Manada was gardening.

"I guess this is a family thing," Ryan said snidely, as the corporate mastermind tended to an ugly rose bush. The floral arrangements were terrible, the work of an amateur.

"Sons." A pudgy man with gray hair and a face resembling Pablo Escobar's, Hector Manada had traded the business suit for casual white clothes and a straw hat. If Ryan hadn't seen his face before, he might have mistaken him for a mere employee. "I didn't expect you. Especially not in such..."

His eyes wandered to Leo Hargraves. "Shining company."

"Surprised, Father?" Alphonse asked, his tone lacking any familial warmth whatsoever.

"Mr. Manada," Leo said, always polite. "It has been a while."

"Not long enough, I must say," the CEO replied, before finally noticing Quicksave. "And who might you be?"

"Hi, I'm Quicksave," Ryan presented himself. "I'm the guy who ruined all of your evil plans, but don't tell anyone."

"My evil plans?" the CEO answered with a forced smile. "I do not understand."

"I think you do, Father," Enrique said, as he straightened his tie. "We destroyed the Meta-Gang one hour ago."

"An action which I did not authorize," the CEO replied with a frown, before forgetting Ryan's existence and glancing at Alphonse instead. "Nor do I remember recalling you to New Rome either."

"You forfeited any authority over me when you betrayed us all, Father," Alphonse replied. "You wanted to stay in power so much, you would rather clone yourself than let us inherit?"

"Clone myself?" Hector Manada feigned ignorance.

"We have Psyshock in custody, father," Enrique said. "He admitted everything. From your secret deal with Adam the Ogre to your mind-transferring project."

Ryan knew it was probably a bluff, considering the timeline of events, but it worked like a charm. "Is that so?" Hector asked, glancing at the soldiers following his sons. The courier could almost see the gears turning in the CEO's head, as he weighed his options.

"We have recordings, captured technicians, proof of monetary transactions," Enrique continued. "Did you know the Meta-Gang had unearthed a Mechron base beneath Rust Town?"

Though he quickly corrected his expression, the CEO's brief look of genuine surprise told Ryan that no, he didn't. As the courier guessed, the Meta-Gang had planned to betray him from the start; take Dynamis' Elixirs, until they could overthrow the company with Mechron's weaponry.

"So you were a traitor *and* a fool," Alphonse Manada said, with a grunt of disgust. He had noticed the look of surprise too. "You despise us so much?"

"Can you blame me, Alphonse?" Hector replied with a sneer. "Sometimes I truly wonder if you came from my loins. You and Augustus would have turned Italy into a bloody battlefield if I hadn't sent you away."

"So instead you sent Psychos to wage war for you?" Enrique asked, shaking his head. "I still remember what you told me when I welcomed Felix Veran into our fold. '*Don't rock the boat.*'"

"Augustus' influence needs to be constrained, but we can't afford a direct confrontation," Hector snapped back. "We have no means of getting rid of him permanently."

"We do," Alphonse said with confidence. "The Gravity Gun."

"Your obsession with miracle weapons will be your undoing," Hector lambasted his son. "If yours fails, we will have an invincible madman with nothing left to lose on our hands."

"Augustus will never be satisfied," Leonard Hargraves interrupted the conversation. "He wants nothing less than total dominion over Europe."

"His delusions of grandeur mean nothing," Hector scoffed. "You don't know him like I do, Hargraves."

Sunshine scoffed. "I have been sparring with Augustus long before you came to Italy, Mr. Manada. I know him well."

"No, Hargraves, because if you did, you would have grasped a simple truth. With all his power, Augustus could have established himself as a god-king, written laws, but what does he do? Peddle drugs, launder money, corrupt existing infrastructures. At the end of the day, Augustus is just a gangster with cancer, and that's all he will ever be." The

CEO shook his head in frustration. “Don’t you see that to win, we only have to outlast him? Let nature do its work.”

“And let countless suffer in the meantime?” Sunshine replied. “Assuming the next Augusti generation isn’t made of the same cloth?”

“Well, to be honest—” Ryan raised his hand to speak on behalf of Livia.

“The adults are talking, Quicksave,” Alphonse interrupted him.

“Then why are you here?” Ryan replied with a mocking tone, being far, *far* older than the VP. The nuclear-powered cyborg glared at him, but the courier wasn’t intimidated in the slightest.

“Enough,” Enrique said, a hint of frustration in his voice.

“And are you truly so different, Father?” Alphonse asked mockingly.

Hector’s expression turned into one of pure disgust. “You dare compare me to Augustus, my son? I am no saint, I confess, but I do not go around murdering people who never crossed me.”

“You raised us to believe Dynamis had a mission. To rebuild a better civilization, based on free-market, the rule of law, and individual freedom.” Alphonse’s voice turned bitter.

“One that wouldn’t repeat the mistakes of the pre-war nations. Yet all you have done is repeat the patterns of the past, and maintain a status quo unsuitable for mankind. One that benefits Augustus.”

Ryan realized he had met Fallout's type elsewhere before. Disappointed idealists.

And as he listened to the man's speech, he couldn't help but be reminded of Livia's own situation. Like her, the Manada were children disagreeing with their father's rotten, rigid vision of the world. Unlike Livia though, who couldn't escape Augustus' grasp, the Manada siblings had decided to rebel.

Would it work though?

"That unsuitable status quo, as you call it, is the only one we have," Hector replied angrily. "I've played with the cards dealt to me."

"Whatever your reasons, you conspired with the Meta-Gang, provided them with company resources, and, willingly or not, nearly allowed Adam the Ogre to get his hands on Mechron technology," Enrique pointed out. "We can't let that slide, and neither will the Board."

"I am the Board," Hector replied with a frown.

Ryan couldn't resist. "Not yet!"

"Alphonse and I have enough shares to force a vote, and you know the Board and other corporations will vote for your retirement," Enrique said. "We have too much proof, and they can't be seen cooperating with Psychos. Our image and reputation is our armor, but they are also our weaknesses."

"And most importantly, we have the army," Alphonse stated the obvious. "Do not think you can prevent what's coming."

Hector's scowl deepened. "You would harm me, my son? Your own father?"

"After what you did? What you planned to do?" Alphonse asked, lowering his head to lock eyes with his father. "Yes, I would."

Hector held the glare for a moment, before looking at his other child. "Et tu, Enrique? You know what your brother will do if he inherits my post?"

"Yes," Enrique replied, "but dabbling with Psychos won't be one of them."

"Well said, Brother," Alphonse added. "Enrique will be my vice-president, and we will clean up your mess. We will reforge Dynamis into what it should have been. A beacon that will rebuild civilization, one without Psychos, and certainly without Augustus. You may have failed the dream, Father, but we won't."

"Come with us, Mr. Manada." Sunshine briefly ramped up the heat around him. "I promise you will not be harmed, and be entitled to a fair hearing."

"Take the graceful way out, Father," Enrique pleaded, before glancing at Alphonse. "Or else... it will have to be the other way."

For a long, agonizing moment, Dynamis' CEO said nothing. He slowly glanced at his sons, then at Leonard, and finally to the Private Security members backing them up. Whether out of fear of Alphonse Manada, disgust, or opportunism, none of them moved to shield their employer.

It seemed that in Dynamis, power shifted swiftly.

Eventually, although Ryan had prepared himself for a fight, Hector Manada offered his hands in surrender. "You doom us all, fools."

"It is a new dawn for Dynamis, Father," Alphonse Manada declared. He sounded quite pleased with himself. "One long overdue."

"After me, the flood," Hector Manada prophesied with quiet dignity, as soldiers grabbed him by the arms.

When Ryan glanced at the towering Alphonse, who watched his father being carried away, the time-traveler realized he might have put someone *far* more dangerous in charge of Dynamis. "That's it?" the courier asked Enrique. "After everything he did, you just talk it out?"

"You expected a hail of gunfire perhaps?" Il Migliore's manager replied dryly. "Unlike Augustus, we do not shoot all of our problems. My father is many things, but a fanatic isn't one of them. He would rather go into forced retirement than die for nothing."

"So... what, you're going to imprison him on a private island, Napoleon-style?"

"Pretty much. If all goes as expected, his assets will be confiscated, he will be surrounded by Alphonse's people, and he will be kept away from any form of power whatsoever." Enrique looked at Ryan with disapproval. "This is what we adults call diplomacy, Romano. It is boring, but it usually spares us a great deal of bloodshed."

It... it was good. Ryan had expected the change of power to end in violence, because that was all he ever knew.

"If only more villains were reasonable," Leo Hargraves lamented. "So, it's over. Now, we must decide what to do with the bunker."

“Not yet, Hargraves,” Alphonse said. “There will be a transition of power, and I wish you to assist us with it. I will pay you for your service.”

“We do not work for money, Fallout.”

“You misunderstand me,” the cyborg replied with a hint of amusement. “Our goals are the same. We both want Augustus dragged off from his throne. Now that my father has been dealt with, it is time we focus on the true enemy.”

The Living Sun crossed his arms, the opportunity too great to pass up. “I’m listening.”

“Not here.” Alphonse glared at Ryan next. “And I have had enough of your blatant disrespect, Quicksave. You did your job, but that’s it. Fuck off.”

“Love you too, Nagasaki,” Ryan replied and prepared to leave, having done what he had set out to do. Besides, staying in Alphonse Manada’s company for too long would probably give him cancer.

“Ryan.” Unlike Fallout, Sunshine bowed respectfully to the time-traveler. “There is something I must ask of you—”

“Sorry, Sunshine, I won’t join your circus,” Ryan cut him off. “Too much bad blood.”

“I expected as much,” Leo said with a sigh. “Still, on behalf of the Carnival, no, all of New Rome... thank you. Most people won’t know it, but your actions saved countless lives. History books may not mention you, but we will not forget.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” Ryan replied with a shrug. “But... thanks.”

That shiny paladin was too noble to dislike.

While Ryan would have left the Manada property by himself, Enrique personally decided to escort him to his car. “This isn’t the end, is it?” the courier asked Blackthorn. It didn’t feel like an ending at all. “It’s just the beginning.”

“Don Hector wasn’t wrong. This is the calm before the storm, Romano. My brother is in charge, and he is not as... subtle as our father. If Augustus didn’t know we cooperated with Hargraves already, he will learn it soon. And even if it suffered heavy damage, that base below Rust Town contains a treasure trove of technology, and we must decide what to do with it.”

“I guess overthrowing your father was the easy part,” Ryan mused, his mood turning from curious to slightly depressed. “I don’t know how to feel about it.”

“I’ve seen your reaction to my brother’s speech,” Enrique said. “You seemed... troubled.”

Sharp. “When I tried to overthrow my ‘fatherly figure’s’ hold on me, it ended with his death,” Ryan replied, his thoughts turning to Len and Bloodstream. “And even dead, his influence still holds a friend back. So when I looked at you two... I can’t help but wonder what could have been.”

Enrique said nothing, and for that, the courier was thankful. However, when Ryan put a hand on his Plymouth Fury’s door though, Blackthorn moved right in front of him. “You are not leaving yet,” the new Dynamis VP declared. “I told you we would have a talk, Romano. We’re having it now.”

“What is there to say? Though if it’s for gardening lessons, I guess you could make an appointment.”

"We have plenty of things to discuss," Enrique said while crossing his arms. "I know your sister was in the bunker during the attack. One of the Meta-Gang's members was found trapped in a bubble, and Psyshock's living quarters were ransacked. And most curious of all, our men couldn't find the brain-scanning technology our father lent him."

"I guess you should hire better people to do your ground work, Mr. Nepotism."

"I wondered what your stakes were in this, but now I understand," Enrique said, ignoring the jab. "You were after this tech from the start. This entire exercise was a distraction."

"Not really." Ryan's thoughts turned to Jasmine. "If I told you the Meta-Gang caused the permanent death of someone I cared for, would you believe it?"

"Permanent death?" Enrique noticed the odd wording, but Ryan didn't enlighten him. "People also saw you at a dinner with Livia Augusti and Fortuna Veran, and you apparently brought the latter home. Witnesses said the scene looked... intimate."

"I'm putting an end to the rumors right here," Ryan said, immediately sensing the danger. "Fortuna Veran isn't my girlfriend. I have standards."

"I doubt that," Enrique replied dryly. "The Panda also told me a person matching the Augusti assassin Mortimer's description came to your rescue against Acid Rain. You must understand that I am... *suspicious* about your true allegiances."

The courier shrugged. "I've got no allegiances to any faction. I'm a wild card."

"Then you don't believe in anything? I thought you were a better man than that."

"Aw, did you care?"

Much to Ryan's surprise, it seemed like Blackthorn *did*. "For all your faults, Romano, you are a competent Genome with great potential. I would not have given you the time of a day if I didn't believe it. You are a powerful fighter, a skilled tactician, and incredibly resourceful. I shudder to think what you could achieve, if you could look beyond childish self-gratification."

Ryan wasn't certain if it was meant as a compliment or criticism. Probably both. "I could return the sentiment," he said. "I expected you to be a lot more cutthroat, but... you seem rather honorable and well-meaning below the surface. You could do a lot more for the world outside of Dynamis."

"You are wrong," Enrique replied. "By themselves, humans can only do so much. We conquered the planet by sacrificing our individuality for collective strength. Though I do not share his methods, I agree with my brother's mission statement. Dynamis may not always change the world for the better, but it can."

"After seeing Rust Town, I somewhat doubt it," Ryan replied, before smiling behind his mask. "But I'm an optimist. People can change."

Even if there would be unintended consequences, the Meta-Gang's defeat had put the time-traveler in a cheerful mood. After all the darkness of the previous failed run, this loop had proved he could turn things around.

"I do not trust you, Romano. You are unpredictable, loyal to none, and probably the most dangerous individual I have

met short of Augustus.”

“Thank you, Greenhand.”

Enrique put his hands in his pants’ pockets, the perfect picture of corporate confidence. “However, you probably prevented a disaster and saved Dynamis, in a roundabout way. So... while I hate to use the term, I will look the other way this once. You are no longer welcome in Il Migliore though; I cannot look past your ties to the Augusti. At least Felix burned that bridge.”

“It’s fine, I took the job to do one thing, and it is finished.” Ryan pointed a finger at the manager. “I’m keeping all my merchandise rights though. Don’t you dare sell Quicksave miniatures.”

“I will do my best to forget you even exist.”

“I return the feeling. I’m still going to visit my team in the hospital though. Spoiler warning, if you try to stop me, you will fail.”

“Here’s what will happen, Romano. I will allow you to say your goodbyes to your teammates unmolested, and I will wire you a generous compensation for your service.”

Blackthorn locked eyes with Ryan through their respective masks. “But afterward, you and your sister will leave.”

“Leave for where?”

“Anywhere, far, far away from New Rome,” Enrique said. “He will be too busy with the transition in the next few days to do so, but once his position is secure, my brother will hunt you two down. I know him. Your allegiances are too dubious, your ties to the Augusti too suspicious, and your sister too important.”

Ryan understood the Manada might want him gone now he had outlived his usefulness, but Shortie? Why were they so interested in her? “What is it you’re not telling me, Black Gardener?”

Enrique remained silent for a few seconds, his body so still the courier thought he might have turned into a statue. “I let Len Sabino go once,” he finally admitted. “But I cannot protect her forever. Alphonse knows her base’s location, and he can access it if he so chooses. Take everything you can carry with you, and go.”

Ryan’s tone turned dangerous. “Is that a threat, Greenhand? Because as the Meta-Gang can attest, I’m very effective at killing weeds. Your brother won’t be the first nuclear device I made go kaboom.”

“No, Romano, it is not a threat. It is a warning. Strange as it may sound to you, I harbor no ill-will towards you or your family.” Blackthorn raised his sleeve to look at the time on his watch. “I must go now. Though I have the feeling we will meet again.”

And Ryan felt it would be under circumstances far less friendly.

Ryan was halfway to the harbor, when he received a call on his cellphone.

“Livia?” he asked upon answering.

“*Ryan,*” she answered on the other end of the line, a hint of worry breaking through her composure. “*How is Felix?*”

“Alive, but wounded,” the courier answered. Livia sighed with relief on the other end of the line. “He will recover, but

they don't allow visits yet. I've tried."

"It's... it's fine, I'm glad he is alive at all. I did not inform his sisters yet. I..." Livia gulped, *"I dreaded a different answer."*

"I wouldn't have let him die," Ryan replied. Or rather, he would have reloaded afterward. "Thanks for sending Mr. Passe-Muraille. He didn't help much, but it's the thought that counts. I guess you listened to me."

"About how we weren't enemies?" Livia briefly paused before continuing. *"I hope I won't regret trusting you. You do work with my family's nemesis."*

"Well, if it can reassure you, I've just been fired."

She immediately seized the opportunity. *"Perhaps you would consider employment with us then? The Killer Seven are missing a Violet member."*

"Sorry princess, I'll stay a free-spirit for a while," Ryan answered, as he reached the harbor. "I'm not sure if my presence is needed anymore. I get the feeling Dynamis will hit your drug factory even without my influence."

"My father's reaction will be different if Dynamis does it, rather than an unknown party. But we can discuss that when the situation becomes clearer. When do you think Felix can receive visits?"

"I'll be honest. I don't know, and I'm not sure you will even be able to visit Atom Kitten at all."

Her tone harshened. *"You think Dynamis will prevent us access?"*

"No, I think *Felix* won't want to see you or his family." No answer. "Hey, you can always try. If I'm right, I can carry a message if you want."

The mafia princess had fallen completely silent. Though he had only said the truth, Ryan regretted his bluntness. For a second, he had forgotten how emotionally fragile the woman truly was, beneath her icy facade. "Livia?"

"Have you ever loved someone?" She asked out of the blue. *"Not a fling, but true love? To the point that even though you know it's over, you still cling to any hope you can turn things around?"*

"I'm really not the best counsel on the matter," Ryan said sadly, as he noticed Len's bathysphere near the old piers. "I came to New Rome chasing after a ghost."

"So you do understand," she said with a sad chuckle, before gathering her breath. *"You lived for centuries. Don't you have wisdom to offer?"*

"Things can change," the courier admitted, before considering it thoughtfully. "But sometimes, it's better to learn to let go. You'll hurt yourself otherwise. Some wounds never heal, and you have to live with them."

Livia seemed to see the wisdom in his words, but she didn't appreciate it. "*Thanks for your answers, Ryan.*"

"You're welcome," the time-traveler replied, before falling silent. His thoughts turned to the meeting with Dynamis.

"*Ryan?*"

"The Manadas overthrew their father," Ryan said out of nowhere. "They... talked it out and forced him into

retirement. Now they intend to reform Dynamis into something better than before.”

He didn’t even need to elaborate. Livia could probably see the parallels with her own situation, with a major difference. “*My father won’t surrender with dignity, Ryan.*”

No, probably not. Her regretful tone was heart-wrenching.

“I will get my cat back,” Ryan said, changing the subject. “The furry kind.”

“*I think I can arrange that,*” she replied with a chuckle, though it was mirthless. “*Goodbye Ryan.*”

“Goodbye princess,” he said before hanging up on her and parking his car.

Enrique and Alphonse had managed to free themselves from their father’s hold. So why was it that Ryan couldn’t help Len and Livia do the same? Bloodstream was long dead, and Augustus, for all his overwhelming power, couldn’t overcome a mere tumor.

“No,” the courier muttered to himself. “I can’t let them win.”

He couldn’t let things end this way. Not again.

Never again.

He banished these thoughts and stepped out of his car. Len waited for him on the waterfront in full armor, two bathyspheres floating in the sea nearby; she carried a device in her hands. A gray metal helmet with pylons protruding from the front, and with a plug at the back. Dynamis hadn’t printed its logo on it, probably to avoid being tied to the Meta-Gang should the device be found.

"It's underwhelming," Ryan said as he rejoined his friend. "I expected something more complex."

"It's only a small part," Len replied with a genuine smile. The mere sight caused Ryan to forget all his worries for a brief instant. "I moved the rest to your place."

Your place.

Such simple words, and yet so powerful. "So, you were serious?" Ryan asked. "You're okay with me moving to your undersea paradise?"

"Yes I am," she said with a nod, her smile faltering. "It's over, right? You don't... you don't owe Dynamis anything anymore."

"No, and I've been fired anyway." Ryan would miss the condo, and he would steal a cashmere suit as a parting gift. "I'm officially homeless again."

Len considered her words for a second, but they came swiftly and firmly. "No, Riri. No, you are not homeless."

Ryan's heart skipped a beat for a moment, and he had to look away at the sea to hide his unease. It... felt great, to know Len wanted him back into her life. Even if their teenage relationship had long perished, she had Ryan's back, and he had hers.

And with that tech, maybe his old lonely days would finally come to an end. "You think it can work?" Ryan asked for confirmation, praying not to be disappointed again.

"We will need time, but... maybe," Len said with a smile, perhaps the first time she had shown some optimism in a long, long time. "We... we will need to extract the

chronoradio from your car though. I have, uh, a bigger submarine. To bring it under the sea.”

An undersea garage. Marvelous.

“Frankly, if this loop doesn’t end with my Plymouth Fury getting an underwater mode, I will be sorely disappointed,” Ryan mused, before a darker thought crossed his mind. “But we might have to move to another location. Dynamis won’t leave your base alone for long.”

“They’re not going to let us be?” Her sweet face turned into an angry scowl. “I should have known. They’ll never be satisfied.”

“I don’t get why they’re so interested in you though,” the courier admitted. “Yeah, you attacked a factory, but that’s peanuts compared to the Augusti and the Meta-Gang.”

“And in the end, it didn’t cost them anything.” Len sighed, as if reliving her failed youthful rebellion. “I don’t know, Riri... I think what they can’t control, they destroy.”

No. Ryan sensed something bigger was at work, and it bothered him. “What did they do when they captured you the first time? What questions did they ask?”

“I don’t... I don’t remember much,” she admitted. “The first thing they did was to force me through a DNA test and take a blood sample. Afterward... nothing noteworthy. A sales pitch.”

“A blood sample, you said?” Why a blood sample of all things?

And then it clicked.

Memories flooded Ryan's brain, and he suddenly saw them under a new light.

"Lab Sixty-Six."

"Enrique was supposed to oversee the whole Elixir operation instead of Il Migliore. He visited the lab for two hours, and he immediately asked for a transfer afterward."

"If you ask me, there's something really shifty about the knockoffs; even Augustus' scientists never found a way to copy them."

"Dynamis keeps the Underdiver under close surveillance."

"You let her go?"

"It was our early days all over again."

"I couldn't make Elixirs. What I did was synthesize a specific resource that mimicked the properties of a true Elixir."

"Such a shame, I would have loved to compare samples from various Genome relatives."

"Various Genome relatives."

"Genome relatives."

Relatives.

"Len?" Ryan asked, a terrible doubt creeping in his mind.
"When did Dynamis start producing their knockoff Elixirs?
Do you know the exact date?"

"Uh... I'm not sure, I think... I think they had a few in development, but they only started flooding the market three years ago or so..."

Shortie shut her mouth, and Ryan instantly regretted asking that question. She was smart. She had figured it out too.

“It’s impossible,” the courier said immediately. “It can’t be that.”

“But it would fit!” Len protested, genuine emotion breaking through her monotone voice. “It would explain it all. It—”

“Len, your father is dead.” The Genius flinched, as Ryan’s tone turned deadly serious. “Sunshine burnt him to ashes. I saw it with my own two eyes. He’s gone.”

“But if one of his clones...” Len locked eyes with her old friend. “You know it’s possible, Riri. You just don’t want it to be.”

No, he didn’t. Ryan wanted to think that nightmare was over. That Bloodstream was dead and buried, and could no longer harm either of his children, adopted or otherwise.

But Len had never truly woken up.

“Riri, I... I’ve trusted you, even after everything we... I’ve... I’ve *killed* for you, Riri. I trusted your words, I gave you a second chance. I... I’m willing to start fresh.” She gathered her breath, struggling to find her words. “I just... I just want to get closure, Riri. I want to know. If it’s... if we’re wrong, we can move on. But we need this. We need to check.”

“But if our hunch is right?” Ryan asked. “What will you do? What will we do?”

Len bit her lower lips, and looked at her feet without a word.

“I just...” Ryan gathered his breath, as he thought about his next words. “I just want you to be free, Len. I want you to be

free of him. To exorcise his ghost, so he no longer haunts you. You..."

He paused. "Say it," Len said, without looking up.

"You remind me of a songbird in a cage, Len," Ryan admitted. "You could be smiling and shine like the sun. You could fly away. The cage is open. But you're afraid he will close the door as you try to escape. No one will take away your freedom... but you're still afraid."

Len looked back at her friend once more. "Ryan," she said with an iron gaze. Not Riri. "It's exactly why I won't budge on this. I need to know. I... I *need* to know. To get closure."

Ryan wanted to argue further, but he could see in her gaze it was pointless. She wouldn't change her mind.

And the worst part? While he hated to admit it... he needed to be sure too.

"Lab Sixty-Six," the courier muttered to himself.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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64: Past Fragment: A Death in Monaco

Ryan Romano died countless times, by his hand or that of someone else.

But there was one death that trumped them all. The death that made him stop caring, and taught him to enjoy life. The perfect death, that no one should return from.

This is the story of this death.

This is the story of Monaco.

- *April 1st 2017, France, Village of La Turbie.*

The sun was falling behind the horizon, and the city of Monaco shone from below.

Standing at the edge of the *Tête de Chien* promontory, his trusty motorcycle and travel bag nearby, Ryan observed his target carefully. It had been five years since he had left Italy, and now was the moment of truth.

Well, technically it had been three months, but he lived through them again, and again, and over again. He had toured the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, looking for any sign of Len and her submarine. He knew they had planned to go to America before... before the *separation*, but she

couldn't have crossed the Atlantic Ocean. She *had* to have stopped somewhere closer. Somewhere within his reach.

However, Ryan was starting to lose hope. He had toured Greece, Spain, France, every place he could think of. He had wandered the post-Wars wasteland, and came up short. And if she had left Europe completely, relocated underwater or on a distant island, he might as well look for a needle in a haystack.

There was only one place around the Mediterranean Sea that Ryan hadn't visited yet. The country everyone warned him against. The place nobody returned from.

"Monaco," Ryan said, as he observed the coastal city. It looked... nice, for a lack of a better term. And it bothered him a great deal.

First of all, the microstate was still standing. That alone was unusual. Monaco had once been one of Europe's most luxurious coastal resorts, a den for gamblers and millionaires; and somehow, it still looked the part after the apocalypse. It seemed the bombs, robots, and nano-plagues had stopped at the border.

The buildings and houses had been spared from any degradation, and yet the time-traveler didn't see anybody in the streets. Boats and yachts floated in the sea, empty cars formed long lines on the driveways, and Ryan couldn't hear any noise. Not even the song of birds.

"I know I'm tempting fate by saying this," Ryan muttered to himself, as he usually did to alleviate his loneliness, "but I've got a bad feeling about this."

The time-traveler saved this very instant, just in case. Many had gone to Monaco, searching for supplies, Elixirs, or a safe

haven; but none returned.

But none of these people could time-travel either.

"Well, guess this is the last chance, Shortie," Ryan said, as he climbed on his motorcycle and drove towards the city. "If you aren't in the place nobody returns from..."

Well, he could always try to cross the ocean and reach America, if it still existed. But most likely, Ryan would have to face the obvious.

That Len was gone.

The time-traveler had made his presence obvious, sent signals through radio towers and whatever communication channels he could find. If she hadn't contacted him yet, then she was either unable to respond or dead.

And Ryan didn't know what to do, if he gave up on his friend. His quest to find Len had guided him through so many restarts, and he had no other purpose in life. No cause to dedicate himself to. The time-traveler had been feeling adrift ever since Bloodstream's death, and not even his power could counter his gnawing sense of solitude. Without Len, his existence had no meaning.

Ryan chased away these thoughts, climbed on his motorcycle, and followed the path down towards Monaco. As he reached the city's official frontier, the time-traveler noticed a badly-painted sign on the side of the road.

"The armies of Andorra shall never conquer our great nation!" Ryan read out loud. Wasn't Andorra another microstate?

The apocalypse truly caused all the weirdos to crawl out of hiding.

Ryan drove through the streets of Monaco, and much to his surprise, nothing terrible happened. He didn't instantly fall dead, and no crazy Psycho ambushed him. It was almost disappointing.

However, the time-traveler sensed the pervading tension in the air. The streets were clean, the cars were all parked in the right spot, and the streetlights somehow worked perfectly; yet Ryan knew the city needed to import electricity from the French Republic, which had long collapsed. When he peeked through houses' windows, he found them empty.

Ryan made his way to Monaco's most well-known landmark, the *Place du Casino*. The famous Monte Carlo casino stood strong and proud, its 19th century magnificence preserved from the apocalypse. The clock above the entrance remained stuck at twelve, though the lights remained functional. The fountain in front of the entrance worked too, surrounded by a lush lane and floral arrangements.

"Is there someone here?" Ryan asked, tempting fate. Only a heavy silence answered.

Well, maybe he should look—

The plaza vanished in a flash of yellow and violet.

In the blink of an eye, Ryan found himself inside a luxurious marble hallway. Paintings adorned the walls, chandeliers provided some light, and the room led towards large wooden doors.

After a brief moment of surprise, Ryan looked around, but found himself back against a wall with only his bag of supplies. Had he been teleported somewhere else?

Ryan glanced at the paintings, most of them drawn in a surrealist style reminding him of René Magritte's. One painting, '*The Genesis*', showed two gloved hands opening an Alchemist Wonderbox. Another, '*The Triumph of Monaco*', represented an army of golden men overrunning Mechron's robots.

Perplexed, Ryan grabbed his supply bag and walked through the hallway until he reached the doors at the end. He noticed a sign above them, exquisitely painted with the brightest colors possible.

'MONTE CARLO GRAND OPENING!'

However, next to that sign, Ryan noticed words crudely carved into the marble wall.

'*DON'T TRUST THE CLOWNS THEY WILL EAT YOUR HEART.*'

Ryan continued reading, finding more 'advice' carved into the stone.

"*Follow the arrows to the suites before it goes dark.*" A second sentence was written next to it. Whoever carved it had done so in a hurry: '*DON'T USE THE STAIRS TAKE THE ELEVATOR.*'

Ryan lowered his gaze, noticing arrows carved on the floor. More and more confused, he opened the wooden doors and walked into the next room.

Much to his surprise, Ryan entered a replica of the Monte Carlo casino; or at least, what little he had seen from pre-

Wars pictures. His steps echoed in a vast lobby supported by pillars, the ground replaced with a giant roulette table with one meter-wide tokens. Candelabras dangling from the ceiling provided the light, and the art decoration was the peak of 19th century luxury. Ryan glanced at the windows, but all of them were walled off with marble.

“Hello, dear guest!” a voice said at Ryan’s left, someone having snuck up on him.

“Ah!” Ryan took a step back, and instantly activated his time-stop. Or so he tried. He felt his ability strain against an invisible force for a brief second, but time refused to stop.

Panicking, Ryan drew a gun hidden beneath his clothes, only to quickly realize his mistake.

The creature in front of him looked like a human, but only superficially so. Its skin was unnaturally white, and most importantly, a clownish mask made of solid gold served as its face. It wore a croupier’s costume, including a bowtie, an old jacket, and gloves.

“Welcome to Monaco!” said the clown with a cheerful voice, the gold mask moving unnaturally with each new word. Its eyes and mouth oozed darkness. “The greatest country on Earth! How may I assist you?”

Ryan tried to stop time again, but something prevented his ability from activating. Damn it, did this place interfere with his power? In that case, if Ryan died within these walls...

“Where am I, Pennywise?” the time-traveler asked, keeping his gun pointed at the clown creature.

“In Monaco, of course! The greatest, most prosperous nation on Earth, by the divine providence of His Highness Jean-

Stéphanie!"

"Oh, a new guest!" Ryan heard a new voice, as another clown walked into the lobby, albeit with a face of bronze instead of gold. Like its fellow clown, it wore a croupier outfit and carried a silver plate under its arm. "Welcome! Can I offer you a drink?"

What—what the hell? Did Ryan enter a Stephen King novel by accident? "Jean-Stéphanie?" he repeated, unsure which of these two clowns to shoot first.

"His Highness Jean-Stéphanie the First, Sovereign Prince of Monaco, Conqueror of Liechtenstein and San Marino!" The golden clown waved a hand at a marble statue near the pillars, representing a strange creature in a flattering position. The figure vaguely reminded Ryan of a man in a suit with a fedora, but with elongated arms and distorted facial features. "His Highness rose from humble birth to ascend to the throne of Monaco in 2005, by virtue of everyone else being dead!"

It said that with such cheerfulness too...

"Ever since, he has bravely defended Monaco against the Andorran hordes trying to destroy our great nation," the bronze clown continued, before pointing his hand in one direction east of the lobby. "Now, I can show you our five-stars restaurant, if you wish for a warm meal? Or perhaps you would prefer to enjoy a game of roulette?"

"Why are the windows walled off?" Ryan asked, as he glanced at the ground. The arrows carved on the floor pointed west. "Where's the exit?"

"Why would you want to leave Monaco?" the bronze clown asked with a chuckle. "Why would *anyone* want to leave

Monaco, the greatest nation on Earth?"

"I do," Ryan asked, more and more uncomfortable.

"But you are a guest, you have been invited," the servant continued, its mask morphing into a disturbing smile. While he sounded innocent and cheerful, something in his tone made Ryan shiver. "We are at your service during opening hours. We are always there for you, dear guest!"

The more he stayed in their company, the more uneasy Ryan grew. Their kindness felt fake and forced. "I'll come back later," he promised, following the arrows.

"But we'll be closed soon," the golden clown said, as he and the other servant followed Ryan. Their posture had changed slightly, turning threatening. "We will be closed very, very soon."

"You stay away!" Ryan raised a gun at them, before noticing other clowns making their way into the lobby. While all of them dressed like croupiers, their masks were made of bronze, silver or gold. Though they maintained a respectable distance, they still stalked the time-traveler like a smiling pack of wolves. "I'm not afraid of clowns!"

"We only want to help you, dear guest!" the bronze clown said. He tried to sound reassuring, but it just came off as creepy. "We exist to serve man."

Ryan remembered the message at the entrance, and suddenly wondered if the sentence had a double meaning. He followed the arrow trail and eventually reached an open elevator in between two stairways. The wanderer briefly looked at them, only to notice bear traps and wires placed on the staircases. With no other way out, he walked inside the elevator while threatening the clowns with his weapon.

The Genome noticed a sign saying ‘HERE’ right next to the fourth-floor button, and smashed it as hard as he could. The door closed in front of Ryan, as a dozen masked creatures glared at him in eerie silence.

“*Dear guests.*” Ryan froze, as he heard a male voice come from the elevator’s loudspeaker. “*We must inform you that due to a national emergency, the Monte Carlo Casino will close early! But I assure you that, as long as His Highness Jean-Stéphanie protects us, the armies of Andorra shall never destroy our principality! Long live Monaco!*”

What the hell was this place?

When the elevator reached the fourth floor with a ‘ding’ sound, the lights had gone out; and the elevator’s doors closed the second Ryan exited it. He also heard a sound coming from below, someone having triggered the wire trap.

Sensing that things would get ugly very soon, Ryan grabbed his cellphone and activated the torchlight option. The area looked like a hallway leading to various hotel suites, though the walls and doors had been reinforced with steel plates. Only one room, numbered 44, seemed to have light coming from the other side, so Ryan quickly knocked on its door.

“Hey!” he shouted as loud as he could, though nobody answered. “Is somebody there? Hey!”

Ding!

Ryan looked at the elevator as its doors opened, half a dozen clowns emerging from it. This time, they didn’t invite him politely, or even say a word.

Instead, they each carried silver forks and knives in hands, and napkins around their necks.

"And that's why children don't like clowns anymore!" Ryan opened fire with his gun, while trying to stop time once more.

Not only did his power fail to activate, but a silver clown took a bullet to the face without slowing down.

The suite's doors opened, and someone stepped out. To Ryan's relief, though, his savior was a normal human, albeit one built like Conan the Barbarian. His savior wore some kind of scavenged outfit composed of an American football player's helmet and pads, reinforced with pieces of medieval armor.

And most importantly, he carried a shotgun.

"I knew I heard something!" The man spoke in French, clocking his shotgun. The face beneath the helmet was wrinkled, the eyes an icy blue. "Move out!"

Ryan immediately stepped out of his savior's way, as he fired the shotgun. The shot blasted a bronze clown apart, the creature leaking a white liquid rather than blood. However, the others quickly pushed the corpse out of the way and rushed at the humans with hungry looks.

"Go, go, go!" the man shouted at the time-traveler, and both bravely fled into the suite. The armored figure quickly closed the door behind them and locked the door, Ryan hearing a loud thump on the other side. The malevolent croupiers started screaming beyond the metal door, pummeling it with all their strength, but it held.

"One day, before arthritis gets to me, I'm going to go kamikaze on your ass!" the armored man shouted through the door. "I'll shoot you all up like Tony Montana, and kill every last one of you!"

He then turned to Ryan. "You alright, kid?"

"I think so..." Ryan gathered his breath and looked around. As implied from the outside, the area was a luxurious hotel suite, big enough to welcome an entire family. Decorated in the 19th French century style, the place had walls white as snow, and windows walled off with marble. The suite included various amenities, from a sofa with TV, to a library and even a bar counter.

Most strangely, Ryan also noticed a hole dug into one of the walls, a pickaxe nearby.

"You sound Italian, are you a *rita?*" the armored asked, switching to Italian. He completely ignored the noises coming from outside and moved to the counter, leaving his shotgun within arm's reach. He removed his helmet, revealing his utter baldness; Ryan would peg him around sixty, maybe a bit more. "You've wandered far away from your country, macaroni. What's your name?"

"Ryan, you French cheese," the traveler replied gruffly.
"Ryan Romano."

"Name's Simon. I'm the sheriff of Suitestown." The man said while bringing out two glasses and a bottle of Brandy.
"Which date is it outside? Gotta check."

"First of April, 2017," Ryan replied with a frown.

The man let out a heavy sigh. "Fuck, twelve years, man. Twelve years trapped in this place. Is the planet still an irradiated dump?"

"Yeah, but where are we?" Ryan asked, demanding answers.
"Is this the Monte Carlo?"

"I would say Hell, but you're not that lucky. You're in Monaco. The *real* Monaco, that nobody comes back from." An alarm echoed in the room, and Simon looked beneath the counter to grab a landline phone. "Yeah, Martine?"

Though he didn't understand the conversation. Ryan heard a woman's voice on the other side of the line.

"Yeah, yeah, a new guy arrived and the croupiers followed him. Yeah, he's safe. Don't worry." Simon looked at Ryan dead in the eyes. "You've got weapons in your bag?"

"Uh, three guns, bullets, medical supplies, food, and water..."

"Good. Gonna ask you to share. No selfish freeloaders here." Simon then focused on the phone. "Yeah Martine, we'll meet tomorrow. Take care."

"You said you were the sheriff of *Suitestown*?" Ryan pointed out after Simon hung up, carefully accepting the glass. He noticed a book at the edge of the counter, '*The Myth of Sisyphus*' by Albert Camus.

"We're about forty people spread all over the fourth floor," the man explained. "I'm keeping the elevator border secure, maintaining the stairs traps. If we force the croupiers to use the elevator, it creates a bottleneck. Makes them manageable."

"Have you seen anyone called Len?" Ryan asked, finding a ray of hope in this insane nightmare. "Len Sabino. Black hair, blue eyes, Marxist-Leninist. She must have arrived here one year ago."

"Ain't seen any commies yet, and I've been here for a while. Might be dead though. People like you, who arrive during

the opening hours, they're the lucky ones. Those who arrive at a bad time, well..." Simon gestured at the door. "They get eaten."

So Len was either dead, or not in this place. Ryan prayed for the latter. "Are there—"

"There's no other sanctuary, and no exit either," Simon said bluntly. "The suites are the only safe zones. Something keeps them out, but only if the door is locked. We'll find you a suite of your own."

The man gave Ryan a fiendish smirk.

"You're going to stay here for a while, *p'tit rital.*"

Damn it.

Ten hours.

The clowns' assault lasted for ten hours. They screamed and hit the door without any rest. When the lights returned in the hallway though, the attack stopped abruptly. The clowns calmed themselves and returned to the lower floor; as it turned out, they only turned hostile during 'closed hours.'

The next day, Simon introduced Ryan to the community's mayor Martine, a twenty-eight year old blonde living four rooms ahead of the elevator border. She quickly gave him a rundown of the situation.

Everyone in the town had the same story. They came to Monaco, either unaware of the danger, or underestimating it, and ended up teleported into the entrance hallway. Simon had been here the longest, a few months after the Genome Wars started.

Nobody else had powers, and Ryan's own time-stop didn't work in that strange place. Well, he still sensed his ability activating, but an opposing force canceled it at the last minute. When he learned more information about this place, the time-traveler eventually realized why.

The Monte Carlo Casino was a pocket dimension.

Or at least, that was Ryan's best guess. Besides the suite's floor, every room was a variant of eight others; a kitchen-restaurant, a giant roulette table, a lobby, a slot machines room, a retail shop, a card game arena, a stocking area, and a theater. Each room led to another, never in the same configuration, forming a giant maze with only the elevator and the 'entrance hallway' as the landmarks. According to the explorers' estimation, the area covered at least eight square kilometers, four times the size of Monaco itself. And they kept discovering new rooms.

It reminded Ryan of a dungeon crawl video game, with computer-generated rooms. Except it was a lot less amusing than he remembered.

At least the coffee and restaurants restocked regularly, though nobody knew how it worked. Someone once placed a camera in a kitchen to record the phenomenon, and the food and water magically appeared during the 'closed hours.'

Ryan wasn't certain if his save point still worked. There was only one way to find out, and he wasn't in a hurry to try the noose checkout. He had died a dozen times, and each experience had been harrowing so far. Many had told him death was a peaceful end, but they clearly never died before.

The community was divided into groups, each with a specific task; from explorers mapping the maze, to gatherers looking for food. Since he was one of the few experienced with firearms, Ryan quickly became Simon's deputy, with his own suite right next to the elevator.

Right now, the time-traveler was escorting Martine's group as they scavenged food. And he regretted it.

"Dear guest, I hope you have a happy time in Monaco, the greatest nation on Earth!" a silver clown told Ryan, presenting him with a plate full of exquisite shrimps and salmon toasts. "May I offer you these gifts from our chef?"

"Screw off," Ryan replied, threatening the croupier with a gun. Martine, less categorical, swiped all the toasts away and put it in a bag.

The clowns were completely friendly during opening hours, which in Ryan's mind, made them even creepier. They switched from false affability to murderous hunger eerily fast, and they were frighteningly good at sneaking up on people.

Worst, the Monte Carlo Casino often 'closed' early, at the whims of whatever force controlled the loudspeakers. The first time it happened, with only five minutes to return to the suites, Ryan thought his last hour had come. If he hadn't made a mad dash at the elevator, he would have certainly perished.

A voice echoed through the loudspeakers. For a moment Ryan dreaded it might announce an emergency closing, but it was just the usual nonsense. *"Today is a great day for Monaco! Our soldiers won a great victory against the duke of Luxembourg! The blood of our enemies shall paint our yachts!"*

'Monaco' had been at war with Lichtenstein, Luxembourg, Andorra, San Marino, but never the same one each day.

"*Rise, Monaco, rise!*" the voice continued. "*Long live Jean-Stéphanie!*"

"I'm not even sure he exists," Martine told Ryan, "nobody's ever seen him, not even the clowns."

"Because His Highness is beyond our comprehension!" one of the creatures interjected, only to be ignored. "*Long live Jean-Stéphanie!*"

"Could be a Psycho," Ryan said as the group finished its scavenging and returned to the elevator. If it interfered with his power, then it was probably a Violet. "Though I don't get why nobody came after me."

"Perhaps his power sustains him," Martine offered, as they returned to the suites' floor. "Any progress with your radio?"

"Nope." Some of the books the group managed to scavenge included manuals or pre-Wars technology magazines. Ryan thought he could perhaps create a radio powerful enough to call for a rescue.

It was a fool's hope, but until someone found an exit, it was all the group had.

"Wanna watch a movie tonight?" Martine offered him. "I found a cassette of *La Grande Vadrouille* the other day. It's not high comedy, but it helps pass time."

"Maybe another day," Ryan replied, stopping in front of Simon's room. "Gotta check on the old man."

"I just don't get why he keeps digging," the mayor sighed. "I guess he's occupying himself the best way he can."

Ryan shrugged and unlocked Simon's door. As the deputy, he had a double of everyone's keys.

After closing the door behind him, Ryan made his way to the hole in the wall, activated a torchlight, and walked inside. It took him more than an hour, but he finally heard the sound of a pickaxe hitting stone. Simon was busy digging with a torchlight strapped to his helmet.

"Hi, Simon," Ryan announced his presence, though the sheriff didn't stop. "We've got shrimp for tonight."

"Ugh, I would kill for a hamburger," the man complained, hitting the wall with his pickaxe. "How long has it been since you joined us, *p'tit rital?*"

"Six months."

"Six months... which means two more until they change the menu. They do that each time on Christmas." The old man let out a sigh. "You know, there was this guy, who had a puppy dog. He thought it was cute, so he kept sending me pictures. Every time I looked at the furred thing, it kept barking at me. It barked, and barked, and barked. It was annoying like you wouldn't believe. Every time it got on my nerves, I wondered... how does he taste?"

"The guy?" Ryan asked, a bit uncomfortable with the discussion.

"The puppy," Simon said. "And one day... I couldn't resist. There wasn't much meat, but it tasted good. Like a Christmas gift I offered myself."

"I'm not sure I understand where this is going..."

"God put us on Earth for a reason, *p'tit rital*," Simon said while making a short pause. "Mine was to eat puppies. When I look at these rabid clowns outside, they all look like puppies to me."

Ryan suddenly realized that years trapped inside a hotel suite did wonders for a man's sanity. The wanderer dreaded to imagine how he would look ten years from now. "How long is your tunnel now?"

"Two kilometers, *p'tit rital*."

"Two kilometers," Ryan repeated. How had the whole thing not collapsed on him yet? "Your tunnel is *two kilometers* long now."

"I have enough energy for ten more."

"I'm just saying, I don't think there's an exit this way." Though Ryan hadn't given up on finding one, he had the intuition this insane dimension expanded endlessly. "I don't get why you keep digging."

The older man looked into Ryan's eyes. "Have you ever read '*The Myth of Sisyphus*'?"

"No, but I probably will, since you pitch it to me all the time."

"In it, Camus presents the fate of Sisyphus, forced to roll a boulder for all eternity. A purely meaningless task. But when he finally realizes that it's futile, and he stops struggling against his fate, he is truly free. He has accepted his situation, and through acceptance, found happiness."

"So you... what, you think we'll never escape?" Ryan asked with a disgusted frown. "That all our efforts are for naught?"

"Yes, our efforts are futile. But I accepted them as meaningless, so I'm at peace with myself. You though, *p'tit rita?* You still think you'll get out, and the more you fail, the more frustrated you become."

"There's someone waiting for me outside," Ryan pointed out, remembering Len.

"I don't think so," Simon replied with a shrug. "But suit yourself. I'm just telling you the secret of happiness, but I can't force it on you. What I'm saying is, when you're confronted with meaningless absurdity, you've just got to roll with it. Like the boulder."

"That's ridiculous."

"One day, you will realize the boulder isn't your enemy," Simon shrugged. "It's your friend."

"What happens if, through some miracle, you reach an end," Ryan said. "But instead of an exit, your tunnel leads to another suite? How would you react?"

"I'll find a new wall," Simon replied with a bright smile, as he raised his pickaxe again, "and dig another hole."

Ryan opened his mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. "The boulder is your friend?" he asked with a frown.

"The boulder is your *only* friend."

It was December 2035 in Suitestown, and little had changed except the menu.

Nobody had entered the maze for years, probably because people finally wised up to the danger of Monaco. Or perhaps their mysterious abductor had died, and his dimension kept working without him. Whatever the case, with no fresh blood, the community's numbers had started to dwindle. Once nearly fifty at their peak, they were now half that number. Some had been eaten by the clowns, while others... just gave up.

Simon ended up committing harakiri yesterday, as he promised he would. He went out one night to die like a man, a cigar in the mouth, a bottle of vodka in his left hand, and his shotgun in the right. In the end, the croupiers didn't kill him, though many of them died trying.

Instead, the old sheriff's heart had failed him, unable to handle the stress of battle.

The creatures hadn't eaten the body, though Ryan wasn't sure if it was because Simon scared them even in death or out of twisted respect. The villagers burnt the corpse and buried the bones beneath the bar counter he loved so much, and Ryan had taken over as Suitestown's sheriff. He even inherited Simon's suite.

And now...

Ryan faced the tunnel, wondering what to do with it. Simon boasted he had reached the five kilometers mark before perishing, and would have probably continued had his body not failed him. He even left his pickaxe right next to the entrance; by now it had grown rugged from overuse, and could hardly dig anymore.

And yet...

"The boulder is your friend, huh," Ryan muttered to himself, as he grabbed the pickaxe.

It was December 2101 in Suitestown, and Ryan was the last man in Monaco.

He rested on his bed, a pile of food within arms' reach, scribbling his life's memoir inside a journal. Though nobody new arrived in decades, he wanted to leave any help he could in case someone ended up trapped in Monaco.

Over the century, the wanderer had explored the Monte Carlo Casino farther than anyone, but learned little more. The maze truly was infinite, as far as he could tell. None of the systems needed electricity to work, the landline phones linking the rooms functioning even while cut off from one another. There was no central communication system to carry orders through loudspeakers, no birthplace for the staff.

This place made no sense. It was a conceptual space, with no logic but the maker's will. It had to be a Yellow Genome's doing, but Ryan could never confirm it.

He had tried everything, from radios to bombs. He had blown up the entrance hallway, dissected the clowns, and even attempted bizarre occult rituals when all else failed. Nothing worked. There was only one way to escape this place, and Ryan had the feeling it would happen soon.

Two decades ago, when there were only five of them left with most too old to survive without help, the survivors summoned a meeting. All of them decided to take the bullet checkout option, except Ryan.

He had died too many times already to want to hurry it up.

A clown knocked on his suite's door, interrupting his work. "Dear guest, perhaps you would enjoy a game of baccarat downstairs? We are organizing a tournament just for you!"

"No thanks," Ryan rasped, refusing to leave his bed. They waited at the door day and night, those assholes. They waited for him to die like hungry hyenas stalking an old lion. But the time-traveler refused to perish out of sheer spite.

As a Genome, inherently better than humans, Ryan had aged gracefully. While his body showed wrinkles, he kept the vigor of a middle-aged man even while past a century old.

And then, Ryan's health suddenly started deteriorating one year ago. Perhaps his Elixir-enhanced body came with an expiration date, or it was just the accumulated toll of living so long without natural light, fresh air, or company. Thirty days ago, the Genome woke up only to realize he couldn't move far from his bed without collapsing. Thankfully, he had accumulated a food and water reserve just for this occasion.

Ryan slightly regretted not going on a suicide run like Simon when he had the chance. At least he would deny his jailers any satisfaction in his own way.

His old eyes wandered to the edge of his room, and the tunnel beyond. He had almost reached the fifteen kilometers mark when his body finally failed him, and it would remain one of his last regrets.

But most of all, Ryan regretted never finding Len. Never knowing what happened to her. He had learned a great many things over the years, devouring any source of knowledge he could find, sharpening his fighting skills, but he never discovered how the world continued beyond these walls.

He would die with unfinished business. That was the most ignominious part.

But... well, it had been a life at least. He had defeated Bloodstream, and made sure he would never kill anyone again. Ryan hadn't done everything he could have done, but he tried. Maybe it was an old man's last attempt at comforting his guilty conscience, but... as he closed his eyes for the last time, the wanderer thought he had found the acceptance Simon preached to him so long ago.

Accepting his fate didn't bring him happiness.

But it brought him closure.

And so, Ryan slept.

And he woke up again, facing a bright light.

"What is..." The wanderer raised his hand, the overwhelming radiance too much for him. It burned his eyes with its brilliance, and that strange force brushing against his cheeks.

Was it... wind?

When Ryan acclimated to the light, he realized he was facing the sun. His hand was no longer wrinkled, his legs could still carry him, and he felt young again. So very young, so very strong. He breathed fresh air again, for the first time in almost a century.

As he looked down, and observed Monaco from above, it didn't take Ryan long to realize where he was.

It was the same stone promontory where he last saved, almost a century ago.

“But I... but I died. I died in Monaco, and my power...” Did the pocket dimension prevent the time-stop, but not the save point? And yet, the way he perished... It couldn’t be mistaken for anything else. Ryan knew it deep within his bones.

Old age.

Ryan Romano had died of old age.

And the whole thing started.

All.

Over!

AGAIN!

“I can’t die of old age,” Ryan realized, as he collapsed to his knees. “I’m... I’m immortal. I’m *immortal*.”

It...

It would never end.

It would never, ever end.

He would always start over, all over again. Forever and ever. Though it could prevent the time-stop, even Monaco couldn’t undo the save point. Even old age wouldn’t cancel his save point.

“Ah...” Ryan chuckled to himself. “Ah...”

Ryan exploded into nervous laughter, rolling on the stone near his motorcycle. He didn't know how long he laughed, but by the end, the sun had long vanished, and his throat felt sore. Then the time-traveler rested on his back, looking at the stars in silence for half an hour.

Finally, when he rose up and looked at the stars, Ryan realized that he felt nothing.

He had been scared of death before. Dreaded it. He feared the pain, the loss, the brief oblivion after the light went out. Dying wasn't fun.

But that was before.

Now?

Now, he was no longer scared. Death no longer felt painful. After realizing even old age wouldn't put him down for long, the wanderer had grown numb to it all.

Ryan Romano was condemned to live. To carry that boulder at the top of the hill, and begin again. He remembered Simon's words, and realized the old man might have been right. The time-traveler was Sisyphus reborn, and his life was absurd.

And instead of horror... Ryan felt a deep sense of liberation.

"You know what?" the time-traveler muttered to himself, looking down at Monaco below. "I don't care anymore."

If Ryan was condemned to live, it would be to the fullest. He was no longer afraid of anything, and he had all the time in the world. All the time to see how everything could play out, to try everything worth doing. His life was an endless game,

and the sky was the limit. He was free to anything he wanted.

And right now, Ryan wanted to free Simon, Martine, and everyone trapped in this hellish place.

If the time-traveler's life were a video game, it would be his first quest. The first of many, but far from the last. And after seeing the bad end, he wouldn't settle for anything less than the perfect ending.

Ryan had embraced the absurd, and learned to love the boulder.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Chapter selected by my patrons on Patreon.

Anyway, Monaco was heavily inspired by the tales of the SCP Foundation, especially SCP-3008 (*endless IKEA*). If you don't know about them, I suggest checking out Youtube channels like **TheRubber** or **SCP Explained**. They're awesome.

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65: In Mysterious Ways

Sitting on a sofa right next to the inactive plushie, Ryan stared into the abyss of the Tyrrhenian Sea. He found it relaxing to wake up to the sight of silent darkness and mutated fish, especially after he had grown used to New Rome's noisy environment.

Each 'apartment' was a carbon copy of the other, each tenant free to decorate their own as they saw fit. Ryan had of course brought his entire wardrobe, and thrown euro bills everywhere to protect himself from the specter of Vladimir Lenin. It certainly haunted this underwater kremlin.

As it turned out, Len meant that she had borrowed the Meta's own submarine during the raid. Now the vehicle waited right outside the underwater habitats, and Ryan had an excellent view of it from his underwater apartment.

However, while the submarine had allowed Len to smuggle the Plymouth Fury to her base, it also meant that the Meta-Gang could reach the area if they wanted. The courier would keep it in mind for future loops.

"Don't do anything rash," Ryan jokingly told the plushie while rising up from his sofa. He then moved through the corridors linking the underwater habitats together. Shortie's own lair was next door to his own, probably because she worried the courier might influence the kids without surveillance.

Besides her own habitat, Len had established a workshop close to the living spaces. Unlike the comfortable apartments, this part of the underwater base reminded Ryan of a steampunk factory, all metal walls, and steam pipes. It wasn't as well-equipped as Vulcan's, and far less organized; Len had hooked the servers administering the underwater base to Dynamis' brainscan machine, while half-finished machines covered various workbenches. Len had hung designs of submarines, underwater cocoons, and even artificial fish on the walls to save space.

Most important, Ryan's Plymouth Fury waited in a corner. Len had removed the Chronoradio's components, the engine, and pretty much every piece of Genius tech inside. He knew it was a sacrifice for the cause, but the sight of his beloved car turned into a husk filled the courier's heart with sorrow.

And of course, Len listened to Alexandrov Ensemble's *March of the Artillerymen* while working. Even Ryan had to admit that it was a good song, but his Genius friend couldn't look more Marxist even if she tried.

Thankfully, somebody else was already annoying her today. "But Mama, you said I would get a suit too!" Little Sarah complained to Len, carrying a cat in her arms. The Genius was sitting behind a workbench, working on the Dynamis tech. "That I would be the Little Diver!"

"Sweetie, I know... but I have to work on something else first..." For once, Len had traded her jumpsuit for simple blue clothes. She looked a lot more lively when she turned to face Ryan, perhaps because she felt more confident inside her lair. "Hi, Riri."

“Hi Shortie, Little Hellion,” Ryan greeted them, before recognizing the cat in Sarah’s arms. “Eugène-Henry!”

“He showed up in my room this morning,” Little Sarah said, the animal meowing in her arms. “Did you bring him from the surface to the magical place?”

“No, he brought himself,” Ryan replied, immediately petting the placid cat behind the ears. The feline’s teleportation ability had an enormous range. “Also, it’s called the Commie-Cave.”

“The Ark,” Len said with a frown.

“The Commie-Cave,” Ryan insisted. “Corpos are a cowardly and superstitious lot. To instill fear in their heart, we must abolish private property.”

Len rolled her eyes. “If this is... a Batcave, what do we call ourselves?”

“The Hammer and the Sickle,” Ryan immediately answered. “The perfect union of peasant and working-class superheroes. The children can become our minions, the *Proletariat*.”

Len let out a small sound that the courier hadn’t heard in centuries.

“Ma?” Sarah asked, having never heard it either.

“Shortie, you chuckled?” Ryan asked. Len tried to look away to hide her facial expression, but he was persistent. “Even you must admit my jokes are funny.”

“No, they aren’t,” his old friend replied while trying not to smirk. “You’re bad, Riri. You’re so bad, it loops back to good.

Like a... like a boomerang."

"What can I say, all my jokes are state-approved by our soviet supreme."

Len now wore a warm smile on her face, which in Ryan's mind was worth all the runs so far. "I'm not like that, Riri."

"What's a soviet supreme?" Little Sarah asked while petting Eugène-Henry.

"Wait, you didn't send her to the Party Congress?" Ryan frowned at Len. "These children will be lost without a good revolutionary education!"

Len shook her head, the smile still on her face. "I... I haven't thought much about education," she admitted. "I was... too focused on building the place first."

"What's a soviet supreme?" Little Sarah asked, before glaring at Ryan. "Talk, motherfucker."

"It's a bad idea," Ryan answered truthfully before patting Sarah on the head. "And that's all you will ever know."

Sarah immediately stuck out her tongue at him, causing Eugène-Henry to meow loudly and leap out of her hands. He immediately took over a server as his throne, looking down at the humans like a noble sphinx.

"Sweetie, can you leave us for a moment?" Len asked Sarah. "I... I need to discuss something with Riri. Privately."

Little Sarah looked at Ryan and Len in turn, her gaze turning very, very suspicious. "Yes, Ma..."

The little girl left while squinting at them, and Ryan sat on the workbench once she was gone. “Are you happy now? They will think we do adult things behind closed doors... though we did, long ago.”

“That was...” Len’s face turned embarrassed. “Awkward.”

“Well, it was both our first time.” And they had to do it in a hurry, so her father wouldn’t notice. “I remember it fondly.”

Len didn’t answer, probably because they discussed an era long gone. Ryan still longed for the emotional intimacy they once shared however. Maybe that was what he was looking for with Jasmine; the echo of something once vibrant, yet long dead.

Was that how Livia felt whenever she thought of Felix?

“Have you made progress?” Ryan changed the subject upon sensing Len’s lack of comfort with the discussion.

“Sort of,” she replied, joining her fingers. “Have... have you?”

Ryan sighed. Now it was his turn to feel uncomfortable. “An idea crossed my mind,” he admitted. “Did your father ever use his power on you?”

“I... I don’t think so. I... if he had, I wouldn’t be here. I would have become him.”

“He could have done something more subtle. Closed your wounds, perhaps?”

“Why are you asking me this?” Len asked, her smile gone.

"You remember when you took your Elixir?" She nodded slowly in response. "Your father instantly knew you had done so. At first, I thought it was because he could sense blood and manipulate it from afar, but what if he had left a trace of himself inside you?"

"Like a... blood beacon?"

"You were his cherished daughter, his only reason to live," Ryan said with a frown. "He always managed to find us when we wandered off."

Len's worried face told the courier she considered it a strong possibility. "You think... you think that's what Dynamis is after? Something he left behind?"

"It's possible. I will need a blood sample to check, and the tools in the back of my car."

"What about the Knockoffs?" Len asked suddenly. "You, you studied Elixirs, right? Didn't you... didn't you notice a match?"

"How? The Carnival made sure to erase any trace of your father specifically to prevent him from returning. I had nothing to compare the Knockoffs to."

"Until now..." Len frowned. "Riri, if there is a match..."

"I know," Ryan sighed. "But can we focus on the brain-transfer project first? I... it's dangerous, Len. It might take me more than one run to get into Dynamis' labs, and I don't want you to forget me again."

"I... I will do what I can." Len cleared her throat. "But there's... there's something missing. Something is wrong."

Of course. There was always a new roadblock to overcome, but Ryan remained an optimist. “The tech doesn’t work?”

“It does,” she replied, pointing at the brain-scanning helmet. “It can make a brain-map and create a... a computer simulation. I can then send it... send it to a host, to overwrite the previous cognitive system. The closer the host’s nervous system to the simulation, the better. Otherwise... the host brain will degrade. Conflicting memories, confused neurons...”

“But if we send your memories to your past self, then there shouldn’t be any problem, right?” Ryan asked.

“It should be fine. Maybe a harmless concussion, maybe nothing.” Len crossed her arms. “Should work even wirelessly, when I’m done.”

“Then where’s the catch?”

“To wirelessly send the memories to a host through time, you need...” Len struggled to find the right words. “You need more power. More power than any natural energy source can provide.”

Ryan quickly caught on. “Like Violet Flux?”

“Yes. I think... I think we can only send signals, let alone the brainmap, back in time if we hook the Chronoradio to Vulcan’s armor.”

“But...” Ryan immediately noticed the problem. “That wasn’t the case in the previous run. The Chronoradio was destroyed, and Jasmine and I created the armor afterward. Yet we still received future recordings.”

“Yes,” Len nodded slowly. “I... I don’t think I sent the Chronoradio messages, Riri. Or at least, not the previous me. It... it could have been a future me.”

“That’s not how time works, unless I have been wrong about everything,” Ryan replied, scratching his hair. Only two time-periods could exist through his save point. “It has to be something else. All the messages revolved around our interactions during the previous loop.”

“Then... who sent the messages?”

Ryan tried to remember the end of the previous run, and his trip to the Purple World. The visions he had seen, and the colossal entity he briefly made contact with near the end.

‘The Ultimate Ones are compassionate, though narrow-minded.’

And the Chronoradio message happened right when Ryan seriously considered giving up...

“Not who,” the time-traveler realized. “What.”

Ryan looked at Eugène-Henry, as a few things fell into place. The cat had somehow gained powers across time, deliberately led Livia to the courier, and then appeared in the Commie-Cave right when Len considered studying Violet Flux for her experiment. Far too many coincidences at once.

“You aren’t teleporting at random at all,” the courier accused Eugène-Henry. “You’re *being* teleported by something else. Something showing us the way, telling us we can succeed if we work hard enough.”

The cat meowed in response.

“Riri, you... you’re talking to a cat...”

“It makes sense in the context,” Ryan defended himself, while Eugène-Henry licked his own shoulder. “You remember what I told you, Shortie? About what I saw in the Purple World?”

She quickly connected the dots. “You think the pyramid thing is... what, helping us?”

The courier nodded, leaving Eugène-Henry to his cleaning. “I’m starting to wonder if these visions, the Chronoradio signals, and Eugène-Henry’s teleportations are truly random events, or an attempt at communication.”

“That sounds...” Len tried to find the right words. “I dunno, a bit far-fetched. And if it’s as powerful as you think it is, why do so little? Why only teleport a cat around, of all things? Why would it even care?”

“I dunno,” Ryan admitted. “It’s just a theory. But I find all these strange coincidences oddly convenient, and I’m convinced the people I saw in my vision are either the Alchemist or connected to them.”

“You saw a base in Antarctica, right?” Len asked. “Could you identify where exactly?”

“Maybe,” Ryan replied. “I have only seen the night sky, not enough to pinpoint the exact position, but at least we can narrow it down.”

“We could visit that base,” she suggested. “With the submarine. Check, after... after we’re done with the rest here.”

The rest. Such an understatement.

“I guess I better work on that heist then,” Ryan said.

Since Len kept the car—and they weren’t even married—Ryan had to use a bathysphere to reach the surface, and then called a taxi to get to his destination.

A *taxi*.

“Is this karma for leaving my car to die?” Ryan wondered out loud, as he stepped out of the taxi and right in front of a Dynamis-owned hospital; the same one where Psyshock’s victims had been brought to during the courier’s first Il Migliore loop. Private Security members protected the building from intruders, but much to Ryan’s surprise, no journalists waited at the entrance. Either Dynamis kept the patients’ identity strictly confidential, or all media were in the company’s pocket. Probably both.

As he made his way towards the entrance, Ryan quickly noticed a familiar face leaving the hospital and climbing at the back of a Mercedes Benz. A young teenager with short brown hair, blue eyes, and a heart-shaped face.

Narcinia.

As for her chauffeur, Ryan recognized him as Mortimer out of costume and with sunglasses. Though the courier only caught a glimpse of her, Felix’s adoptive sister looked quite upset. He guessed her meeting with her brother hadn’t gone well.

The guards let Ryan in after a quick security check, and the courier found Wardrobe and the Panda waiting for him in the entrance hall. The former was talking with an unknown woman, and the latter texted on his phone with tears in his

eyes. They had brought chocolate and flowers with Felix's name on them.

"Hi, Ryan!" Wardrobe greeted the courier, though the Panda was too focused on his task to notice. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"Hi, Yuki," Ryan waved his hand at his favorite fashion designer, before glancing at the other woman in the room. She was in her early twenties, with shoulder-long brown hair and striking amber eyes; probably British too. Unlike the more feminine Wardrobe, she wore a gray corporate suit, albeit one as stylish as Blackthorn's.

"Hello, Quicksave," she said with a warm smile, offering him her hand to shake. Definitely British. "I'm Nora, Nora Moore. Yuki spoke a lot about you."

"She's my girlfriend," Wardrobe said with a smile. "The Architect!"

"The pleasure is all mine," Ryan said, as he took Nora's hand and kissed it in the most gentlemanly way instead of shaking it. The woman blushed a little at the surprise attention, though the courier frowned at Wardrobe next in displeasure. "But she doesn't have a costume. I'm disappointed, Yuki."

"I know," Wardrobe sighed. "I tried."

"I can't wear a costume like yours at work," Nora replied with an embarrassed smile, before glancing at Ryan. "I'm not a superhero, but an independent contractor and urban planner. I have a Genius power specialized in cities and architecture."

“And she is *amazing*,” Wardrobe said with a bright smile.
“Come on, Nora, show him!”

Her girlfriend showed Ryan her tablet, which showed advanced plans of arcology-like, self-sustaining towns, a flying city, and even an underground bunker settlement.

“So you can make any kind of city?” the courier asked, quite impressed with her work. He recognized most of the features thanks to his own knowledge, but Nora made excellent use of limited resources. “And for a fraction of the expected cost, from what I gather.”

“How could you tell?” Nora asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, you fully optimize the space, energy consumption, and material,” Ryan said, pointing at various parts of the designs. “Though I think you could move the generators closer to the water recycling for shorter heating circuits.”

“Interesting idea,” Nora said with a smile. “Are you a Genius too?”

“Ryan is super duper smart,” Yuki said, doing the courier’s publicity for him. “You should see his car and weapons, it’s a treasure trove!”

“Unfortunately my Plymouth Fury is in a garage for now,” Ryan said before returning the tablet. “Do you plan to resettle areas destroyed by the Genome Wars? Some of your designs don’t make sense otherwise.”

“You’re quite sharp,” Nora replied with a nod. “A lot of my projects were scrapped by the previous administration, but the new one seems more open-minded. It will be nice to design something other than fortress cities in Sicily.”

“Have you ever wanted to build an underwater metropolis?” Ryan asked, wondering if he should introduce her to Len. “Because I know a Genius specialized in sea-based technology. She’s a Marxist-Leninist however.”

“The idea of oceanic settlements crossed my mind, yes. I would be happy to meet with her, though considering her political leanings, it will be outside of Dynamis.” Nora observed Ryan closely, a warm smile on her lips. “Maybe we could discuss that in length another time? You seem quite knowledgeable about Genius tech, and I would be delighted to exchange with you further.”

The way she looked at him made Ryan realize that he really had a thing for female Geniuses, even when they played for the other team. “Tell me, did you design the Dynamis HQ and Optimates Tower?” he asked the Architect. “I think I recognized your style from the plans.”

“I did, yes, it was one of my earliest work, so I’m not all that proud of it. Why?”

“Nothing,” Ryan replied innocently, a sinister plan forming in his mind. “Also, I apologize.”

“For what?” the Architect asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I know everyone does that, but I shamelessly flirted with Wardrobe before I knew of your existence,” Ryan apologized, making Yuki all flustered. “I hope you don’t hate me for it. She really deserved it.”

“Oh, that?” Nora exploded into laughter. “It’s fine. I really like the bunny costume you made for her actually; we’ll make good use of it.”

"I'm sorry, Ryan, I would totally date you both at once if I could," Wardrobe said with a sorry face. "It's an exclusive contract. Civil union and all."

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Nora said with a coy smile. "But I will give you my blessing to send Yuki an application if we end up breaking up. You seem like a nice person."

"But if I wasn't with Nora, I would wear your bunny costume, force you into a Hugh Hefner one, and we would make love everywhere in my condo!" Yuki told Ryan with a wink. "I like beautiful people. Men, women, it doesn't matter, so long as they dress well and are beautiful inside too. And you're beautiful everywhere, Ryan."

"Thanks," the courier replied, happy to keep such a cultured, gentle soul as a friend. He would make sure they got to hang out together during his Perfect Run.

"Also Ryan, I imagined a new costume for you!" Wardrobe said while grabbing the tablet and opening a new file. "I was so, so sad when I learned you would leave the team, I had to make a new one!"

"We can still team-up," Ryan said. "Like Batman and Superman. I'll be the grim vigilante, and you the law-abiding citizen!"

"I've thought of that!" Wardrobe presented him a sketch of the costume, all dark and edgy except for a silver lining on the chest. "You've turned your back on the *light* and embraced the *darkness*; you've chosen to wear *Karl Lagerfeld*. No longer a villain, no longer a hero, but someone in the twilight! Yet the silver lining on your chest means that you're still looking for *redemption*."

"But it's still made of cashmere?" Ryan asked, hopeful.

"Only the shirt beneath, hidden like your tortured soul," Wardrobe continued, "the jacket will be made of guanaco."

"Pure genius." Ryan then glanced at the Panda, who hadn't left his seat yet. "Is that any way to greet your sensei, arrogant young disciple?"

When the young hero looked up at his master, it was with tears. "I'm sorry, Sifu..." he said, holding his phone with his tiny human hands. "I just... I just can't..."

He showed Ryan his cellphone, and the website he had been browsing.

"'Pandamania?'" the courier asked upon reading the name out loud. The landing page represented his animal friend with a cape and a lightning hammer, with '*The Panda's true power*' written below.

"It's a meme!" his young and naive disciple said, with tears in his eyes. "A meme site! I have memes!"

"He is a hit on the Dynanet and our social networks," Nora explained. "His first merchandise sold incredibly well, almost as much as all other new recruits combined."

Ryan could see why. It seemed the Dynanet users loved exalting the Panda as an unstoppable badass, photoshopping pictures of him in place of action movie stars. '*The Panda is the Key to Everything!*' '*Panda OP, please NERF!*' '*One just does not say no to a Panda,*' '*The Panda didn't take a second Elixir to give Augustus a fighting chance*' and so on.

"I'm famous." The Panda wiped away a tear. "Everyone thinks I'm amazing and strong..."

“You deserved it,” Wardrobe patted him on the shoulder with a smile. “You were so brave fighting the Meta-Gang, I thought you stole everyone’s spotlight!”

“Yes, young disciple, here is the reward for your hard work,” Ryan said, trying to imitate a wise elder’s voice, “but this is only the first step towards ascension! Many roadblocks await you!”

“Thank you Sifu, I wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t believed in me. You...” The Panda couldn’t prevent himself from crying. “You are my friend!”

“Hug me, you stupid manbear!”

And so they did. Tightly. He felt so warm and furry to the touch, even while in human form. Wardrobe looked at them for a moment and then joined in, while her girlfriend looked on with amusement.

Eventually, a nurse came for them. “Mr. Veran will receive you now.”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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66: The Hit

“So you say the high-security labs are so reinforced, they would survive missile strikes?” Ryan asked Nora as the group walked through the hospital’s hallway, guided by the Dynamis nurse. The Panda hummed a song to himself, while Wardrobe carried flowers and chocolates in her arms.

“Yes, the tinted glass windows outside are just for show,” the Architect explained. “Separate energy generators keep the whole floor running without any external help needed, and the alarm system can detect any intruder. And there is only one way in, through the elevator and then a blast door.”

“No emergency exit?” Ryan asked, realizing his options to infiltrate the lab unnoticed had greatly narrowed. “Not to criticize you, but it sounds like an oversight to me. What if there’s a nuclear detonation inside?”

“Bite me, Mr. Manada wanted the place to be ‘secure, not safe,’” Nora replied with a smile. “I suppose they experiment with dangerous creatures and they don’t want to take any chance of them escaping. I mean, have you seen what they use at the Colosseum Maximus?”

“I just *love* the new Cyber-Tyranno design!” Wardrobe commented. “Especially the holographic goggles, very classy.”

"Oh, about that, people asked the Panda to participate in the new tournament's opening match!" Ryan's disciple showed off his chest with pride. "Panda vs Velociraptors, the ultimate showdown!"

"If you ask me, it's a colossal waste of resources." Nora rolled her eyes. "The money would be better spent on hospitals than dinosaurs. They cost a fortune to make, let alone feed."

"Frankly, I'm torn," Ryan admitted. "I understand where you come from, but dinosaurs have a special mass appeal. Though if someone were to blow up the whole building because they're too lazy to use the stairs, would the labs remain intact?"

"Well, yes, they would." Nora looked at Ryan strangely.
"Why would terrorists be too lazy to use the stairs?"

"It's purely hypothetical," Ryan lied through his teeth. "But that's good to know!"

Eventually, the nurse led them to a white hospital room; or as Ryan called it, Felix's litter.

The young hero looked far better than a few days ago, when Acid Rain had stabbed him through the gut. Besides the fact he needed to stay in bed with bandages around his chest, Atom Cat looked almost perfectly healthy. Though he had been forced to trade his hideous suit and mask for white hospital clothes, which Ryan considered an improvement.

No wonder Livia fell for a face like that, Ryan thought, as he observed Felix's adorable visage. However, he soon remembered what Fortuna had said, about how her mother used her power for esthetic surgery. Did Venus do the same

with her son? Now that Ryan thought of it, Atom Cat's facial features seemed a bit too perfect.

Poor kitten. Even his face wasn't his own.

"Guys," Felix said, unsurprised by Nora's presence. Wardrobe probably introduced them to one another in the past.

"Felix, I'm so glad you're okay!" Wardrobe immediately all but dumped the chocolates and flowers on the patient's lap, much to his shock. "Did they treat you well?"

"Of course," the Dynamis nurse said with an amused smile, before closing the door behind them, "I will leave you alone, but please don't make too much noise. The other patients need rest."

The Panda scratched the back of his head, a bit confused. "I thought you shared a room with... the glass guy..."

"Translucent," Ryan said. "Or Semi-Transparent for friends."

"The Shroud," Felix replied. "He was transferred to intensive care after some shrapnel hit his vital organs. His injuries were so severe, they had to put him in an artificial coma."

This bothered Ryan. Though Matty Boy had killed him a few times, the time-traveler had grown to appreciate the vigilante. The transparent hero had provided a lot of help across the loops, and without his assistance, Big Fat Adam might have gotten his hands on the *Bahamut* by now.

"Will he survive?" Wardrobe asked, her expression deflating. Atom Cat shook his head, unable to answer. "It is my fault... I should have thought of a better persona."

“You couldn’t know, Yuki,” Nora reassured her. “It was in the heat of battle. No one will blame you for losing your cool.”

“You saved my life with your nurse cosplay,” Felix pointed out.

The fashion designer didn’t look convinced. “Yes, but... I’ve done some research, and there are a few personas I could have used to save you both. Though I wish White Mages were public domain...”

“It was your first time in that situation, right?” Ryan asked Wardrobe, who nodded slowly. “Nobody can blame you for not being perfect on your first try. Believe me, I know. Practice makes perfect.”

His words were meant to encourage Wardrobe, but they worsened her mood further. “I don’t want to practice watching people die,” she said, holding her arms as if to protect herself. The Architect put a comforting hand on her girlfriend’s shoulder, trying to reassure Wardrobe.

“So, um, Felix, when will you be out?” the Panda attempted to change the subject.

“Tomorrow, but I won’t stay with Il Migliore,” Felix said, before dropping the bomb. “I’m joining the Carnival.”

“What?” The news was enough to draw Wardrobe out of her depressed mood. “No way, *Quicksave the Pandas* only had one successful outing and you’re all leaving? That’s like breaking the band after a hit song!”

“W-we can form a duo, Yuki,” said the Panda, trying to salvage the brand. “*Yin and Yang!*”

"If you change your hero name to Circus Lion, I'll disown you," Ryan warned Atom Cat. Felix ignored the courier's jab, and seemed quite uncomfortable in his presence. Something had changed.

"Is this about the costume?" Wardrobe asked Felix with a frown. "Because Enrique won't let you join the pro-league unless you change your outfit?"

"Wearing what I want is just a bonus," Felix said with a smirk. "Sorry, but I feel more in line with the Carnival's values than Il Migliore's. Too much red tape gets in the way of doing what's right."

Ryan couldn't say he was surprised, but he wondered how Lightning Dad would react. Mob Zeus could barely be talked out of murdering his godson for joining Dynamis; joining Sunshine's team might very well push the aging psychopath over the edge. Come to think of it, both Lucky Girl and Livia had been strangely silent lately, neither sending messages.

A storm was brewing in the background. Ryan could feel it in his bones.

"I feel so sad about this," Wardrobe lamented. "We could have done wonders, the four of us..."

"We can still team-up from time to time," Ryan argued. "A crossover event every month, until our fans get sick of it!"

"Yes, but it's not the same," the fashion designer replied. "I really liked hanging out with all of you."

"You could always form your own group," Nora suggested. "I think Enrique would be open to the idea."

"I'll pass," Ryan replied. "I don't think I will stay in New Rome for long."

"Really?" This time, Felix finally paid attention to him.
"Where will you go?"

"Where life will carry me."

In truth, Ryan had no idea what would happen after he achieved his Perfect Run for New Rome. In the best case scenario, he might stay with Len and the children, but the time-traveler would likely go back to the road. Staying in one place made him restless, and he couldn't live without seeking new adventures to tackle.

The courier didn't feel at home anywhere.

"Sifu, are you leaving me alone?" Even though he was in human form, the Panda's expression remained very bearlike.

"Your training is now complete, young disciple," Ryan said, trying to sound wise. "From now on, *Life* will be your teacher."

"I... I understand..." The poor manbear struggled not to cry.
"I understand."

"I know you have a lone cowboy energy about you," Wardrobe said with a frown. "But... I dunno, that sounds like a very lonely existence, Ryan. You're sure you don't want to stay? Even if Dynamis doesn't want you anymore, I sure do!"

Ryan looked at this pure, sweet creature too good for this broken Earth. "BFF?"

“BFF!” she replied with a warm smile.

“Unfortunately, you might have to discuss Yuki’s better qualities later,” Nora said as she checked the time. “You will be late for the meeting.”

“You have something planned?” Ryan asked the others, uninformed.

“Wyvern wants every Il Migliore member to join a big meeting,” Wardrobe said with a sad face. “Sorry, Ryan, it’s members only... I really argued for you to be present, but the new CEO said no. But we’ll tell you how it went!”

It didn’t take long for Ryan to put the pieces together, but he kept his thoughts to himself. “Well, I’ll change the Kitten’s litter alone then.”

“Oh, we could meet tomorrow at my place!” The Panda suggested. “It’s small, but it’s comfy!”

“Sure, that would be great,” Nora said with a smile as she turned to face Ryan. “Perhaps you could introduce me to that underwater specialist you told me about?”

Ryan chuckled. “I’m not sure if she will agree to leave the Commie-Cave, but I’ll try to convince her.”

“Ooh, maybe I will get the Karl Marx costume out of storage then!” On these words, Wardrobe apologized to Felix for the short visit, and then left alongside her girlfriend and the Panda. Ryan was left alone with the young superhero.

“Dynamis and the Carnival are planning to attack the Augusti, aren’t they?” Ryan asked Felix once the rest of the group had left. “A meeting that involves all heroes in their employ barely two days after the Rust Town raid. Alphonse

Manada and Hargraves want to strike the iron while it's still hot."

"Do you want to know?" Felix asked, his tone suddenly caged and wary. "Or is it Livia asking through you?"

"Truthfully, Kitten, I will find out soon anyway," Ryan replied with a shrug. "I'm just trying to make conversation. Also, I thought you didn't want family visits, but I've seen Narcinia leaving this place."

"I made an exception for Narcinia. She deserved to know the truth." Well, that explained her reaction. "I told her everything. How Augustus murdered her parents, and arranged her adoption so he could use her powers to make drugs. It makes me sick just to speak of it. He's even worse than I thought."

"I assume she didn't believe you?" Ryan slouched on the nearest chair, a leg over the armrest. "She has no memories of her birth parents?"

"No," Felix replied with an angry scowl. "Bacchus probably shattered her mind when she was young. He can do that with his power. Psychically torture people to madness, or gaslight them into believing false things."

Ryan mentally noted that tidbit of information, to use when he would blow up the Bliss Factory later. "Well, if you truly join the Carnival, you will have the opportunity to contribute to the family feud."

"I know about Livia." Felix glared at Ryan. "Blackthorn told me you met with her and Fortuna."

Well, that explained the sudden distance between them. "If I told you it was part of a master plan to get your sister off

my back, would you believe me?"

"I know how she is, but Livia?" Felix crossed his arms. "First my sister, now my ex? You had to fuck the whole family?"

"Are your parents in an open marriage?" Ryan asked innocently.

Atom Cat didn't find him funny. "Are you in bed with them? The Augusti?"

"Figuratively or literally?" Technically, he did sleep with Jasmine, but that was one loop ago. "Because the answer is no for both. I swear I haven't touched your sister, though her power doesn't make it easy. She's not as bad as I thought, however..."

"Just... stop talking about my sister..." Felix closed his eyes for a second, as if he banished a dirty image in his own mind. "Livia is too careful to approach someone outside the hierarchy. Even with Fortuna around. And that's not all. You knew that Fortuna was my sister and that I dated Livia, information only available among the Augusti and a few people at Dynamis. Blackthorn swears you never talked about me before."

Ryan guessed where this was going. "You think I got this information from the Augusti, Kitten?"

"Where else?" Felix replied sarcastically. "I just don't get you, Ryan."

"Would I have helped Translucent and Sunshine if I worked with Augustus?" Ryan asked a simple question, glancing at the chocolates Wardrobe had left to Felix. He had the feeling they would go uneaten. "I can't help it if everyone wants a piece of me."

"So you're not a friend of Augustus, but you're not his enemy either?" Felix sneered, his former friendliness gone. "So, you're just a mercenary at heart? You organized the Meta-Gang's downfall because someone paid you to?"

"What? No, I'm not paid for what I do, though I wish I were." Good grief, if Ryan had been paid for every loop he spent in New Rome, he would be even richer. "Truth is, Kitten, I destroyed Hannifat Lecter's group because they threatened friends of mine. I'm just trying to make sure the people I care about get to live another day. No more, no less."

"That's Livia's excuse. Protect her family, no matter what."

"She still loves you, you know?" While Ryan respected Felix's decision to cut ties with his family, he sympathized too much with Livia's situation not to at least try to help them make up.

"I don't." Atom Kitten looked away. "I never did. Not like that."

Ryan frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Our parents pushed us into our relationship," Felix admitted. "They were best friends back when their organization was just a branch of the Camorra. Our match was decided back when we were children. I... I still care about her, don't get me wrong, but as a friend. I don't love her. I never was the Prince Charming she wanted me to be."

"She told me about your secret hideout." Ryan tried to sound neutral, but he couldn't hold back an undercurrent of reproach in his voice. "How you went there to hide from your families. You were misleading her back then?"

"I... I wasn't lying, not really. I tried to make it work, but..." Atom Kitten shook his head. "You can't force yourself to love someone, man."

Ryan felt some sympathy for Felix, but he pitied Livia most of all. Longing for something that was never there.

Most of all though, the courier couldn't shake the feeling this situation echoed his own. He saw the parallels with his relationship with Len painted all over the walls, though at least he and Shortie might end up on speaking terms. Livia and Felix's situation just reeked of a tragedy waiting to happen.

"You're close to her," Felix said. "Livia. She told you about the hideout. About me. That's how you knew. You're not Augustus' friend, you're Livia's."

"I wouldn't go that far. We threatened to kill each other more than once."

"Still, Blackthorn told me you were pretty friendly to each other." Felix examined Ryan closely, his face undecipherable. "What is she to you?"

"I..." Ryan cleared his throat, trying to organize his thoughts. "She... she reminds me of someone else. Someone I tried to free from a monster, and I failed. I just don't want Livia to end the same way."

Atom Cat remained silent for an agonizing minute, before speaking his mind, "You won't save her from her father, Ryan."

The courier flinched.

“I tried too,” Felix said. “But you can’t. His hold over her is too strong. The only way is to destroy Augustus, and even if you can, she will hate you for it.”

Just like Len and Bloodstream.

“Isn’t that what you’re trying to do?” Ryan asked. “Dynamis and the Carnival plan to attack Augustus, and Lightning Butt won’t take you siding with them well. Your parents can’t shield you forever.”

“I don’t care,” Felix replied, raising his shoulder in an attempt to look stronger than he was. “I made peace with the possibility.”

“With Sunshine’s help, the Manada *might* have the firepower to take down the Augusti,” Ryan conceded. “But the real problem remains. Mob Zeus himself.”

“Dynamis has a weapon. Something that might put him out of commission.”

“The Gravity Gun Alphonse mentioned earlier? His own father didn’t believe in it.”

“We can’t live in fear of *him* forever, Ryan,” Felix replied gruffly. “Someone has to take a stand, even if they must pay the price. Or else, things will never change. Bliss will continue to flow, and people will keep dying.”

Ryan prepared to argue with him further, when his phone rang. He quickly brought it out of his pocket and checked the sender. “It’s Livia,” he said.

Felix responded with a scoff. “Don’t answer. I won’t take the phone.”

“Okay boomer,” Ryan replied before taking the call anyway.
“Yes, Princess?”

“*Ryan.*” Her tone was frantic, almost panicked. “*Is Felix with you?*”

“Yes, but he won’t speak with you—”

“*You need to run,*” she interrupted him, “*you need to take him and run. You need to get out of New Rome right now.*”

“Wait, wait, out of New Rome?” Ryan frowned, straightening in his chair. “Princess, I have a life, I can’t drop everything to—”

“*If you don’t, Dad will have him killed!*”

Ryan froze in place, looking at the oblivious Atom Kitten.
“Because he joined the Carnival?”

“*And what he told Narcinia,*” Livia continued, her voice breaking. Though he couldn’t hear her side of the conversation, Felix clearly seemed to understand the gist of it. “*I’m... I’m trying to prevent it, but the possibilities get worse every minute. I... I can’t see a way out, but I can’t see you either. I need your help.*”

“Should I bring him to Dynamis?”

“*No. My father is marshaling his forces for war with the Manada. Felix won’t be safe anywhere in New Rome, do you understand?*”

War.

Ryan’s worst fears were realized. Either Lightning Butt had learned of Sunshine’s alliance with Dynamis or of their

incoming attack, and gotten off his throne. The Living Sun and Augustus would soon settle their rivalry, one way or another.

Ryan looked at Felix and considered his options. Technically, besides Lab Sixty-Six, nothing kept him in New Rome anymore in this run. Shortie wanted to abandon the surface altogether, and the Carnival would probably make the Bliss Factory their first target.

However... if the city descended into war, Ryan couldn't afford to miss it. Len might get embroiled in it, if he trusted Enrique's words, and too many people he wanted to protect were in danger. He needed to gather more information.

"Who is after him?" the courier asked. "Why can't he survive in any possibility?"

Livia hesitated, but in the end, she wanted to protect Felix more than she wished to hide her family's secrets.

"*Aunt Pluto,*" she finally admitted. "*Aunt Pluto will go after him.*"

Cruella. They sent Cruella.

"If she gets to him, it's over Ryan. She already marked him." And Ryan too, beforehand. *"If she gets close enough, he will die with no way out. He has to leave the city."*

"How does Pluto's power work?" The mere mention of her name caused a silent Felix to tense up.

"She... she can mark people with a curse, and the closer she moves to them, the closer they become to death. Ryan, you must leave now. She will be on her way anytime soon."

Ryan observed Atom Cat, who seemed... almost resigned. Like a condemned man hearing a death sentence.

He didn't think he would survive this.

Now, Ryan could leave him to his death. Pluto might be one of the few people capable of killing him permanently, and he was making real progress with breaking his own curse. Len was on the verge of unlocking the brain-transfer, and they could sit out this war. Livia would be mad, but Ryan could reasonably escape any punishment if he played his cards well.

But that would mean callously leaving a teammate to die for his personal gain.

And even if there might be no punishment... Ryan wasn't that kind of person.

"You were on my list too," the courier finally told Felix, remembering his discussion with Livia earlier during this loop. "She had claimed you first, so I didn't say your name."

Atom Cat blinked in confusion. "What?"

"The list of people I wished to protect." Well, that left only one option then... "Kitten, pack your things, we're going to Monaco."

"Monaco?" Felix asked, horrified.

"I'm kidding," Ryan said, his phone still in hand. "About the Monaco part. Pack your things, we're leaving."

"I'm not running away, not even from Pluto," Atom Kitten insisted. "I won't hide—"

“Let me tell you something,” the time-traveler put away the phone, looking straight into Felix’s eyes. “Death is painful. It is painful, and lonely, and you have *no* idea how much. And not just for you, but for everyone who cared about you. If you want to die a martyr? Fine, it’s your choice. But do you imagine how your sisters will feel? How will your friends?”

“But—”

“How do you think Fortuna will feel once Pluto brings her your head?”

This time, Ryan’s blunt question silenced the young hero. Unlike the courier, Felix had people who would mourn his death; people who would remember. And it seemed he had finally realized it.

“We’re leaving,” Ryan told Livia, Felix climbing out of the bed to change his clothes. “How long do we have?”

“I’ll try to give you as much as possible, but... not much.” She let out a long sigh. *“Thanks, Ryan. I... I will remember this. You aren’t helping an ingrate, I swear.”*

“You won’t remember, but thanks anyway.” Ryan hung up, and called another number. “Shortie? Shortie?!”

“Yes?” she answered. Thankfully, she had set up a communication channel for such emergencies. *“Is there a problem?”*

“Yes, a big one. Could you reroute one of your bathyspheres to send a human-sized cat to say, France?”

“What’s, what’s happening?” She immediately started to panic. *“Riri, are they hunting you?”*

“No, not yet.” Though Ryan had the intuition he would be on Augustus’ kill list very soon. “It’s for a friend in need.”

“I... I can do it.”

“Okay, we’ll meet outside the city.” If the transfer happened within New Rome’s confines and they learned of the bathysphere, then Vulcan would either track Felix down or inform Augustus about Len’s hideout. While the weapon Genius wasn’t very loyal to her boss, she had no reason to help Ryan this time around. “Be wary, Vulcan might be set on our case soon. From the designs I gave you, how long will it take you to recreate the armor?”

“Riri, we can’t, it’s too early to test... I’m not even sure...”

“We won’t have much time,” Ryan replied. “The whole cardboard castle will crumble soon.”

The storm Enrique had forewarned was about to hit New Rome. And Ryan wanted Len to remember him when it subsided.

“I... I’ll do what I can,” she said. *“Take care, Riri. I’m coming.”*

“Thanks,” Ryan said as he hung up. By now, Atom Cat had switched from his hospital clothes to his usual costume, and even put the mask on.

“Why France?” Felix asked, a dart bandolier around his chest.

“Many people there owe me a favor, and I’ll cash in.” Ryan’s first thought had been to send Atom Cat to Len’s base, but the risk of Augustus attacking the Commie-Cave was too

great. The courier couldn't endanger Shortie nor the children. "I hope you like Camus though."

"Whom?" What an uncultured bore! "Do we take your car?"

The—damn it, and this mess had to happen the one day he left his Plymouth Fury with Len!

"No," Ryan said, realizing he would need to cross a line today. "We'll take the Pandamobile."

He had the feeling this day was about to get worse.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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67: Murphy's Law

The Pandamobile was... well, everything Ryan had expected.

A Dynamis-made copy of a second-generation Fiat Panda, covered in white and black fur to mimic an actual panda. It was comfy and cute, with a panda doll dangling from the rear-view mirror. A complete lack of imagination packaged by a corporation too lazy to make a custom car.

If the Panda hadn't given him the keys beforehand, Ryan wouldn't have touched the thing with a nine-foot pole. And even then, just putting his hands on the driving wheel felt wrong.

"I feel like I'm cheating on my long-suffering wife with a dirty whore," Ryan said, thinking fondly of his Plymouth Fury. "I'm filled with regrets! Regrets and anguish!"

"Shut up and keep driving," Atom Cat said from the front seat, repeatedly looking in the rear-view mirror for any sign of Pluto. The duo had reached the city's suburbs, and would soon approach an overpass.

Great pillars of concrete lifted the highway out of New Rome above the road like a bridge, and loomed over shacks inhabited by the city's poorest residents. While Dynamis had put some effort into keeping the highway functional, they clearly didn't look below it.

Still, the sun was starting to set, and no sign of the Augusti yet. If all went well, the duo should reach the rendezvous point with Len near the Amalfi Coast at nightfall.

"Hey, you're the one who prevented us from taking a better car!" Upon seeing the abomination, Ryan had immediately tried to 'borrow' the nearest sports car, but no, Kitten was too nice to allow it. "It's your life on the line. One of them anyway."

"Yours too now. Augustus will target anyone who helps me." Felix sighed. "Sorry to be snappy, Ryan. I appreciate the help."

"Have you fallen for me yet?" the courier teased him, just as his phone started ringing. Lucky Girl. "Because your sister has, in spite of my best efforts."

"You shouldn't be calling while driving," Atom Cat said gruffly, as Ryan picked up the phone while driving towards a traffic light.

"Fortuna, darling, how can I make you even happier today?"

"*Ryan?*" Much to his surprise, she seemed confused to have the handsome courier on the phone. "*How can it be, I was trying to call Felix! My power is never wrong!*"

"Well your wish has come true," Ryan said, while Felix shook his head like a maniac, "he is right next to me, begging me for protection."

"*He is?*" Fortuna asked while her brother glared at the courier. "*Oh my Ryan, you truly are the perfect gentleman, anticipating my wishes before I even think of them! Now, hand him the phone!*"

“I don’t want it,” Felix said, as Ryan dangled the cellphone right in front of his partner’s head.

“Come on, don’t be a bab—”

The traffic light above them separated from the pole holding it above the ground, and threatened to fall on the Pandamobile.

Ryan activated his power, looked out of the window, and then skillfully drove out of the object’s way when time resumed. The traffic light crashed on the ground and shattered into pieces. “Sheesh, what happened to public service?” the Violet Genome asked, before shoving the phone against Felix’s ear.

“Stop...” the hero complained, until he heard Fortuna berating him on the other end. “Yes, Fortuna, I’m alive. No, I can’t tell you where I am.”

Ryan tried to relax, but didn’t have the time to as he noticed a car coming from his right. The courier had to veer at the last second to dodge the incoming maniac. “Does everyone in this town drive like crazy?” Ryan complained. New Rome’s traffic killed him twice on his first day. “At least I can stop time!”

Atom Cat tensed up. “It wasn’t an accident,” he said, pushing the phone away. “Can you feel it? The *cold*?”

What cold?

“It’s her?” Ryan looked at the rearview mirror, but didn’t notice anything extraordinary. “How far does her range extend?”

"I don't know, but if I can feel the effects, then she can track me."

Damn it. "Milady," the courier said, as he recovered the phone, "I'll call you back."

"Don't you dare hang up on me again, Ryan—" The courier hung up on Fortuna, putting his phone back under his suit, and took a turn towards the highway.

Soon, the Pandamobile climbed on the giant highway and left New Rome entirely. The enormous road, lifted by pillars, oversaw the lush countryside around the city. The urban jungle was replaced with woods, country roads, and isolated houses. Besides a few diesel vehicles, Ryan had the road to himself.

"Kitten, you're sure she can track people down with her power?" After all, Pluto didn't notice that she had marked Ryan until they met in a previous loop.

"Yes," Felix said, repeatedly glancing at the rear-view mirror. "Once she marks a target and activates her curse, it creates a sympathetic link between them. And the closer she is to her victim, the stronger her power is. I don't know everything about her ability, but I learned that at least."

If Pluto's range extended so far they couldn't even see her, and if she could truly sense her targets, then they had no way to surprise her.

Felix looked through his window, and gasped in surprise.
"There!"

Ryan froze time, and looked through Atom Cat's window.

A familiar black Lamborghini moved on the road below the highway, between the woods. A few hundred meters away from the Pandamobile.

Worse, two people on a motorcycle escorted the car. The driver was a gaunt, masculine figure entirely dressed in a black bodysuit covering him from head to toe. The other was a woman in a red leather jacket, her crimson hair flowing out of her biker helmet; she was carrying a submachine gun.

The road they followed led back to the highway, at a junction roughly a kilometer ahead.

“Kitten, put on your belt, we’re gonna rock,” Ryan warned as time resumed. The courier smashed the accelerator, and the Pandamobile moved faster and faster. With luck, they would reach their maximum speed and beat their pursuers to the road junction.

“The Vamp, and Night Terror,” Felix said before looking at the speedometer, as it climbed to one hundred twenty and kept rising. “Can this car go faster than a Lamborghini?”

“Now, Kitten, don’t be stupid.” Pluto was driving a Lamborghini Gallardo, which could go twice as fast as the Pandamobile. That Dynamis abomination could reach a hundred and fifty kilometers per hour maximum. “Night Terror, you said? I think I heard that name before...”

“The Blue Genome of the Killer Seven. I don’t know what his power does, except it activates in the darkness.”

“Oh, so during the night?” Ryan was glad some of the Killer Seven used appropriate names themed after their abilities. “And the Vamp? She sucks you dry?”

"Not really, she can use pheromones to make people do stupid things, and even kill them on touch. I should have known they would send the one Genome I couldn't blow up through direct contact." Atom Cat looked through the window and ground his teeth. "They're accelerating. They know we noticed them."

Thankfully, the Pandamobile passed the road junction first, and had now reached its maximum speed. However, when Ryan looked into his rear-view mirror, he noticed the black Lamborghini and its escort pursuing them.

Pluto had engaged Ryan in a highway car chase.

She had no idea who she was dealing with. "Go get'em, tiger!"

"With pleasure." Felix opened his window, and threw an explosive dart at their pursuers with insane dexterity. Though Night Terror's motorcycle dodged the attack, the projectile exploded right in front of the Lamborghini in a catastrophic blast and blew dust everywhere.

A truck next to the Pandamobile suddenly veered off course, one of its wheels breaking down. Thanks to skills honed through countless stunts across his loops and selective use of his time-stop, the courier managed to dodge the vehicle as it fell off the highway.

"No reincarnations today!" Ryan mocked the truck, though he immediately had to avoid a pickup next. From what he saw, it suffered from the same problem as the previous vehicle.

Ryan had a nasty gut feeling, and checked on the various parts of the Pandamobile. He quickly realized their car

hadn't been spared either. "Oh great, the brakes don't work anymore. Not that I ever needed them before, but..."

"It will become worse, the closer she gets," Felix warned, as Pluto's Lamborghini emerged from the dust cloud unharmed. The Vamp, meanwhile, raised her submachine gun at the Pandamobile. "Get down!"

Ryan didn't need a warning. He and Felix lowered their heads, as a volley of bullets shattered the windows at the back of the Pandamobile and impacted the windshield. One of the glass shards deviated from its natural course and aimed straight at Atom Cat's throat. The courier stopped time, grabbed the projectile, and threw it out of the car once time resumed.

"Does Pluto have any weaknesses?" Ryan asked while looking at the road ahead. The sun was starting to vanish behind the horizon, and if Night Terror's power truly activated in the dark...

"I think she can only target one person at once," Felix said, throwing another dart at Night Terror's motorcycle. The assassin skillfully dodged the projectile, though at least it prevented his backup from aiming.

From the glass shard incident, Ryan guessed Pluto directed her power at Atom Cat. Which would have been a great asset to counterattack, if the two heroes weren't in the *same car!*

"She needs physical proximity for the effect to get stronger," Atom Cat said, grabbing a new dart from his bandoleer, "so if we get far enough, it will lose potency. Maybe the brakes will work again then."

"What happens if she gets within say, ten meters of us?"

Felix scowled. "Heart attack."

Ryan hoped it would take more than forty seconds.

Her power had to have a weakness. All Yellow Genomes had weird limits. They warped reality, transforming an imaginary concept or narrative into a physical law of the universe. They changed the very logic of the world.

"*This* world," Ryan muttered out loud.

Pluto's power might make death an inevitable certainty for her victims, but the Purple World belonged to the Violet Genome. Like how he ignored Fortuna's luck, the courier could break Pluto's hold on causality by stopping time selectively. Neither did Ryan think Pluto actually controlled the calamities she generated, or she would have caused their car to explode already.

She was Fortuna's evil counterpart.

She was...

"She's our final destination," said Ryan.

"I'm sorry?" Felix asked, while Night Terror attempted to bridge the gap between their two vehicles and the Vamp prepared a second volley.

"You never watched that movie?" Ryan veered off to dodge a deer before it could hit the Pandamobile. A *deer*. On a *highway!* "Spoiler alert, the heroes live at the end!"

But they died in the sequel. He'd better not mention that.

While Atom Cat's explosions prevented the Vamp from aiming her submachine gun and forced Pluto's car to slow

down to avoid getting blown up, Ryan could already see the consequences. The highway seemed to tremble, the structural damage from the explosions extrapolated by Cruella's own ability.

Eventually, what was bound to happen, happened.

One of the pillars holding the highway two dozen meters above the ground in front of the Pandamobile collapsed, causing cars to fall to their doom. A large hole had formed between both halves of the road, one slightly higher than the other.

"Hold tight!" Ryan said, the Pandamobile now an unstoppable missile. The side of the road was located slightly higher than the other side, so they had a chance to make it. "I got this!"

"You're sure?!" Atom Cat panicked, as he quickly put on his belt.

"I couldn't slow down even if I wanted to!"

Ryan froze time for a few seconds to calculate the right angle, and then made the jump when it resumed.

Like the majestic beast it took inspiration from, the Pandamobile soared through the air with grace and dignity. The vehicle crossed the hole at full speed, Ryan adjusting its movements slightly to make the perfect landing. He then took a strong, confident pose, because when you made such a brave jump, you had to look the part too.

And then came the moment of truth.

The Pandamobile landed with a loud thump, Felix almost jumping from his seat as the vehicle continued its course.

Ryan heard the sound of the wheels straining from the impact, realizing they might flatten soon.

Night Terror, that coward, chickened out and abruptly stopped his motorcycle within a few inches of the hole, much to the Vamp's chagrin.

The Lamborghini Gallardo though, kept accelerating. The car soared through the air like the Pandamobile and made the jump, while Night Terror turned his bike around to find another way.

Unfortunately, while Ryan was undoubtedly the most experienced driver in the world, Pluto's car could go twice as fast as his own. The Lamborghini started to gain ground, from three hundred meters to two hundred.

A chill ran down Ryan's spine, like the hand of death crawling on his back. His heartbeat accelerated, his breathing grew a little shorter. The courier felt like a rabbit hearing the faint steps of a predator nearby. His vision started to blur at the edges, his fingers twitched, and he heard his own heartbeat in his skull.

Pluto's evil eye was on him now.

"Hit her!" he snarled at Felix, Pluto's power making him unnaturally anxious. "Hit her, hit her!"

"I'm trying!" Felix panicked, removing his seat-belt and struggling to find a new projectile. "And I'm running out of darts!"

In which case... "Kitten, hold the driving wheel."

"What?" Felix hastily grabbed the wheel as Ryan kicked his door open, grabbing a revolver from under his suit. Then, as

his cat struggled to keep the Pandamobile on track, the courier rose half out of the car.

"Didn't you hear?" Ryan shouted to Pluto, as he froze time and aimed at the Lamborghini. "I'm immortal!"

He fired multiple shots, two at the windshield, one at the engine, and two at the wheels.

Almost all of them bounced off.

"A bulletproof car?" Ryan raged as time resumed, as he took back the driving wheel and closed his door. "They have bulletproof cars, and we have a *Fiat Panda*?"

Worse, the Pandamobile's car hood let out a puff of smoke, a flame rising from below. The calamities had started targeting the engine.

"Leave me and run!" Felix shouted, as he found the only item left to throw: the panda doll dangling from the rear-view mirror. He grabbed it and prepared to throw this lethal projectile like a grenade. "They're only after me!"

"No way, let me think!" Ryan snarled, his breathing getting shorter, his body colder. The sun had now set, night ruled supreme, and the enemy car was now within one hundred meters. "Let me think, I can figure—"

"Cesare."

Ryan froze in fear, as he recognized the voice coming from his back.

He didn't even dare look behind himself. He looked into the rear-view, and he *saw*.

It was dark outside, and Bloodstream sat at the back.

He was exactly like in Ryan's memory, a monstrous, human-shaped blob of blood. And he *remembered*.

"You're dead..." Ryan whispered, his voice breaking in primal fear. "You're dead."

"Because you killed me!" His arms lunged for Ryan's throat and started to choke him, like in his childhood. The courier lost his breath, and control of the driving wheel. "Your own father!"

"Ryan, what's happening?" Felix panicked, as he abandoned his plan to throw the doll to regain control of the car. Unfortunately, he couldn't. Without the brakes, an intact engine, and a good driver, the Pandamobile veered off course.

The car crashed through the guardrail, and fell from the highway.

Felix screamed in horror, as the Pandamobile prepared to crash into the woods below. Ryan activated his time-stop, the instinct of a dead man.

Bloodstream's hold vanished along with his ghost, though the pain in the courier's neck didn't. The Pandamobile had frozen a few meters above the ground, interrupting the fall.

Working entirely on instinct, Ryan kicked the door of his car open and grabbed the time-frozen Felix. He leapt out of the car with his friend, both rolling on the soft grass a few meters away from their vehicle.

When time resumed, the Pandamobile hit the ground and exploded in a fiery detonation. Smoke and fumes rose from

the wreck, illuminating the darkness. Bloodstream was nowhere to be found.

He had never been there at all.

“An... illusion...” Ryan croaked, as he regained his breath and rose back to his feet. An illusion that could *harm* the target. Psychosomatic wounds? “Night Terror?”

“No time!” Felix said, pointing a finger at the highway above. The Lamborghini had stopped at the edge, Pluto and Sparrow stepping out of it to inspect the Pandamobile’s wreckage.

Ryan and Felix immediately fled into the woods, just as Sparrow noticed them. The assassin unleashed a crimson beam from her vantage point and set a tree on fire, but the two heroes managed to escape into the darkness.

The hunt had only started.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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68: Death Stranding

From *Friday the 13th* to *Candyman*, Ryan had seen all the slasher movies.

He had acted in a few too, either as the relentless terminator during his brief Punisher phase, or as the lonely target pursued by malevolent Psychos. He still looked back fondly on that run where he escaped the Centipede with only his boxers on. Good times.

So the current situation was nothing extraordinary. Night Terror was just Freddy Krueger, except he could attack people while they were awake. Pluto was Death from *Final Destination*. The Vamp was a trap; literal death by sex. As for Sparrow... she didn't fit any box.

Perhaps she would be the final girl? The assassin was a bit old for the role, but Ryan was nothing if not open-minded.

Anyway, he and Atom Cat had managed to escape through the woods, eventually moving far enough that Sparrow could no longer target them with lasers. The duo followed a hiking path down a wooded valley, surrounded by lush green ferns, verdant trees, orchids, and cascading water. Ryan recognized the area as the Valle Delle Ferriere, a natural reserve pre-war.

Unfortunately, the courier sensed Pluto's power active on his person. His heartbeat raced unnaturally, his fingers twitched with tension, and he almost tripped on a rock at

one point. They had put distance between the Augusti Underboss and themselves, but she wouldn't relent.

"If we continue south, we should reach the rendezvous point with Shortie." Ryan checked his phone, trying to contact the Soviet Supreme without avail. "Something is jamming my cell phone."

"Probably Vulcan's tech," Atom Cat said. "Cut your phone off, they might be able to track it down."

Good point, and it would spare Ryan more messages from Lucky Girl. "How far do you think Night Pajama's range extends?"

"I don't know," Atom Cat admitted, checking Ryan's neck. Red marks marred his skin where the Bloodstream hallucination had choked him. "Are you okay? I admit I was quite scared when I saw you freak out like a man possessed."

Aww, he cared! Though after putting Ryan through such a scare, Night Pajama would suffer the Luigi treatment.
"Continue south, I will go east."

"You want us to *split*?"

That was a big no-no in slasher movies, but the courier was no helpless teenager. "Cruella can only target one person at once, and she's focusing on me. I will lead her into a trap. If you escape, we've won."

Also, Ryan couldn't risk having the Killer Seven track them to the rendezvous point. Risking his own life was one thing, endangering Len's was another.

Felix immediately protested, “I’m not leaving you to die, Ryan.”

“Trust me, Kitten,” the courier said, while grabbing a revolver in each hand. He would have taken a dose of Rampage too, if he didn’t worry Pluto’s power might worsen the side-effects. “I do better without teams.”

“But—”

“Do I have to shoot you too?”

The Kitten finally understood it was time to let the adults do their thing. “Okay,” Felix said, though he clearly didn’t like it. “Okay, I will trust you. But don’t you dare die for me.”

“God forbid, your sister would nag me in the afterlife if I did. Now go.”

With one last glance, Atom Kitten followed the hiking trail south, while the courier moved east.

Ryan strolled through the woods, even as he sensed Pluto’s invisible pressure growing stronger. He passed before the mossy ruins of houses and mills, and eventually followed a path following a tumbling river. He soon reached a wide area, with woods on one side, and a small waterfall on the other. A river coursed through a path of whetstone, which allowed one to step from one side to the other.

Leaves bristled as shadows approached. Ryan raised his guns, as multiple figures seemed to surround him; with the darkness, he couldn’t see clearly.

And yet... as a sweet, delicious perfume filled the air, the courier couldn’t help but relax. The tension in his body seemed to vanish, as an invisible voice told him to relax.

Slowly, a figure emerged from the bushes; she was the most beautiful sight the courier had seen in his entire life, in all his runs combined. A gorgeous redhead with a curvaceous body, and perfect skin; even her few freckles only enhanced her appeal. Her lips were red as blood, her eyes shining emeralds. Her red jacket seemed like a forbidden frontier, the promise of untold pleasure to whoever could get past it.

When he saw her, Ryan immediately wanted to drop everything, slam her against a tree, and give her the *Full Romano Special*.

“Hey,” the Vamp said with a warm, lovely smile, revealing her empty hands. Even her voice aroused the courier. “It’s okay. You’re safe. My poor boy, you must have been so scared, all alone in the woods.”

“Are you an angel?” By now, Ryan’s pop culture-infested subconscious was in full control of his body. “They’re the most beautiful creatures in the universe.”

“I can be your angel if you want,” the redhead said, putting a hand on her jacket’s zipper. “Just throw your weapons away, and... I’ll show you heaven.”

Who was Jasmine again? This was the perfect waifu. The romance endgame, the true ending.

But as Ryan was about to turn this horror movie into a porno, he realized one problem with this scenario.

“Gingers can’t go to heaven,” he said, “they don’t have souls.”

“What?”

And then he shot her.

The bullet impacted the killer's chest and tossed her back against a tree, but didn't shed blood. Oh, come on, what kind of supervillain wore a bulletproof vest nowadays? Ryan knew he should have aimed for the head!

"You shot me!" Vamp protested in shock. "You shot me!"

"Begone, demon!" Ryan raised his guns and fired at will like a maniac. "I know your game, succubus! Each of your freckles is a soul you stole!"

Vamp looked at Ryan as if he were mad, before fleeing behind a tree to avoid getting shot. Damn, this always happened when he tried to blow off stress! "Richie, get your ass over here!" she shouted. "How can you resist my pheromones, asshole?"

"Well, when you have taken as many mind-altering substances as I did, eventually you build a tolerance," Ryan replied, as he reloaded his guns. "Frankly, I've tried much stronger aphrodisiacs than your pheromones. You wouldn't believe half the things I've done."

"No matter," the ginger devil replied from behind her cover, "a kiss and your vitals will fail you."

As she said that, all too familiar inhuman faces emerged from the woods to surround Ryan from all sides. "Dear guest." Five vicious clowns, each armed with napkins and silver cutlery. "The Monte-Carlo is currently closed!"

"Bring it, Pennywise," Ryan replied, shooting the closest one as it collapsed into a white substance. These illusions could harm him like the real ones, but they died like the originals too. They only had as much power as his mind gave them.

As he engaged the clowns, Vamp left her hiding spot and moved around bushes like a stalking lion, her hands now letting out some kind of colored smoke. Lethal pheromones, most probably.

Ryan briefly stopped time, the Monaco illusions vanishing instantly. However, unlike Bloodstream's ghost before, when time resumed, the clowns returned to life.

"Is that the best you've got, Pajamas?" he taunted Night Terror, as he slaughtered his way through the clowns. "I killed thousands of them! I even ate one!"

Then, as he was surrounded by darkness and dead clowns, a new smell filled the air. One that filled him with anxiety and dread. The stench of death and disease and—

"Riri."

Ryan turned around, and faced her.

She stood on the whetstone near the waterfall, wearing clothes drenched in blood.

"Shortie?" Ryan asked, though intellectually, he knew this was all in his head.

Len opened her mouth, only to vomit blood. She cried crimson tears while letting out an ear-piercing shriek, and charged at the courier with a knife raised.

Ryan was so startled by the sight, that the illusion had closed the gap before he could aim. She used one arm to push him against a tree, and the other to try and stab him with a knife. The courier had to drop one of his guns to catch her hand and keep the blade away; he then

attempted to aim with his remaining gun, even as his attacker started shocking him...

"You never left Monaco." The illusion's voice didn't belong to Len, but Ryan himself. "You're still in that bed, and this is all a dying dream."

That was probably the worst thing someone could have said to the time-traveler, and it made him lose focus for an instant. Night Terror's blade instantly hit Ryan's thigh, though the courier managed to deviate the attack away from his vitals.

Unfortunately, while the scary special effect failure kept him pinned to a tree, Vamp emerged from her hiding spot. "You should have taken the easy way out, jackass," she told Ryan as her pheromone-charged hand moved towards his neck. "At least I would have fucked you first."

"Maybe next time," Ryan replied with a scowl of pain, before freezing time.

He expected the illusion to vanish, but instead, it merely transformed. From a nightmarish, twisted version of Len, to a masked man in a full black suit.

"There you are."

Ryan pushed the paralyzed Night Terror away, and shot him twice in the head.

When time resumed, the Blue Genome's corpse crashed against a surprised Vamp and caused her to trip on the whetstones, nearly falling into the waterfall nearby. One hand on his thigh wound, Ryan raised his gun at her.

"Wait," the Vamp pleaded while raising her hands in surrender, her scent filling Ryan with a mix of desire and regret. "Don't kill me! I can make it worth your while!"

Yes, she would be his. His mind, his body screamed it at him. She would do everything Ryan wanted; he just had to drop his gun, and take her now. "What's your name?" the courier asked, pointing his gun at Night Terror's remains. "His and yours? For later."

"Richard Pinkman, and Karen Ricci!" She forced herself to smile. "Yes, lower that gun, and I will kiss your wound—"

Ryan shot the ginger menace in the head before she could tempt him further.

"No sex before marriage," he quipped, as the waters dragged the assassins' bodies down the waterfall. "My purity is my shield!"

Afterward, Ryan let out a sigh of pain, Night Terror's knife still embedded in his flesh. He couldn't remove it without risking bleeding out, even with his enhanced physiology. At least, not until he found a safe spot.

However, he didn't have time for this. The courier heard an explosion in the distance, south of his location. It seemed Atom Cat was fighting for his life too, in spite of the time-traveler's best efforts.

Ryan could barely hear himself think, as his heartbeat rose in intensity. His heart felt as if it would burst in his chest, and his vision blurred at the edge.

"I'm impressed."

Pluto.

Ryan immediately raised his gun in the darkness, but couldn't locate her. Was she hiding behind a tree? Down the waterfall? No, the voice was a distant shout, far away.

"No one has survived against us so long before, at least not without backup." Pluto fell silent for a brief instant, while Ryan tried to locate her by sound. "You are Quicksave, are you not? My niece asked us that no harm befall you a while ago."

"She asked me to spare you too," Ryan replied with a scowl. He couldn't hear right with that heartbeat drum in his head! "You know, I've been meaning to ask, are you single?"

"I'm widowed," she replied with a tone that made Ryan wonder if she was joking. "Why?"

Either it was the lasting effects of the pheromones, Jasmine's absence in his life, or sheer masochism, but the courier couldn't help but be a relentless flirt. "Can't we solve our differences the noble way, with an arranged marriage? I swear, I will be the best you ever had."

"I will pass," Pluto replied, all business. "Your thought process is painfully transparent. Separating so I could only focus on one of you only. But Sparrow is giving chase to the traitor as we speak. Your scheme changed nothing."

"Don't you know cats eat sparrows?" Ryan shook his head, on edge. No calamity had befallen him so far because Pluto wanted an audience, but he had no idea what would happen once she fully unleashed her power at this distance. "You don't know anything about the animal kingdom."

"I have studied your marker from afar, and it seems strange. As if connected to a second one, far, far beyond my reach. A universe that my curse cannot touch." Her voice

was getting closer. "You're not really here, are you? You're just a projection. Even if my calamities kill you, you will pop up again."

"Honestly, I don't think the Earth would survive two of me." At least it meant that while Pluto could kill Ryan now and track him in future loops, she couldn't put the courier down permanently. The news came as a relief.

Now, if only he could confirm the same with Cancel, that would be perfect.

"If you fight so ferociously to live, then there is a cost to pay, even if you can recover," the Underboss said with sharp insight. "Stay out of this, Quicksave. My brother wants his godson dead for his treachery. He doesn't care about you. Just... look the other way."

"Sorry, you're too poor to afford my rates."

"Then *die*."

Pluto unleashed the full strength of her curse at him, and the world trembled.

Literally. The ground quaked below his feet, and a terrible wind blew through the trees. Leaves flew in his direction, and before Ryan knew what hit him, they cut through his clothes and skin like razors. The gun in the courier's hands made a worrying sound, and branches fell on him at the speed of javelins.

Ryan hurriedly froze time to dodge the projectiles and toss his gun away, just before the gunpowder inside caused it to explode mid-flight.

"I see how your power works," he heard Pluto taunting him as time resumed. "You freeze time for a few seconds. Five? Maybe ten? You can gain a respite from my curse by breaking the flow of causality, but at this distance, you can't escape everything. At some point, you will slip up. Eventually, you will die. Everything dies."

Ryan opened his mouth for a clever retort, only for something to catch him from behind. A noose-shaped branch from a tree grabbed his neck and raised him above the ground, tightening its hold. At the same time, Night Terror's knife moved on its own, worming its way through his flesh as if wielded by an invisible hand.

At such a short distance, Pluto's curse outright warped reality. It caused the *world itself* to want Ryan dead.

Worse, the courier heard a gunshot in the distance. Pluto had decided to speed his demise along the old-fashioned way.

Hastily freezing time, Ryan managed to break the branch holding him prisoner, removed Night Terror's knife, and tossed it aside before it could worm its way to his vitals. As he moved, he noticed Pluto's bullet frozen in midair; its trajectory had clearly deviated to target the courier's head.

Should he use the plushie? No, the risk was too great. If Pluto's power could affect it, then it might do worse than just turn against Ryan.

No sooner did the courier step out of the way and time resumed, than he almost tripped and broke his skull against a large stone. His movements slowed down, his heart beating so fast his enhanced body couldn't keep up with the blood flow.

Beep.

Ryan heard a familiar sound coming from inside his suit.

The A-bomb!

Shit, shit, shit! Pluto's power prioritized killing him over collateral damage!

Without any other choice, Ryan froze time, dragged the device out of his clothes, and hastily disabled it. Thankfully, the temporal anomaly canceled the calamitous power and he managed to remove the detonator.

However, when time resumed, he found himself without any defense.

The ground collapsed beneath his feet, dragging him into the river and down the small waterfall. Ryan managed to protect his head with his arms before he hit a large stone below, but part of the natural structure collapsed behind him. A pile of rubble buried him from the chest down, crushing his legs.

He only had the strength to raise his head, as a lone shadow loomed over him from atop the waterfall.

"This is as far as you go, Quicksave," Pluto said, raising a gun at him from the higher ground. The distance between them was no more than fifteen meters now. "I will tell my niece you did your best."

"I'll..." Ryan rasped, the water level rising and threatening to drown him. "Be... back..."

"And I will kill you as many times as it takes."

"No, you won't!" Both Pluto and Ryan turned their heads, Felix emerging from the woods with a weapon, charged with his explosive power.

The panda doll from the Pandamobile!

Yes! Ryan thought, his lungs too squeezed by rubble to articulate his words. *Use the power! Use the panda power!*

"Take this!" Felix snarled, as he prepared to throw the projectile at a stoic Pluto.

The courier felt the death curse's pressure vanish, as it targeted Felix next.

A rain of branches and leaves hit the young hero from behind just as he tossed his projectile, two wood spears impaling him through the right leg and shoulder. Felix collapsed while the leaves hit the panda doll in midair, detonating it at a safe distance.

Pluto could use her ability *defensively*?

"Where is Sparrow?" Cruella asked calmly while dusting off her dress. Kitten's valiant effort had achieved exactly nothing.

"Dead," Felix said with a snarl of pain. The branch-spears had pinned him to the ground, and his blood mixed with the water falling down the waterfall. "Took her by surprise... and blasted her."

Pluto's scowl deepened, and she aimed at Kitten's head with her gun. "She was a loyal soldier," she said, taking a step in his direction. Felix coughed blood, as the curse intensified and attacked his vitals. "Truly, my niece was too good for you."

It couldn't end like this!

This run... it had started so well, and he had made so much progress... Ryan was so close to breaking his own curse, to solve the secret of carrying someone across loops. It couldn't end like this, not after everything!

God answered his silent prayer with a meowing sound.

Pluto stopped before she could fire a bullet, as a white furball hopped out of the forest and right in front of Felix. The animal sat right in front of Atom Kitten, and looked at Pluto with its adorable eyes.

Eugène-Henry!

"What is..." Pluto's expression had changed from bored professionalism to a hint of fear. No more wooden spears or leaves fell to finish her prey off. In fact, strands of yellow energy seemed to flicker around the area, as if something challenged the Underboss' power. "What is this thing?"

And someone had followed the cat through the wood. A striking young woman with hair as bright as the sun, the most elegant costume, and a gold-plated gun.

Fortuna.

Of all people, it was Fortuna who came to the rescue. A living good luck charm.

Even better, her power seemed to interfere enough with Pluto's that no calamity or heart attack finished her brother off. Instead, a golden cloud surrounded Fortuna like a halo, and shielded Felix thanks to the physical proximity.

“Godmother...” she said with a frown, before noticing her brother and immediately rushing to his side. “Felix! Felix are you alright!”

“Fortuna.” Pluto frowned deeply, her gun still pointed at Felix. “You were to stay with Livia.”

“I... I tried to follow—” Fortuna’s eyes noticed Ryan down the waterfall, and widened in shock. “Ryan!?”

The courier tried to wave a hand at her, but his body failed. Now that Pluto’s death curse didn’t target him, the water level had fallen and no longer threatened to drown him, but his body remained crushed, battered, and bleeding. He was in no shape to interfere.

Fortuna’s horrified eyes moved from Ryan to Felix, as she quickly put the two and two together. “No...”

“Your parents gave their authorization,” Pluto said, almost reading Lucky Girl’s mind. “The task fell on me, specifically so you wouldn’t have to sully your hands.”

“But...” Fortuna’s voice broke in her throat, as she tried to form a coherent sentence. “It can’t be!”

“He betrayed the organization to the Carnival,” Pluto insisted, growing annoyed with Felix’s continued survival. “Now move out of my way. It has to be done.”

Fortuna’s panic turned into a scowl, as she silently reached a decision.

“Godmother.” Fortuna raised her own gun at Pluto’s head, while stepping between the killer and Felix. “Get away from my brother.”

If she wasn't such an annoyance, Ryan might have fallen for her on the spot.

"You're turning traitor too?" Pluto glared at the siblings. "You disgrace your parents, both of you."

"Get away from my brother!" Fortuna repeated, her fingers trembling on the trigger. "I'm... I won't hesitate!"

The two women exchanged a glare, the tension rising between them. "Fortuna, no..." Felix pleaded, his eyes widening in dread. "No, don't..."

"Spare the rod," Pluto said, calmly aiming her weapon at Fortuna while the death curse found a new target. Yellow strands surrounded Fortuna's cloud, like spears ready to fall on a shield. "Spoil the child."

Two gunshots echoed across the forest, and then silence.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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69: Limited Time

Ryan's vision blurred. It was hard to focus; darkness lurked at the edge of his vision, and his strength left him. He couldn't even feel his legs, and his whole body felt cold.

Maybe it was the loss of blood, or the leftover damage he suffered from the battle with Pluto. Or perhaps it was Eugène-Henry's doing, as the cat teleported right in front of Ryan. The feline looked down on the trapped Genome without a sound, like a guide to the underworld.

“Fortuna!”

Above the waterfall, a horrified Atom Cat held his sister in his arms, blood flowing from her chest. Pluto's corpse fell down the waterfall, a hole in her forehead. The river pulled the Underboss downstream to her last abode; her curse had been canceled and the woods returned to normal, though it came with a cost.

Fortuna had made a lucky shot... but even luck couldn't cheat death from her due.

“Fortuna!” Felix shouted, trying to cover his sister's wound with his hand and prevent her from bleeding out. Ryan knew enough about medicine to know it was useless. If he had the tools and the energy, he might have saved her.

He would save her still. He would save them all the next time around.

In the end, only Ryan was cursed with immortality. Only he could carry that burden.

As he started to lose consciousness, Ryan noticed a metal shadow moving upstream. A mermaid in power armor crossing the river to rescue him.

“Riri!” Len shouted in horror while rushing at his side, immediately pushing away the debris keeping him down.
“I’m here! I’m here!”

Len...

Always there to save him when all was lost.

“I must go now.”

For a moment, the courier thought he had spoken out loud, until he realized *where* the disembodied voice came from.

Something spoke through Eugène-Henry, using Ryan’s own voice.

“The rest,” the cat looked into the courier’s eyes, his feline gaze shining purple with the wisdom of the stars, “is up to you.”

A flash of violet light overwhelmed Ryan, and he lost consciousness.

When Ryan opened his eyes, it was to the tune of *The International*.

The ceiling was crimson red, and he faced a portrait of Marx and Engel. An intravenous device pumped his right arm with

anesthesia, right next to a steampunk wheelchair of leather and tin.

Damn it, had he woken in a hidden Soviet lab again? Once had been enough!

Ryan's eyes wandered around himself, his body feeling heavy; he had trouble breathing correctly, and his chest itched. Most importantly, he couldn't feel anything below his waist, including his most dangerous weapon. Even Vamp died in an attempt to claim it for herself.

He was in a hospital bed, with a TV and a window leading into a dark undersea abyss. Sitting on a chair right in front of him, Little Sarah read *Journey to the Center of the Earth* by Jules Verne. She hadn't noticed him waking up.

Ryan turned his head, glancing at another bed near his own. Atom Cat laid half-hidden beneath the bed sheet, watching the ceiling with empty eyes. Bandages covered his torso, and he had an intravenous system of his own.

"Felix?" Ryan's voice startled Sarah, who hastily closed her book. "Kitten?"

Nothing.

Atom Cat didn't even respond. His gaze was a blank, empty abyss of nothingness, a thousand-yard stare.

"He has been like that since Ma brought you in," Little Sarah said with a frown. "He doesn't respond when people call him. I've seen that gaze before in Rust Town. He's broken inside, and he's not coming back."

"He will." Ryan knew that from experience. "Eventually, when it's done chewing on you, the abyss spits you back."

Of course, the courier would probably turn back time before Atom Cat finished that healing process. Even if she annoyed him, he couldn't let Fortuna stay dead. Not after she gave her life to save her brother.

"Now you're awake, get your ass out of bed," Little Sarah said, before realizing the obvious. "Figuratively, I mean. How do you feel?"

"Without my legs, like Christopher Reeves."

"I don't know who that is."

"And that's why I can't stand you."

"At least I still have le—" Little Sarah suddenly stopped, as she put the two and two together. "Oh wait, I get the joke! Can't stand!"

"Now, if you can bring me the wheelchair," Ryan said, glancing at his new *Plymouth Fury*. "I will let you push me around a bit, but please don't talk behind my back."

"Do you want me to find you a parking lot?" Little Sarah replied, as she put her book aside and helped Ryan get into the wheelchair. As he expected, the rest of the courier's body hadn't been spared either. He had almost as many bandages as an Egyptian mummy.

"It's a start, but you need training in pun-fu," Ryan said.
"How long was I out?"

"Ma brought you in yesterday night," she replied, grabbing the pole holding the intravenous system and attaching it to the wheelchair. "The other orphans made bets about your death. Most said you wouldn't make it."

“I hope you bet on me.”

If he could trust her smile, she did. “Yeah, you’re too mean to die, and Ma... it would have hurt Ma, if you didn’t wake up.” Sarah glared at the courier. “She was in tears when she brought you here.”

“I didn’t plan on it,” Ryan said with a sigh. “Can you bring me to her?”

“Sure.” Sarah pushed the wheelchair towards the ‘hospital’s’ door, while Ryan sent one last glance to Atom Cat. Felix had stopped looking at the ceiling, and now glanced at the undersea abyss outside the habitat with a blank face.

Ryan couldn’t blame him. His own parents had signed his death warrant, and a sister he left behind died for him. It would shake anyone. “Felix...”

“I don’t want to talk,” Kitten said suddenly, his voice emotionless.

Now wasn’t the time. Maybe never.

Sarah pushed the wheelchair through a steel corridor, and eventually, to Len’s workshop. Ryan found his best friend tinkering on her diving armor, which she had linked to the Chronoradio and Dynamis’ brain-tech with cables. Some of the suit’s parts had been replaced with copies of Jasmine’s design, including the helmet. It seemed Len had decided to repurpose her existing equipment rather than make something new, perhaps due to lack of resources.

And Eugène-Henry stood atop a server, like a sphinx.

“Riri...” The sheer relief on Len’s face was almost palpable.
“You’ve woken up.”

“Did you ever doubt?” he joked.

When the Genius winced, Ryan realized he should have kept his mouth shut. “Yes, I *did*,” she said with a frown. For the first time, he noticed the red shade around Len’s eyes, as if she had repeatedly wiped away tears. “I thought... I thought I was too late...”

“You’re an ass,” Sarah told Ryan with a glare. “I would kick you in the leg, if it wasn’t useless.”

“You can still pinch me in the arm if you want,” Ryan replied, and she did. “Ouch!”

“You deserve worse,” Sarah said, before looking at Len with concern. “Ma, you should rest. I can bring you a warm hot chocolate.”

“No, it’s okay. Thanks, sweetie.” Len forced herself to smile at Sarah. “Can you... leave us for a moment?”

The little girl clearly didn’t want to obey, but did so anyway. The workshop’s door closed behind her, leaving Len and Ryan alone.

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said immediately.

Len looked away. “I couldn’t save her. The girl. She was already drowning in her own blood when... when I...”

“She was dead before you even arrived.” Ryan moved the wheelchair forward, putting a hand on Len’s arm. To his surprise, she didn’t immediately back away from the physical contact. “Shortie, it’s not your fault.”

She pushed his hand away. “If I had arrived earlier...”

“You would have died,” Ryan said. “Who told you where we were?”

“I...” Her expression turned from saddened to embarrassed. “I hacked your phone. After you turned it off, I had to search for you on foot.”

He should be mad at her for this, but the NSA did it first. Ryan glanced at the device, and then at Eugène-Henry. The cat seemed delighted to see his master again, but his gaze had returned to its natural blue. “Did you finish the consciousness-transfer device?”

“I think so,” Len declared with a frown. “But it’s gone.”

“What’s gone?” Ryan asked with a frown.

“Your cat’s energy readings. They’re gone. He’s a normal cat now.” Len shook her head, while Eugène-Henry showed them his royal ass. “Whatever caused his teleportation jumps before, it stopped.”

A Purple World entity had possessed Eugène-Henry like the plushie, and then left the building.

Why? Why did it act this way? What was the point? Ryan couldn’t figure it out, but he would in time. “How are things on the surface?”

Len instantly winced. Clearly, things had only changed for the worse. “Riri, you really want to know? You just woke up.”

“Yes, I want to.”

Len slowly moved towards a computer hooked to the servers, typed on the keyboard, and showed him the screen.

Droplets covered the camera recording the image, so Ryan assumed it came from a sea-based probe. But the quality was enough for the courier to see the disaster in all its glory. An awfully familiar disaster.

New Rome had turned into a warzone, with Augusti Genomes and Dynamis forces openly warring in the streets. The Private Security's helicopters rained bullets on superpowered gangsters, who retaliated with fireballs. Flames consumed buildings, including the Il Migliore HQ, which Vulcan and an armored squadron bombarded with missiles. A horde of cybernetically enhanced dinosaurs soon emerged from the Dynamis tower, engaging the attackers in melee. The Panda led the charge.

Wyvern had been pinned to a building by countless spears and sharp weapons, while Mars dueled a colossal plant monster over the rooftops. Spatial tears opened around the centurion wannabe, raining swords and spears upon the vegetal abomination. Yet the creature retaliated with vines as thick as trucks, and pollen capable of melting steel. As Wyvern freed herself, Mars jumped from one rooftop to the other by materializing shields beneath his feet to escape her.

The strip had been flooded by a tidal wave, and corpses washed up on an artificial shore, only to rise up again to attack Dynamis facilities. Neptune himself rampaged across Rust Town, having shaped an astronomical quantity of water into the shape of a colossal squid. A living laser cut one of its tentacles, and was soon joined by Devilry. But in spite of their best efforts, the liquid elemental quickly pulled itself

back together and continued its deadly march towards the junkyard.

The villa atop Mount Augustus had transformed into a fuming crater, over which two lights dueled to the death; a raging sun, and a crimson lightning bolt. Their fight was by far the most fearsome, both moving so fast even the camera had troubles following them. Mighty thunderbolts and plasma blasts rained down from the heavens, devastating the district around the mountain.

The camera provided a panoramic view of the disaster, eventually reaching the harbor. Mortimer, Lanka, and other Genomes fired at will against an unseen form, which almost gave Ryan a headache simply showing up on screen. A horrifying eldritch mascot with swirling tentacles for a beard, great dark wings, and webbed hands; a terrifying mix between a squid and a human, worn by a foolish Genome unable to control its public domain-powered darkness. The abomination let out a scream, whose garbled words Ryan's maddened mind managed to understand.

“CTHULHU FHTAGN!”

Wardrobe had brought out the apocalypse suit. Things were that bad.

“It’s... it’s like that all over the coast,” Len admitted, as she sank in a chair of her own. “Not just New Rome. Sicily and Sardinia too.”

It was the end of the last loop, all over again. Destroying the Meta had only delayed the inevitable. So long as events remained on their current track, Dynamis, the Carnival, and the Augusti were bound to collide with disastrous results.

His Perfect Run looked so far away still. “I’m sorry Shortie, but Lab Sixty-Six will be for next time.”

“Yeah,” she replied with a frown. “It was like this? The previous time?”

“Not as terrible, but the result is the same. Adam just provided a bigger matc—” The computer let out a bleep.
“What is it?”

“A call,” Len said, frowning as she typed on the keyboard.
“Vulcan.”

Ryan’s heart skipped a beat. Was this a ray of hope, in the middle of another bad ending? “Open the channel.”

The picture on the screen changed from New Rome’s apocalyptic landscape, to a young woman sitting in a chair.

But it wasn’t Jasmine.

“Ryan,” Livia said with relief, as her visage appeared on the screen. “Thank goodness, since I couldn’t see you, I... I wasn’t sure.”

Len’s face turned into a scowl, while Ryan took it in stride. “If I were dead, princess, this horrible present would have ended abruptly.”

“True, but I worried that perhaps, you hadn’t told me the entire truth,” Livia replied with a joyless smile, before it broke off completely. “Fortuna, is she...”

“Dead,” Ryan admitted, causing Livia’s expression to deaden into deep grief. “Felix is alive, but deeply shaken.”

Livia fell entirely silent, her expression dead, her eyes looking down. “I... I foresaw it,” she muttered to herself, holding back tears, “but I hoped... I hoped I... is my aunt...”

“Fortuna died defending her brother from Pluto, and if she had her way, your *late* aunt would have killed Felix too.”

Though it was blunt, Ryan thought she needed to hear the grim truth right now. “Your father gave the order, and Pluto didn’t think twice about carrying it out.”

“I never wanted this,” she said, joining her fingers. “I never... I never thought it would come to *this*.”

Even Len’s expression changed to sympathy, even if she clearly disliked Livia; perhaps because she empathized with the mafia princess’ situation.

Ryan sighed. “I will make it alright,” he said, his tone softening. “I will make it right again.”

Livia finally looked up. “Is there truly no other way?” she asked, her tone breaking. “Nobody will remember. Nobody but you. If nobody else remembers... if nobody remembers, it will happen again.”

Ryan glanced at Len, who shook her head. She had guessed his thoughts, and disagreed with the idea. Livia was sharp enough to catch on to their unease. “You have a plan to solve this issue,” she guessed.

“We can’t tell you,” Len said before Ryan could open his mouth. “We... I’m sorry, but no.”

“You are the Underdive, correct? Len Sabino.” Livia regained her composure as she focused on Shortie, putting on her poker face. Perhaps she had started using her power to observe and predict the Genius. “You know everything.”

"Yes," Len admitted. "And... I was against him telling you."

"I understand why you distrust me, especially after... after what my aunt did." Livia's fingers fidgeted, the young woman unable to hide her shame. "But I swear, I never wanted this to happen. I did everything I could to stop it."

Len wasn't impressed much. "But you couldn't."

"No. No, I couldn't." Livia closed her eyes and bit her lips. The little gesture reminded Ryan of Len, so very much. "My father... he usually listens to me. But not on this. No argument, in any possibility I've seen, could cause him to reconsider. His hatred of Hargraves runs too deep."

"Where are you even?" Len asked with a frown. "How can we be sure that others aren't listening?"

"I am in a safe place outside New Rome alongside Narcinia. It's a private line, I assure you. Vulcan's private line, and she is too busy to listen." Livia cleared her throat. "It's... it's precisely because she is too busy that I call you now."

"How did you know... how did you know Ryan was here?" Len continued. "You said your power didn't work on him."

"It doesn't, but I can still see the results of his actions afterward. I looked for a possibility where I could talk to Felix, and it always involved using this line. I don't even know where you are."

Ryan cleared his throat. "Shortie, I think that's enough. We're going nowhere with this."

But Len would hear nothing of it. "She told you she could talk her father out of... out of doing stupid things. She

couldn't. What if she slips up about us to Augustus? Riri, she is a bomb—”

“I was wrong, alright!”

Livia's outburst startled everyone.

“I was wrong,” the Augusti princess said, her expression twisting into a mix of remorse, grief, and disappointment. “I wanted to think Dad... I wanted Dad not to be capable of such destruction. But I was wrong. Even Narcinia...”

“You shouldn't have trusted Augustus,” Len said. “It was written on the walls.”

“Didn't you trust your own parents?” Livia asked bitterly. “When your parents told you something, did you distrust everything they said?”

Len flinched as if she had been slapped. That remark hit too close to home.

“Look...” Livia let out a long, heavy breath. “If there is any chance to right these wrongs, I want to help in any way I can. My family caused so much pain, and now it's up to you to make up for them. Now I understand the burden on your shoulders, Ryan. I... I'm not blind. I can see your wounds. After what you sacrificed to help me and Felix, I want to return the favor. I told you on the phone. You did not help an ingrate.”

“So you finally believe me? About how we weren't enemies.” Ryan asked, Livia answering with a nod. “Took some trying.”

“I know maybe it's too late, but... I was just scared, alright.” Livia looked at the courier. “I was scared of you. You're

just... you're *terrifying*, Ryan. You know so much, but you can erase everything we do at will. You've done so countless times. None of my powers work on you. They work on *Father*, but not on *you*."

When you put it that way...

Ryan said nothing, turning instead towards a silent Len. The courier could have forced the issue, but Shortie had been at his side through thick and thin. If she didn't trust Livia enough to involve her in their scheme, then he would have to respect her wish. Even if he didn't like it.

In the end, Len's dilemma was the same as Ryan when he confided in Jasmine during the previous loop. To risk opening up; to risk betrayal and disappointment, for an uncertain future. To dare say something, and never take it back.

"We are..." Len hesitated, but finally spoke up. "We're trying to develop a system capable of sending someone's consciousness back in time."

"Truly?" A streak of hope appeared on Livia's face. "How can I help? Can I help?"

"I have created a memory map of myself," Len admitted. "It will transmit my memories to my previous self. But my system... I can't send more than one person back in time. At least not yet. I'm not even sure... I'm not even sure it will work at all. I modified one of my armors based on Ryan's design, but... there's no back-up. No way to be sure it will work."

"You have one," Livia said immediately, eager at the idea of contributing. Her guilt ate her up like a festering wound. "I may not retain my memories, but I keep a detailed journal. I

could save information, and transmit it to Ryan in the next iteration. I could record your machine's design."

"No," Len protested, still too suspicious of the Augusti princess to give up something that valuable. "No, not the machine. *Never* the machine."

"The memory map then," Livia proposed calmly.

Ryan's heart skipped a beat. "You could record that?"

"It's all data, is it not? Lines of code?" Len answered Livia's question with a cautious nod. "Then I can take a snapshot. If the transfer fails, you will have a backup."

The Genius then turned to the courier, looking into his eyes. It would be far less risky than providing the blueprints, since the brainmap was an enormous mass of incomprehensible data without the original machine or Len's own technology... but it meant Livia could keep Shortie's memories hostage.

"Riri?"

After a short moment, Ryan answered with a nod. In the best-case scenario, it wouldn't cost them anything; and in the worst-case... in the worst case, it could make all the difference. He *wanted* to trust Livia. The courier wanted to think that for once, he could rely on someone on the other side of time. That he wouldn't be alone when he started again.

"Thank you. Both of you." Livia made a deep, formal bow. "I swear, I will not disappoint you. When will you turn back time?"

"I suppose it will happen as soon as I send Shortie's consciousness backward?" Ryan asked, glancing at his friend.

"Yes," Len answered with a nod. "My system should cause an... an early end, as the message is sent."

A polite way to say it would kill Ryan.

"Is..." Livia cleared her throat, trying to find her words. "Is it possible I speak to Felix beforehand?"

"I will link your feed to his TV," Len said. "And send you the memory map too."

"Thank you," Livia said with a sad smile. "Thank you."

Len cut the conversation short, the screen turning black.
"You don't like it," Ryan said.

"No, Riri. No, I do not. If it goes wrong, she will have my life in her hands. If I fail, I... I will be her hostage, and she may use me against you. Do you understand that, Riri?"

"I do." He narrowed his eyebrows. "But why did you tell her, if you don't trust her?"

"Because I trust *you*, Riri," Len replied. "And... I was afraid of you too once. But I was wrong."

"Thanks, Shortie." Damn, he had sand in his eyes. "If the world is just, you will remember these words."

"It's not," she said, looking away. "But... I hope I'm wrong."

The courier glanced at his cat, who now rested on the server. "It said it was all up to us now," Ryan said. "It helped, but now, it's all up to us."

"I... I don't understand."

“Eugène-Henry. It said it had to go, and that the rest was all up to me now.” Now, Ryan saw it clearly. The entity had sent Chronoradio messages to encourage the courier as he considered giving up, caused him to meet with Livia early in the run, and subtly provided help to Len. Positioning Fortuna so that she would save Ryan’s life, and indirectly convince Livia to assist. “It set events in motion so this very meeting could happen.”

“It would mean... it would mean that it sent Fortuna to her death intentionally,” Len pointed out, skeptical. “Should we trust something using human life so carelessly?”

“I just want to see the best in people. Even interdimensional horrors, without prejudice.”

Len wasn’t convinced. “Sometimes, there’s no good part. Some people are rotten to the core.”

“Yeah, I met Big Fat Adam,” Ryan replied with a shrug. “But I still want to see the best.”

Look for the stars in the night sky.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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70: Gotcha

Sometimes, Ryan wondered if fate existed.

He had seen it across many loops. While they didn't exactly *repeat*, events often echoed one another even after he interfered. Though the circumstances were wildly different, this loop would end similarly to the previous one; with New Rome burning, Ryan trapped in a suit of mechanical armor, and a Genius trying to transfer her consciousness through time.

It made sense. Ryan was only one person at the end of the day, a stone thrown into a river; until he mastered a loop enough to maximize his impact and send it off-the-rails, the sequence of events was tempted to reassert itself. The courier literally fought against the whole universe, and the rule of causality.

But even if it cost him a great many things, Ryan always prevailed in the end. He never gave up on his hope that things would be different, because each loop was a little better than the previous one. His life was a process, each iteration optimizing the final run.

And if the courier succeeded in ferrying more people across time, he could do more than just throw pebbles in the river. He could throw it off-course with a landslide.

"I will need you to activate your power when I ask," Len said, as she put the modified armor's helmet on Ryan's face

and hooked the courier to her machinery. “From what I gathered, the Violet Flux should build up, reach critical mass before... before you approach the ten seconds mark.”

“Good, I would rather avoid making a new save point.” Ryan looked through the helmet’s lens, though no data showed up on them. Unlike Jasmine’s armor, Len’s design was cruder, experimental. It would serve as a fulcrum for his power, but her computer would run the actual computations. “So, how should it go?”

“I will send the memory map to my... my previous self.” Len sat behind her computer. “My current memories should overwrite the old ones. Hopefully. Maybe.”

“It will work,” Ryan said, both for her sake and his own. “It has to. Everything is in place for it to work.”

“We can’t be sure...” Len shook her head. “I... I hope it will work, Riri. But I can’t promise anything.”

The workshop’s door opened, interrupting the discussion. A bandaged Felix walked inside the room, his gaze switching from Len to Ryan. The courier could see the disbelief in his eyes, and then the quiet acceptance.

He had been standing behind the door for a while.

“How long... how long have you been listening?” Len asked with a worried frown.

“Long enough,” Felix replied as he sat on a workbench in front of Ryan. “Nice armor, but I prefer the cashmere suit.”

“One day, I’ll make a cashmere power armor,” Ryan joked.

"I guess you've got all the time in the world needed, when you can turn it back?" Felix marked a short pause, his eyes focusing on his former teammate. "Time-travel. It's crazy, but it explains a great many things. How long have you been at it? How far can you go?"

"Honestly, I don't know how old I am," Ryan admitted, before remembering one of his early encounters with Pluto. "Between five hundred and one thousand, give it or take. As for how far I can turn the clock, right before my arrival in New Rome."

"You've been at this for almost a millennia." Felix shook his head in disbelief. "That's crazy."

"Did... did Livia tell you?" Len asked with a frown.

"No, but I was starting to wonder. When you've eliminated the impossible, what remains must be the truth, no matter how improbable." Felix shook his head. "I stayed around Wardrobe for too long."

"You've made peace with Livia?" Ryan asked. It was one of the hopes he set for himself during his loop, and it would probably carry over to his perfect run.

"I wouldn't go so far, but... I think she understands why I left now. It took a war, but her faith in her father is finally shaken. Still too little, too late." Felix clenched his fists. "You can save my sister?"

"Yes," Ryan said. "I will."

"Thanks." The hero let out a sigh of relief, but his face remained full of concern. "Can't you bring me in for the ride too? You'll need help."

"No, sorry," Ryan said. The machine could only host one brainmap. "Believe me, I would if I could."

"We're..." Len cleared her throat. "We're not even sure I can make it at all."

Felix took it well, all things considered. Or more likely, all that he went through lately had numbed his emotional reaction. "I see. And once you go back, we all die?"

"You will forget," Ryan reassured him. "Like amnesia."

"Amnesia... I suppose that's one way to see it. Did..." Atom Kitten's eyes squinted at Ryan. "Did you fuck me before?"

"No," Ryan replied, much to his Kitten's disbelief. Of all things, that was the bit he worried about? "I have a whole '*Fuck, Marry, Kill*' list to fulfill before my perfect run. Marry Jamie, marry Yuki, fuck the Vamp, kill Psypsy..."

Len rolled her eyes, while Atom Cat crossed his arms. "I don't know why I'm not even surprised," he said, before falling silent. Clearly, he had a lot to process.

"Kitten?"

"I didn't understand how much she loved me," Felix said, looking at the floor. "Fortuna. I thought she would choose our parents over me, but I was wrong. I was wrong about her, and about Livia too. There's still hope for them. I... I never appreciated my sister, Ryan. I see that now. My own parents signed off my death warrant, but Fortuna... she chose me over them. When her back was against the wall, she did the right thing."

Neither Ryan nor Len said anything. Both understood that the hero spoke with his heart, and needed to get a truth off

his chest.

"And when you turn back time, Ryan, I'll forget that. I'll be angry and bitter at her, all over again. Her death will mean nothing."

"No, because I will remember," Ryan reassured Felix. His opinion of Lucky Girl hadn't been the best, but after seeing her sacrifice, it had greatly improved. She would make it through his perfect run, one way or another.

"Can I ask a favor, Quickie? Make sure I..." Atom Cat gathered his breath. "Make sure I *understand* that by the time you're done, and without her dying. I... I don't think I will ever make up with Fortuna, if you don't interfere."

"Don't worry, I'll find a way." Most likely, he would kidnap them both and bring them to family therapy. Even if he had to turn one of them into a pickle.

"Thanks." A genuine smile spread on Felix's face. "I had fun working with you, Ryan. You're a good friend."

"Damn it, Shortie, you should start the process before I die of diabetes." Ryan looked away from Felix, as his Genius friend typed on her keyboard. "We never got around to doing a training montage with the Panda."

"Yeah, I'll carry that regret to my grave," Felix mused.
"Would have been fun."

A terrible alarm echoed through the underwater base, interrupting the happy moment.

Ryan turned his head at Len, his heavy helmet slowly moving with his skull. A picture of the abyss outside appeared on her computer's screen, alongside the shape of

an enormous submarine. Projectors from Len's base cast light on its hull, and the logo painted on its steel shell.

Dynamis.

The computer bleeped, as someone tried to establish contact. Len cautiously answered with a frown, a new video feed forming on the screen. A ghoulish, shining skull looked at the Genomes in the workshop.

“So you lived, Atom Cat.” There was no relief in Alphonse Manada’s voice, only a hint of curiosity. *“I was wondering where you had run off to.”*

“Fallout?” Felix said as he climbed down from the workbench and approached Len’s computer. “What is the meaning of this? Aren’t you in New Rome?”

“I was, but we are moving our HQ and laboratories out of the city. Augustus destroyed our previous installations.” The Dynamis CEO glanced at Len. *“And we will pick up Miss Sabino along the way.”*

Len bristled in dread, much to Ryan’s frustration. “Et tu, Nagasaki?” he taunted the nuclear cyborg.

“Is that you inside that armor, Quicksave?” Fallout replied with a scoff. *“Good, you’re coming too. I will give you ten minutes to get out of this underwater hole and join us onboard our submarine. We are on a tight schedule, and Vulcan might give pursuit soon.”*

“No,” Len protested, shaking her head.

“We politely deny your request,” Ryan said. “Don’t force us to raise a new Berlin Wall.”

"I don't think you understand." Alphonse focused on Len, his shining gaze without emotion. *"We need her, dead or alive. If you don't surrender now, we'll flood this entire complex and harvest the corpse's genetic material."*

Shortie's face lost all color. "There are children inside!"

"We helped you against the Meta," Ryan pointed out, deciding to add this man to his kill list. "You have an odd view of long-term partnerships."

"I knew of your dealings with Livia Augusti, Quicksave. You betrayed us first." Alphonse grunted, ignoring Len's comment. *"It doesn't matter. If you want to spare lives, you'll join us."*

Felix didn't hide his fury and disappointment. "I thought you were one of the good ones."

"I am. Augustus will never be the face of Europe, so long as I live. All I do is to make sure he and his twisted kind don't win."

"How are you any different?" Felix snarled angrily. "You heard Hargraves. Augustus murdered an entire peaceful community to get his hands on my sister Narcinia. And now, you threaten the lives of children to put a Genius under your yoke."

"The difference is that I do it to save human lives, not destroy them. Can you even fathom how many people Augustus slew? How many more he will kill, now that he has let go of whatever brakes he had?" Alphonse turned to look at Len. *"The faster we end this war, the less people will die. If she comes with us, we will be one step closer to victory."*

“Why me?” Len asked, her voice breaking. “What... What did I do to you? Is this about the factory?”

“What point is there in telling you now?” Alphonse replied gruffly, but did shed some light on his motives. *“You are the key to refining our Elixir processing, Sabino. To mass-produce these potions, so they’re no longer a tool of oppression by the few.”*

“You want to make everyone a Genome,” Ryan realized.

“Yes. Augustus and warlords like him are able to exert so much influence because they concentrate Genomes into their organizations. But if everyone is powerful, then no one is. Don’t you get it? The only way to break these superpowered dictatorships, is to democratize Elixirs. And Sabino is the key to fulfilling this dream.”

He was a Red in more than one way. A shame; if he didn’t want to carve her open, Fallout and Shortie would have probably gotten along perfectly.

“Because you keep Bloodstream in your labs?” Ryan asked, Len bristling at his bluntness.

Fallout ignored them, denying them even information for the next loop. *“I tire of this nonsense. What will it be? Dead, or alive?”*

Len looked at Ryan, and her answer came swiftly.

“Better dead than corpo,” the Genius said, as she abruptly cut off the communication.

Alphonse immediately answered this act of defiance with a bombardment, the entire undersea complex shaking as

projectiles hit the habitat. “Now, Riri!” Len ordered, as she booted her program.

Ryan immediately froze time, Violet Flux particles floating out of his suit. As they grew in number, the courier took a moment to observe the scene around him one last time. Water breaking through the ceiling thanks to Dynamis’ torpedoes; Len, looking at her screen with dread and hope; and Felix, who waited for the end with quiet dignity.

It wasn’t the ending Ryan had hoped for, and he swore it would not happen again.

Violet particles swallowed the world around him, and this loop came to an end.

It was May 8th, 2020 in New Rome. Not for the first time, and not for the last.

At least he could feel his legs again.

Instead of driving straight into the city, Ryan parked his car nearby and waited. Music came out of the Chronoradio, instead of a message from an erased timeline. Much like Eugène-Henry, whatever force had influenced the device during the previous loop had stopped doing so.

It was all up to Ryan now.

The courier didn’t say a word, didn’t move an inch. Dread overtook his body, as he desperately waited for a sign from Len. Any sign that she had made it through. Any sign that Jasmine’s loss and all the sacrifices afterward had meant something.

Ryan had never believed in any god, but right now, he was sorely tempted to pray.

The Chronoradio's music stopped abruptly, and her voice came out.

"Riri."

Ryan's heart skipped a beat, as a wave of intense relief overtook him. "Shortie?" he asked, his fingers fidgeting around the driving wheel. "Do you... do you remember?"

A short silence followed, and then came the moment of truth. The two words Ryan had hoped to hear one day, since he first gained his power.

"I do."

It worked.

It worked.

It *worked!*

After so many trials, so many false starts, so much loneliness and pain, Ryan's patience had *finally* paid off. He had spent countless loops researching his power and accumulating the necessary knowledge; and many more gathering the tools needed to pull it off. This quest had needed contributions from Len, from Jasmine, and so many others, but it had finally reached its final stage.

This time was different.

Things had changed, and they would *never* be the same.

There wasn't a word in any human language to describe Ryan's joy. A centuries-old curse had finally been broken,

and he would no longer be alone before eternity.

"*Riri,*" Len said with a cough, and he could sense something wrong in her tone. "*You must go to the orphanage. Now.*"

"Right now?" Ryan blinked, his relief overwhelmed by concern. "But Ghoul will kill—"

"*You must come quickly,*" Len interrupted him, her cough getting worse. "*There's little time. The procedure... there's a problem, and I'm feeling... I'm not feeling right. Forget Ghoul, I... I need your help right now. Or it will all be for nothing.*"

"Shortie, what do you mean?" Silence. She had cut the communication. "Shortie!"

Ryan smashed the accelerator, and immediately drove to Rust Town. Though the idea of letting Ghoul get away with murder annoyed the courier, even if it wouldn't be permanent, he shut off his conscience. Len *needed* him. Asked for help.

And she remembered.

"It worked," Ryan muttered to himself, as he drove north. He couldn't believe it. "It worked."

Len's idea had worked! Maybe it had come with a health cost or side-effects, but it had worked! He was so overjoyed, so hopeful, that he threw money at the Private Security so they would let him pass through the Rust Town border.

It didn't matter if the consciousness-transfer had side-effects; the fact it worked at all meant it could be perfected. The future was bright and hopeful.

Ryan's phone rang as he came within sight of the orphanage. His cellphone didn't recognize the number, but the courier did.

Livia.

She had kept her word, but Ryan didn't answer yet. Len was waiting for him in front of the orphanage's doors, all alone. She wore her jumpsuit and carried her water rifle, her eyes sullen and her face pale.

More worryingly, blood dripped from her nose.

"Shortie!" Ryan hastily parked his Plymouth Fury, stepped out of the car, and immediately rushed at his friend's side. "Shortie, are you alright?"

His best friend looked at him without a word, clearly sick. Did the transfer damage her brain?

"Shortie, I'm here," Ryan said, approaching her. "It's going to be alright, I sw—"

She shot him.

If it had been anyone else, he would have dodged. If it had been *anyone* but Len, the courier would have frozen time and moved out of the way. But his mind... his mind simply couldn't imagine Shortie raising her weapon at him, and pulling the trigger. Ryan froze in place for a split second, and it was all it took.

Before he knew what happened, a sphere of water formed around the courier and immediately absorbed him. An intense pressure restrained his body, and liquid broke into his mask.

Why? Ryan held his breath, utterly shocked, as his friend observed him from the other side of the watery prison. And as he looked into her cold, soulless eyes, he realized something had gone terribly wrong.

Len came back through time alright.

But someone else hitched a ride.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Last chapter went up a bit earlier than usual due to DST.
This should be the new publishing hour.

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71: A Friend in Need

It wasn't the first time Ryan had woken up naked and strapped to a chair. At least his captors wisely let him keep his boxers; if naked, he would have gone on a rampage.

The courier coughed out leftover water, and it took him a while to see clearly. The room was dimly lit, cubic-shaped, and as unwelcoming as it could get. Steel walls covered in brown stains surrounded him from all sides, with a single reinforced door as the only way out and cameras in every corner. Ryan's chair was positioned at the end of a tin table, where sat enormous plates shielded by steel lids.

The courier recognized the place.

Mechron's bunker.

"Cesare." Psyshock was sitting at Ryan's right, carefully opening a robot head with his tentacles and tinkering with the processors. "Did you sleep well?"

Ryan instantly froze time and attempted to lunge at the brainjacker. Unfortunately, he couldn't move an inch. The courier's eyes wandered to his hands and feet, noticing steel restraints almost everywhere it counted. The chair itself looked anchored to the ground, with syringe arms raised at the sides. He couldn't even move his head!

Ryan attempted to bite his tongue and choke in his own blood, but his teeth hit a metal plate near the molars; when

the courier focused, he realized a metal device attached to the chair restrained his jaw's movements. Damn it, his captors weren't usually this thorough!

"Can't move, sleeping beauty?" Ryan recognized Sarin's voice as time resumed. Hazmat girl waited in a corner on his left, back against a wall. "Gotta admit, I thought you were a goner for a second."

"Where's Len?" Ryan asked while glaring at Psyshock, the metal bits in his mouth making it difficult to speak.

"Working on your car upstairs, alongside my other thralls." Other *thralls*. The very word made Ryan's blood boil. "She is happier this way, Cesare. Little Len only feels at peace when she uses her power, and now, she will do so nonstop. It was an act of mercy. Kindness, even."

How? How could it be? Did Psyshock infect Len during the bunker assault? No, Ryan would have noticed. Something in the tech?

The metal door opened, Big Fat Adam stepping through alongside Ghoul. "What's wrong, Mr. Time Traveler?" the Meta-Gang's leader taunted Ryan while sitting on the other side of the table. "Can't kill yourself today?"

"I suppose the safe word is 'weight loss'?" Ryan taunted him back, unimpressed.

"How witty, I guess we have a new Bill Murray in our custody." Adam pointed a finger at the chair holding Ryan, while Ghoul took position right behind his boss. "You won't restart this time, mate. Mechron used these devices for human experimentation. The chair will keep you alive, whether you like it or not."

Ryan would have clenched his fists, if he could.

This was bad. This was really, *really* bad. He was restrained, and at the Meta-Gang's nonexistent mercy. If Psyshock used his power on the time-traveler...

"How?" Ryan asked, as Hannifat Lecter put a napkin around his neck and prepared for his meal. The psychopath opened his mouth and brought out cutlery, alongside salt and pepper shakers. "How did you do it?"

"I told you before, Little Cesare," Psyshock said, interrupting his work on the robot head. "Dynamis' technology is compatible with my power."

"I had Psyshock booby trap the tech the second Manada gave it to us," Adam said, smirking to himself. "Anyone who gets their mind overwritten by it? They become Psyshock's newest host. It was a back-up plan, in case Dynamis pulled a fast one on us."

Ryan's eyes widened, as he read between the lines. "It only happens during the overwriting? Not the memory map creation process?"

"Well, no." Adam chuckled. "The sabotage would have been too obvious otherwise."

Thus Livia still had an uncorrupted copy of Len's mind, stored in the Blue World.

Ryan just had to kill himself, abort this loop, and then he could figure something out. Psyshock wouldn't follow him back in time without Len's machine, and the courier could find another way to transfer his friend's memories back. Ghoul's presence meant he had killed everyone at

Renesco's bar anyway, so this run was already ruined beyond repairs.

Adam guessed his intentions. "I'm sorry mate... you won't get a happy ending."

"Your real target was Hector Manada," Ryan said, stalling for time as he furiously tried to figure a way out. "You wanted to take over Dynamis if he ended up using that technology."

"What can I say, mate? People think I look like a fool, but you don't reach my age by being one. Taking over your girlfriend as she went back in time was a fluke, but my insurance policy paid off."

Adam lifted the lid off one of his plates, revealing some fried chicken alongside apples, and meat that wasn't chicken meat. "You want some?" Hannifat Lecter offered the terrible dish to Ryan. "It's Lebanese."

"No, I'm a vegan," Ryan lied. "My compliments to the chef."

Adam chuckled, raising a finger at Ryan with a jovial smile. "You're funny. I admire your wit and self-control. It's like you went through something similar already."

Ryan said nothing, causing Adam to raise an eyebrow. "You did?"

"You know what's tragic about you, fatass?" Ryan taunted him. "You aren't original. I killed dozens of you. It wouldn't even be the first time I got cooked alive."

"Wow," Sarin said. "That's messed up."

While Adam kept his jovial smile, it no longer reached the eyes. The courier took some joy in wounding his ego. "Well,

guess I'll be the one to do you in," said the Psycho, as he started eating. "Keep the best for last. Frankly, the only reason Psyshock didn't scramble your brain already is that I'm not sure if it's a good idea. I feel like we're playing with fire here."

"You are," Ryan said, his voice dripping venom.

Adam chuckled while he continued his meal, and Psyshock took over. "She still loves you. Cesare."

Ryan froze, his body trembling with anger.

"I dived deep into Little Len's mind," Psyshock said, twisting the knife. "I know her greatest secrets. I even know what she thought when you deflowered her; you didn't leave a good impression, I'm afraid. But then again, you were her only one. The *special* one."

"Shut up," Ryan said.

"Deep down, she still believes you are the knight in shining armor who will make everything alright. She is just too scared to let you in. She thinks the white prince has gone rabid. It's tragic, really."

"It would be endearing," Ghoul chuckled cruelly, while Sarin remained silent as a tomb. "If it wasn't pathetic."

To have these monsters use Len's cherished memories as a taunt infuriated Ryan beyond words. But now his fury had cooled down into a cold, quiet feeling of *hate*. "One day, Psypsy, I will pick your brain open," the courier warned, "but I assure you, it won't feel pleasant at all."

"We both know you are in no position to carry out this threat," Psyshock mused. "Perhaps I will pair you and Little

Len, once I have dominated your mind. It will be the closest thing to marital bliss you will ever experience.”

“Will it actually work though?” Adam asked as he finished his meal and wiped away his cheeks with his napkin. He had only left the apples untouched. “Your power modifies brainwaves, and he’s in two places and times at once. Which means two brains, right?”

“I should be able to overwrite his consciousness,” Psyshock insisted, clearly eager to brainwash Ryan. The brainjacker found a sick, twisted pleasure in forcefully invading minds. “It worked with Little Len, when she transferred her mind through time.”

“Should work.” Hannifat Lecter raised an eyebrow, a little skeptical. “That’s the optimistic outcome, but what happens if there’s a failsafe in his power? What’s the worst-case scenario?”

Psyshock seemed annoyed that his boss doubted him, but knew better than to argue. “The two patterns could conflict and cause brain damage. Maybe death.”

“But if his brain explodes right after he reloads, would his power keep working? Do we risk being trapped in an endless loop as he immediately dies and reloads? Or will it stop eventually? Could your brainwashing count as *death* as far as his power is concerned?”

A heavy silence fell upon the room, none of the Meta daring to say a word. Finally, Psypsy was forced to admit his own ignorance. “I do not know, Adam. But it should work.”

“But you can’t know for sure until you try.”

Psyshock’s silence was an answer in itself.

"Yeah, that's my beef with your power, mate," Adam said, as he glanced at Ryan. "We won't know its limits until we test them, and if we mess up once, you win. You're as bad as Augustus in your own way; if we fail, we die, so we're too scared to even try."

"Speaking of Augustus, his daughter keeps trying to contact him on his phone," Psyshock pointed out. "Eventually, she'll start suspecting something's amiss."

"Well, we planned to kill her anyway."

"What I mean to say is that the longer we wait, the greater the risk," Psyshock argued, looking at Ryan with what could pass for desire. "I can enthrall and force him to save."

"But it causes his two selves to align, right? That's what he told his girlfriend. We know his power activates when he dies, but what counts as death? Would stopping his heart for a minute count? Would rewriting his brain and destroying his personality count?"

Ryan knew the answers, but remained silent as a tomb.

"I can make him tell us," Ghoul said, white mist surrounding his hands. "Freeze his extremities one by one."

"My fingers don't make the best ice creams," Ryan replied, unimpressed. He doubted the Meta had anything that could surprise him. "Just chill out, Picard."

The undead took a threatening step forward, but Adam stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"No need for that, Ghoul." The Meta-Gang's leader narrowed his eyes at his captive. "I can see it in your eyes, boyo. Everybody who thinks they can use you, Dynamis, the

Augusti, they're kidding themselves. You're a goddamn hurricane. You can't be tamed, or broken; just avoided."

Godammit, why out of all the people who tried to capture Ryan, Adam was the only one smart enough to realize that?

Thing was, even if Ryan were trapped in a capsule and jettison into space, he would eventually die and find a way out. He had come back from Monaco, and faced overwhelming odds. They just had to slip up once, and Ryan would win the next time around. They were NPCs, and he was a Player Character.

However, Psyshock's power *did* have a credible chance of brainwashing him across time. He needed to make Adam keep doubting, so he wouldn't even try.

Wait. Something was wrong.

Big Fat Adam wasn't doubting himself. At every point in the conversation, he had made the other Psychos doubt themselves, slowly guiding them towards his own conclusions. That manipulative bastard only gave his men the illusion of listening, to gaslight them into following *his* agenda. He had already made up his mind about how to deal with Ryan.

What was he really planning?

"He could be useful in another way." Everyone looked at Sarin. "If he's really a time-traveler, maybe he knows the cure? Psyshock could read his mind and find out."

"The cure?" Ryan frowned. "The cure for what?"

"For us, jackass," Hazmat Girl replied, as if it were obvious.

"A cure for the Psycho condition?" Well, that made sense. Ryan doubted Sarin wanted to stay a gas cloud trapped in a suit, or Mongrel, an animal unable to use the abilities he collected. "Is that what Whalie pitched to get you all in line? He isn't working for a cure. He's not even trying to save himself!"

The courier looked at Hannifat Lecter, sensing an opening to sow discord.

"Last loop, after we took over the bunker from you, I looked at the base's plan at the entrance. And I noticed something interesting. You tried to conquer the place, room by room. But the path you took wasn't the shortest to the lab, or the mainframe... but it is the shortest to the Orbital Communications Tower."

Adam's smirk didn't falter, but his hateful gaze told Ryan he had guessed correctly.

That madman had made up his mind from the start.

"You want me to stun him, Adam?" Ghoul asked his boss, as Hannifat Lecter grabbed a big apple from his plate. "Freeze his lying mouth shut?"

"He doesn't want to save anyone, not even himself!" Ryan shouted. "He just wants to kill everyone, because he's a sick evil bastard who thinks he's already doom—"

Adam shoved the apple into the time-traveler's mouth like a pig, preventing him from speaking. The courier tried to swallow it and suffocate, but the metal plate in his mouth prevented him from doing so.

Psyshock had to know. The bastard was too smart not to guess his boss' plan, but too sociopathic to care. Ghoul was

too dim or too crazy to bother. Only Sarin seemed bothered, but Adam immediately noticed her unease. “Got anything to say?”

Hazmat Girl remained silent a moment, as if trying to digest the news. In the end, her survival instincts kicked in. “No, Adam, I don’t.”

“Good, because you’re a dear friend and I would hate to have you for dinner,” Adam said with a falsely warm tone, before grabbing another plate and removing the lid.
“Especially when we’re reaching the dessert.”

The courier’s blood froze, as he gazed at the horrifying dish.

Sarah was bound and gagged like a pig on the plate, surrounded by salad and tomatoes. Tears of terror rained down the little girl’s cheeks, her eyes pleading Ryan, anyone, to save her.

Adam snickered, as he started salting Sarah with the shakers. None of the other Psychos flinched at the horrendous spectacle. “You think you can turn this around, mate,” the sadistic monster said, “but from what I gather, the only way we can lose the game is if *you* play. If you’re taken off the board, nobody will suspect a thing until it’s too late.”

Ryan didn’t listen, his eyes set on Sarah as he furiously tried to figure out a way to save her. Even after all these loops, there were still things that terrified him. Things that he didn’t want to see.

“Let’s suppose your power won’t work, Psyshock.” Adam looked at his second-in-command, once he had finished salting the little girl. “What else could deal with him permanently?”

Psyshock couldn't tell. He only had Len's memories to work with, and while Ryan told her much, he didn't share everything either. "Cancel, maybe? From what he told Little Len, his power is top tier. Even Livia Augusti cannot affect him."

"Shame. Guess we'll use the tried and true method then." Adam opened his mouth wide like a pelican, and shoved his hand down his throat.

A second later, it came out with a bottle marked with Mechron's symbol.

The Black Elixir.

No.

"You see that light in his eyes, people?" Adam said, dangling the container at a horrified Ryan. "That's *fear*. First time he has been really afraid yet."

No, no, no!

Ryan tried to escape the restraints, froze time, tried to pull off a Houdini, suffocate, anything! But the chair kept him frozen, and he had no tool to call upon!

"You're sure, Adam?" Psyshock asked, quite uneasy with this development.

"Something has been bothering me," Adam said with a cruel smirk. "He has been exploring all his options for centuries. Yet, he never tried to get a second Elixir, even with his unlimited tries. Which means that it's the one thing he *knows* will wreck his save point beyond repair. If we can't remove his power... we're going to poison it."

That bastard.

He didn't want to neutralize Ryan's power, he wanted to corrupt it! He thought turning the time-traveler into a Psycho would be just as devastating as firing the Bahamut... and he was probably right.

Worse, the Elixir bottle started to shake, much to the Psychos' surprise. The thing inside the container wriggled at the courier's proximity, and Ryan felt a chill down his spine. An unnatural cold he had never experienced before.

The Black Elixir *remembered*.

"Oh oh! Looks like that ooze really wants to bond with you too!" Ryan's panicked expression only made Adam laugh louder. "Well, boyo... time to take your medicine."

"Don't worry, we've got enough of a supply to keep you hooked," Ghoul added, delighting at the scene. Sarin kept her arms crossed, seemingly lost in her thoughts. "We'll be like family."

That moment was Ryan's worst fear coming to pass. The cruelest, most terrible ending possible. Worse, Adam relished it. The bastard's only pleasure in his own life was to destroy other lives. It wasn't enough to kill the time-traveler; he wanted him ruined beyond recovery.

He would become the new Bloodstream. An unending nightmare.

The room shook as Adam rose from his seat.

First a tremor, then a second. Ryan thought it might have been the Land causing a quake, perhaps in response to an

outside attack, but it sounded more like explosions from inside the bunker.

"What's happening?" Big Fat Adam asked, as Psyshock rose up in alarm. Another tremor shook, the source closer to the room this time.

"The robots again?" Ghoul moved in front of the metal door, approaching his head and seemingly addressing the guards on the other side. "Hey! Hey, what's up?!"

Ghoul barked at the door, and for a brief moment, neither Psyshock nor Adam kept an eye on Ryan, or even the terrified Sarah. Instead, they focused entirely on the metal door, with Hannifat Lecter covering his skin with a layer of carbon alloy.

Ryan noticed Sarin subtly move closer to him. The time-traveler thought she would execute him, but instead, Hazmat Girl moved her head next to his ears. "Do you have a cure?" she whispered, too low for the others to notice.
"Can you find a cure?"

Ryan looked at her, utterly astonished by this turn of events. Was she the cause of the explosions? No, she looked as confused as the other Psychos in the room. She was just seizing an opportunity to jump ship, perhaps because his words had shaken her faith in Adam. She must have realized he wouldn't deliver.

Could Ryan find a cure for Psychos? He had never managed to do so in the previous runs, but... he never had access to Mechron's bunker before either, nor people like Dr. Tyrano.

Maybe... maybe this time would be different.

Ryan blinked repeatedly, hoping she would get the message. Sarin moved her hand behind the chair, and he sensed his restraints slowly weakening. Perhaps she caused the machinery to rust with her gas power.

“No answer, boss,” Ghoul said, covering his body in a thin layer of ice.

“Did someone come to rescue you, mate?” Big Fat Adam glanced at Ryan, causing Sarin to pull off her hand before he could notice her sabotage. “The Augusti? Did you prepare an insurance plan of your own too?”

Ryan wished he had.

Who could it be? Was it Livia? Did she gather forces and assault the bunker? Was it Jasmine? The Carnival? What kind of unstoppable force could have fought its way through a base full of Genomes?

“Ghoul, open the door,” Psyshock ordered the ice manipulator, tentacles raised for battle. “If it's not one of ours, kill it.”

Mr. Frozen Food obeyed the order, the door opening to reveal a metal corridor. Someone had painted the walls with blood, and two armed thralls of Psyshock dangled from the ceiling, hanged by ropes made of their own intestines.

Ryan's savior waited right between them, its whitened fur as pristine as snow. For by praying for salvation from the Meta's depredations within reach of a preteen child, the time-traveler had only called upon a greater evil.

And as the courier looked into the beast's blue sun of an eye, this dark abyss of infinite darkness, he couldn't help but wonder.

Why?

And the abyss answered, its long ears raised.

“I will always be your friend!”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)



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72: Plushieland

For a second, none of the Psychos dared to move.

Instead, they looked at the surreal scene before them. That of an adorable rabbit plushie standing right outside the room, surrounded by blood and corpses. Ryan never told Len much about this unholy abomination, and so, these fools didn't expect to awaken it. The seal had been broken, and hell set loose.

The plushie noticed the Black Elixir in Big Fat Adam's hands, and looked at it with curiosity.

Don't do it.

The plushie playfully glanced at Ryan.

Don't do it!

And then, the worst came to pass.

The plushie noticed Little Sarah, bound on the table. Its ears raised up in interest, and it uttered cursed words, "Child detected!"

Finally realizing the danger, Psyshock launched his wire tentacles at the plushie, while Ghoul unleashed an ice shard volley. The possessed toy leapt into the air with unnatural agility, its eyes turning red. A laser blast hit Psypsy and vaporized his brain, the rabbit bouncing off walls to dodge attacks.

Realizing the danger of Ryan dying in the crossfire, Hannifat Lecter turned towards his captive with the Black Elixir bottle raised. “No escape!” he snarled angrily, intent on corrupting the time-traveler.

In a sudden but inevitable betrayal, Sarin unleashed a blast of compressed air at her boss. The attack threw Adam against a wall, shattered the bottle, and splattered him with black ooze. The vicious cannibal let out a scream of agony, as the Black Elixir ate through his reinforced skin and consumed him whole.

Call it Karma.

“Sarin, you traitor!” Ghoul raised his hands to freeze everyone in the room, too dim to realize it would kill Ryan and make him restart. Before Mr. Dem Bones could do anything though, the plushie bounced against his chest like a cannonball. The cryokinetic tripped on Adam’s leg and fell onto his boss’ lap, the black ooze immediately latching on to him as well. Soon, the scene looked like two birds desperately trying to escape an oil spill, and failing.

“Let’s hug!” the plushie abandoned everything to leap on the table and lovingly hug Sarah. The little girl’s gagging muffled her screams of fear and confusion. “We’ll be together, forever and ever!”

“What the fuck?” Sarin looked at the scene in shock, before getting her priorities straight. Using weak but focused vibrations, she disabled Ryan’s bindings one by one.

“AH!” Ryan gasped for air after spitting out the apple in his mouth. “That was close.”

“It’s not over yet,” Sarin warned, as the Black Elixir finished consuming its two victims. Somehow though, it didn’t

collapse into nothingness like in the previous loop. Ryan quickly understood why. Ghoul couldn't die, but the Black Elixir devoured its hosts.

A paradox.

And somehow, the situation allowed the Black Elixir to stabilize in the shape of a colossal, monstrous blob of dark goo; an oily *shoggoth*. Its victims' eyes and mouth floated on the surface, the lips moving to form words. "You..." it said, the alien voice belonging to neither of its 'hosts.' "You... you open the gate... send me back... back to the Black..."

Sarin raised her hands to blast the creature, but Ryan stopped her by standing up between the ooze and her. He had an idea.

Look for the stars in the night sky...

"How about this?" Ryan told the shoggoth. "You help me, and I help you."

If the creature was sentient and needed help, then perhaps it understood the concept of *reciprocity*.

The goo fluctuated and wriggled, but much to Hazmat Girl's surprise, didn't make a move to attack. It didn't even try to assimilate Ryan, perhaps because it needed him alive and functional. "Help... how?" the ooze asked with a confused voice.

Ryan glanced at the corridor outside the room, glimpsing some movement on the other end. Psyshock must have summoned his thralls. "Helping me live through this would be a start?"

"Wait, you aren't offing yourself?" Sarin asked, a bit surprised.

"Not yet," Ryan replied. This run was doomed from the start, but it also provided a unique opportunity. "I'm all for assisted suicide, but only in moderation."

"Alright..." The shoggoth slithered out of the room, Psyshock's thralls immediately opening fire at the alien abomination. Bullets hit the creature without damaging it, and it quickly devoured them like it did with the Psychos.

"Man, you tamed a giant slime," Sarin said, astonished.

"A shoggoth," Ryan replied, before glancing at the other abomination in the room.

Pop!

Correction, the *two* rabbit abominations in the room. While the original kept hugging Sarah by the neck, the clone pulled out a switchblade and cut her bindings. The poor girl immediately removed her gagging and took a deep breath, like Ryan before her.

"Are you alright, Sarah?" the courier asked her, the little girl backing away in fear and falling off the table.

"Who are you?" she asked in a panic. "Where are we? How do you know my name?"

Before Ryan could answer, the second plushie removed its switchblade to grab Sarah's hand instead. "Let's play together!" it said, all but begging its new bonded child, who had no idea how to react.

"Later," Ryan told the critter, before trying to reassure Sarah. "I'm your mom's friend."

"Ma? She was all strange, and these guys... they took everyone."

"Yeah, Adam wanted to throw them at the base's defenses," Sarin said, before observing the plushies more closely. "Do they multiply or something? Come here, fluffy."

The two rabbits looked at Sarin with crimson eyes.

"Hey, hey, stop!" Ryan pleaded by protecting Hazmat Girl with his body, neither of the critters dropping their murderous attitude. "She's thirteen too, in her head! Let's save the other preteens first, *then* we resort to violence."

The two plushies calmed down, speaking in unison, "Let's go to Disneyland!"

"We're not going to Disneyland," Ryan said, cracking his knucklebones. "We're already there."

"I don't understand what's going on anymore," Sarin admitted.

"Story of my life." The courier looked at the corridor beyond the room, which the shoggoth had cleaned up of life. All the thralls, and even the plushie's previous victims, had been consumed by the ooze. "Thanks for the assist, by the way. I almost regret beating you up in previous loops."

"I didn't help you pro bono, jackass," she replied gruffly. "Do you have a cure? Can you make me human again?"

"I don't have a cure on myself," Ryan admitted. "But I think I have the resources to make one."

"So like Adam." She crossed her arms, disappointed, but not surprised. "Always the same bullshit."

"Except he's a sociopathic cannibal, and I'm a friendly, grass-eating time-traveler. One should sound a little more trustworthy than the other. Who else knows about my power?"

"Uh, maybe Acid Rain? She wanted to skewer you on sight, so Adam kept her outside."

Whalie had kept the secret close to his chest to avoid a leak or mutiny, which served Ryan fine. If he could get rid of Psyshock, nobody else in the Meta-Gang would know the truth.

"So what's the plan, Quicksave?" Sarin asked, as the two plushies both took Sarah by one hand and tried to lead her towards the slaughter. The little girl was still too cowed to follow through with it. "If you aren't killing yourself."

"First we save the children and Shortie, then we're taking over."

Sarin froze a second. "What, the bunker?"

"Yes, the bunker." With Adam gone, most of the Meta outside the base, and his current allies inside, Ryan had a once in many lifetimes opportunity. Since the plushie had already entered its duplication phase, the run was ruined beyond repairs, but the courier would have the opportunity to study Mechron's tech up close. "I will need a gun, and drugs. Something that can alter the brain quickly."

"Like every drug ever?" Sarin deadpanned, but went along anyway. "I think Psyshock keeps a batch of *Bliss* in the

infirmary. Mongrel can't sleep without that stuff. The other hellions should be there too."

"Well, let's go take some eye medicine then." If Psyshock was mostly made of brain tissues, then drugs should paralyze him like Enrique's toxin. "Sarah, you stay with the plushies until Uncle Ryan comes back with your mom. You don't leave them, but you don't listen to what they say either. They're a baaaaad influence."

"Let's play outside!" the plushies replied, eager to sow chaos.

Sarah anxiously bit her lower lip, *exactly* like Len. Adorable! "You're leaving me alone?"

"Oh, you're safe, trust me. It's everyone else who isn't." Ryan walked outside the room and into the corridor, Sarin following him like his shadow. "We'll clear the way."

After a short walk, the duo entered an underground chamber with seven vats full of colored liquid, each representing a different Elixir. Mutated animals floated in three of them, linked to strange machinery, and Ryan counted two blast doors on each side.

The courier recognized the room as the one where he died fighting Hannifat Lecter in a previous run, though one of the blast doors was closed back then. The Meta-Gang must have unlocked the next area while he slept, but it did them no good; Ryan could hear screams and gunfire coming from the next room, as thralls tasked with exploring the bunker faced the shoggoth.

Android parts covered the ground, alongside the occasional tools. Since most were bloodied, Ryan assumed they were what remained of the plushie's victims after it made its way

to the cell. The thralls must have been disassembling robots before being interrupted.

"Infirmary is the other way," Sarin said, as Ryan searched through the tools on the ground for a weapon to use. Eventually, he settled on a bloodied hammer, elegant in its simplicity.

"You're not mad about Ghoul?" Ryan asked her, as they left the central hub for the next corridor. "I thought the two of you were an item or something."

"What? No, I hate that mofo, it's just Adam always pairs us up because we've got good power synergy." Hazmat Girl suddenly considered the implications of his question. "How many times did we fight before?"

"If I looked up 'jobber' in the dictionary, your picture would come to mind."

She flipped him the bird in response. A witty sidekick, she wasn't.

"I knew this job would suck, but I still signed on." Miss Chernobyl shook her head in annoyance. "What you said, about Adam..."

"He blew up New Rome with Mechron's orbital laser. You were fighting with him until the end." Which was why he remained wary of her presence. He still remembered her playing a song alongside Adam's cronies, after they burned the city.

His words did seem to spook her though. "Guess I lost all hope of a cure then, but sheesh, burn the whole—"

She froze in place, as the towering figure of Frank the Mad walked in on them from the other side of the corridor. The colossus kept his body down to move inside the narrow space, the tentacled shadow of Psypsy slithering behind him. Ryan hastily hid his hammer behind his back, immediately thinking of a plan.

“Frank, capture him,” Psyshock ordered, pointing a tentacle at Ryan. He didn’t even pay attention to Sarin. “I want him alive!”

“Yes, Mr. Vice-President.”

The schizophrenic giant took a step forward, but Ryan quickly thought on his feet. “Agent Frank,” he said, pointing a finger at Psyshock with his free hand while keeping the hammer hidden with the other. “Arrest this Viet Cong traitor! He murdered President Adam!”

His words caused the giant to flinch in confusion, while Psyshock and Sarin were too confused to say a word.

“Ryan Romano, CIA!” Quicksave continued to bluff, now fully roleplaying. “This man is a commie sympathizer who murdered the POTUS! And he killed Kennedy too! The bullet bent, Agent Frank! He made it bend in midair!”

“You cannot trick me!” Frank said, regaining his composure. He might suffer from delusions, but he wasn’t entirely stupid either. “I know we brought you to Guantanamo for a waterboarding session, and you’re going back in there! You’re the communist spy!”

“He set me up!” Ryan kept accusing Psyshock with an experienced actor’s talent. “He set me up in an attempt to silence me! And when I convinced the President of the truth

during the interrogation, he murdered him! He *murdered* him, Frank!"

"This is nonsense!" Psyshock said, though he didn't dare attack Ryan directly. Perhaps reading Len's memories taught him that he shouldn't engage the courier without backup.
"Frank, he's trying to divide us. Don't listen and power through."

"Agent Romano is telling the truth, Frank," Sarin said, finally understanding Ryan's ploy. She pointed a finger at Psyshock, who hadn't expected her betrayal. "I swear it, Psyshock murdered Adam. I saw it."

"Sarin, once we are done, I will disperse you to the winds," Psyshock threatened her, "you will never reform."

"These are serious accusations, Agent Sarin," Frank declared. Sarin's lies had weakened his resolve. "Do you have any proof?"

"I have!" Ryan said, freezing time.

When it resumed, Psypsy held a bloody hammer in a tentacle.

"Look at his tentacles!" Ryan said, both Psyshock and Frank noticing the hammer. "He carries the crime's weapon in his dirty tentacles! The President's blood is still on it! He was trying to hit you by surprise with it!"

"A hammer," Sarin said with a nod. Her acting, while wooden, worked somewhat. "A communist weapon. Those fools can't help themselves."

"Frank, you are immune to metal!" Psyshock argued while hastily throwing the weapon away. The delusional giant kept

looking back and forth between his superior and Ryan. “I couldn’t harm you even if I wanted to! He stopped time and set me up!”

Unfortunately for him, his last words confused Frank even more. As Sarin had warned, it appeared the Meta-Gang’s leadership *did* keep their troops in the dark about the courier’s power.

And Hazmat Girl immediately seized the opportunity. “Do you hear him, Frank?” she said mockingly. “Stopping time? How childish. Now that he has been caught red-handed, he will tell any lie to save himself!”

“The president died in my arms, Agent Frank,” Ryan continued to appeal to the madman’s delusions, mimicking the act of holding a dying person. “With his last breath, he tasked me to find you! He said, ‘*find Agent Frank... he who fought Nazis in Alamo, and Viets in the jungle... our greatest hero... only he...*’”

Ryan shed crocodile’s tears.

“‘*Only he can save democracy!*’”

His tearful words echoed in the corridor, like a desperate plea for help.

Frank the Mad looked at the courier and Sarin, then at Psyshock, then back at the duo, and finally at his ‘superior.’ “Mr. Vice-President,” he finally spoke up, “I swear, we will clear this misunderstanding up with due process.”

“No, you dimwit!” Psyshock shouted, infuriated by the giant’s madness. “He is speaking nonsense! You’re not even America—”

But Psyshock had forgotten something that Ryan learned long ago in his anger. The main reason why it was so difficult to work with Psychos.

To run an asylum full of madmen, you had to speak their language.

“I voted for you!” Frank suddenly punched Psyshock so hard his head exploded in a shower of brain matter. The fist hit the corridor’s wall with such strength, it caused the whole bunker to shake. “I voted for you, and you betrayed my feelings!”

And as Dynamis’ psyche report on him attested, Frank didn’t react well to people contradicting his delusions.

“So long as I live, this great nation will never fall to communism!” Frank turned around and walked towards the other end of the corridor. Ryan guessed he intended to take the elevator to the upper levels, and hunt Psyshock’s newest host. “Better dead than red!”

The furious giant’s steps caused the ground to shake, leaving a cowed Sarin and Ryan behind. “I hope it was worth it, jackass,” she told him while glancing at Psyshock’s bloody remains, “because only Adam can manage Frank when he’s pissed. None of us can kill him.”

“My hope exactly.” As Dynamis predicted, without Big Fat Adam to keep them unified, the whole Meta-Gang would implode with the right push. And now that the path to the infirmary was clear, Ryan knew exactly where to start.

After a short walk, the duo reached the whitened room in question, separated from the corridor by a glass window; the exact same place where the courier had discovered Psyshock’s terrible immortality. The orphanage’s children

were kept in cages like rats or strapped to operating tables, right next to crates full of knockoff Elixirs.

"Hi, kids!" the courier waved a hand at them with a bright smile. "We're here to free you, and bring you to your mom's magical place!"

"You're going to rape us?" one of the children, Giulia, asked Ryan from inside a cage.

"What, no!" Ryan protested in horror. "Of course not, I would never do that! Why are you even asking?"

"You only have boxers on..." the little girl replied, unconvinced.

"Woman," Ryan asked Sarin, as she started scavenging the supplies, "where is my supersuit?"

"I think Psyshock threw your clothes in the incinerator."

Ryan's gaze turned murderous. "Then these fools have chosen death."

"This'll help." Sarin tossed him a Dynamis-made laser gun and a Bliss-inhaler. "Your weapon and drugs."

"Perfect," Ryan replied, immediately checking the gun's energy reserves. Not good, but passable. "Got any remorse massacring your old comrades, buddy?"

"Nope," she replied.

Excellent. Then, as if this day couldn't get crazier, Ryan noticed half a dozen furred shapes leaping into the corridor outside the infirmary. The demonic critters looked through the glass window at the children, mesmerized.

“Children detected! Entering cute mode!”

And so began Ryan’s first Meta Run.

With chaos and madness.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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73: Civil War

Ryan had had many awkward elevator moments in his life, but this one trumped them all.

“Is your life always like this?” Hazmat Girl asked Ryan, as they climbed multiple floors towards the bunker’s recreational area. They shared their lift with four plushies out for blood, with Sarin wisely looking away from the fluffy abominations.

“Do you know where they put my A-bomb?” the handsome courier answered with another question, holding a laser gun in one hand and a Bliss inhaler in the other.

Sarin looked at him in embarrassed silence, and then focused back on the elevator’s doors. Come to think of it, this run was a complete inversion of Ryan’s suicide run. Instead of fighting his way inside Mechron’s bunker, he murdered his way out. The circle was complete.

As the elevator doors opened and revealed a well-lit atrium, the group faced a scene of utter devastation. Frank had reached the recreational areas first, and gone on a rampage that eclipsed even Ryan’s suicide run.

The giant fought a dozen Dynamis thralls firing at him with laser weapons, none capable of harming the enraged Psycho. Psyshock stood at the other end of the atrium, desperately trying to figure a way out of this mess, while

other members of the Meta-Gang had taken cover wherever they could.

“Frank, calm yourself!” Mosquito shouted, fearfully hiding behind a broken pool table with Rakshasa. The tigerlike Psycho had summoned hordes of gremlins, with the tiny creatures trying to climb on Frank’s back. “You’re going to bring down the whole place on us!”

“I knew McCarthy didn’t go far enough!” Frank shouted, before grabbing a *Street Fighters* arcade game and throwing it at the thralls. The projectile immediately killed three people in a devastating impact. “The red menace contaminated our precious bodily fluids!”

“No, not *Capcom*!” Ryan protested at the horrifying sight. He couldn’t care less about the pool table or the bar, but destroying an arcade game? It was sacrilege!

Sarin, the uncultured bore, had the exact opposite reaction. “Argh, the pool table! Frank, what the hell, we’ve only got one of those!”

“Sarin?” Rakshasa glanced back at Hazmat Girl and her partner. “What are you doing with the prisoner? What the hell is going on?”

“President Adam is dead, and we’re taking over,” Ryan explained, laser gun raised. “Democratically.”

“Let’s play!” the plushies said, before rushing into the melee. The gremlins assaulting Frank immediately recognized the fluffy creatures and fled in terror at their approach. Unfortunately for them, the possessed toys seemed to find as much joy in chasing them as attacking humans.

A woman made of ink, which Ryan recognized as Ink Machine, peeked over a bar counter's ruins. "Adam's *dead*?"

"They are the enemy!" Psyshock shouted, running out of cannon fodder to throw at Frank. "Mosquito, Ink Machine, get out of your hiding hole and capture them!"

"You betrayed democracy!" Frank snarled back.

"Choose your side, guys," Sarin said, raising her hands at Psyshock to blast him. "We've got Frank *and* the juice. Get in line."

Psypsy immediately realized the danger of a mutiny. "Only I have the Elixir connection!" he snarled, before lowering himself to avoid Frank throwing one of his thralls at him. "You will run out of knockoffs without me!"

"And you'll run out of life first!" Sarin made a terrible wordplay as she blasted the brainjacker. He dodged the attack with a leap, the compressed air hitting a wall and causing the bunker to shake.

When the Psychos present hesitated, Ryan pointed at his boxers and threatened to unleash his ultimate weapon. "Don't force me to flash you. You shall not survive."

After a short glance at each other, Mosquito and Rakshasa immediately left their hideout... and charged at Psyshock, much to his anger. "Traitors!"

"Sorry, Psyshock, but I would rather be on your bad side than Frank's!" Mosquito apologized before lunging at the brainjacker, while Rakshasa tackled a thrall. Inky Winky emerged from her hiding hole too and wisely joined the winning side. "At least we can kill *you*!"

Thank goodness, it wasn't loyalty that bound the Meta-Gang together.

Raising a tentacle, Psyshock managed to throw Mosquito off him and fled out of the room. Leaving his minions to take care of the remaining mooks, Ryan immediately gave pursuit. After escaping the atrium, Psyshock reached a corridor with reinforced glass windows on both sides, shattering one and jumping through the hole.

The hangars below the junkyard were no more peaceful than the atrium, for the Black Elixir had managed to invade them; perhaps another elevator connected the lower levels to this floor. The creature rampaged in the hangar holding the Meta's submarine with the technicians fleeing in panic. The giant slime had grown with each victim, now reaching five meters across in size.

Most importantly, Ryan noticed his Plymouth Fury near the submarine, its engine removed from the husk. "Shortie?" The courier muttered to himself, remembering that Psyshock sent Len to work among the thralls. Yet only the screams of the enslaved answered him.

Ryan glanced at the other hangar within reach, the one where Psyshock had fled. The nerve squid was making a desperate dash towards Mechron's scorpion mech.

"Oh no you don't!" Ryan said from the corridor above, freezing time and sniping the Psycho with his laser weapon. A light ray hit the Psycho when time resumed, blowing a hole in his brain. Unfortunately, the engineer closest to the mech started to undergo a terrifying transformation, Psyshock reshaping his body into his new vessel.

"You thief!" Ryan glanced at the corridor's other end, which led to the bunker's entrance. Acid Rain had climbed down

inside alongside two hound drones. “I knew we should have gutted you first!”

“Sorry honey, no indoor rain on the weather report today,” Ryan replied before firing at her with his gun. Even though she couldn’t summon her poisonous downpour underground, Acid Rain still had sharp reflexes and managed to dodge the attack by diving to the side. She retaliated with a thrown knife, while the hound drones lunged at Ryan.

With no other way out, the time-traveler jumped through the broken window to escape and landed inside the mech’s hangar a few meters below. Two thralls guarding the area immediately fell upon him like a pack of hyenas; the blisters on their skin informed the courier they were Bliss addicts, abducted off the street, and transformed into brainwashed tools.

How many people had Psypsy enthralled since he arrived in New Rome? Every hour wasted on a run increased his kill-count.

Swearing to destroy the brainjacker as early as possible in his Perfect Run, Ryan regretfully opened fire back, though non-lethally. His weapon’s rays hit the addicts’ hands, forcing them to drop their guns, and he punched them both out cold.

Acid Rain prepared to jump into the hangar above him, only to take a blast of compressed air for her trouble. The powerful attack threw the teleporter through the glass window, and she crashed on the ground unconscious only a few steps away from Ryan.

Sarin emerged from the recreational area, and quickly blasted the hound drones before they could retaliate. “Get

Psyshock, I've got your back!" she shouted to the courier.

"Sure, blow off steam as much as you want!" Ryan said, as he charged after Psyshock's newest host. A thrall with a laser rifle attempted to intercept him, but the courier's backup propelled him backward with a blast. Though Sarin couldn't take a hit, she had a lot of firepower at her beck and call.

Soon, Ryan reached Mechron's mech right as Psyshock had started climbing its metal hide. He probably intended to use it against Frank, even at the risk of destroying the bunker, but the courier wouldn't let things get that far.

However, Psypsy had one last thrall emerge from below the mech and stand in Ryan's way. The courier instantly froze in place, when he recognized her.

Len.

She must have been working on the mech when the battle started, for she wielded a small drill in her hands. Her beautiful eyes were devoid of emotions; Psyshock had drained her soul and left only a husk behind.

"Back off, Cesare," the brainjacker warned, as Len put her drill against her left temple, "or I will have your beloved kill herself right before your eyes."

Ryan froze in place at the odious threat. "I can bring her back," he said, raising his laser gun raised at Psyshock. The bastard immediately had Len move in the line of fire.

"But you will always remember," Psypsy taunted him. "Whenever you look at her from now on, you will see that moment flashing back before your eyes. The sight of her

brain spilling out on the floor, because you wouldn't back down."

And he was right. The memory would haunt Ryan forever.

But he couldn't look the other way.

His best friend's index finger slowly pressed the trigger, and his heart skipped a beat. The courier froze time before Shortie could activate the drill, and rushed at her while the universe turned purple. Ryan felt sick in his stomach, for he never raised his hand against Len in any loop. The mere fact Psyshock forced him to do this, even to save her life, filled the courier with *intense* fury.

Tossing his laser gun aside, Ryan raised his free hand, joined his fingers, and quickly hit her multiple times in the carotid and aorta. It was a highly dangerous technique, with a strong chance of causing medical complications, but he didn't know any other method to prevent her from harming herself.

When time resumed, Len collapsed. The strikes had temporarily blocked the blood influx to the brain, causing unconsciousness and making her drop the drill. Ryan carefully caught his best friend with his free hand and gently put her on the ground.

And of course, that bastard Psyshock used the opportunity to launch a tentacle straight at the courier's skull.

Ryan dodged and froze time for two seconds. Leaving Len on the ground, he rose up and prepared the Bliss inhaler.

"You should have seen it coming from Shortie's memories. I've been in this city for months, and yet you have never managed to possess me." Ryan dodged the tentacle when

time resumed, grabbed it with his free hand, and quickly pulled the metal squid down to earth. “Do you know why? Because for all of your vicious, cowardly tricks, I always beat you.”

Psyshock replied with a hateful snarl and a tentacled whip, but the time-traveler dodged with quick bursts of his time-stop.

“As your boss once said it...” Ryan quickly closed the gap and applied the inhaler to the brainjacker’s face. “Time to take your medicine.”

Psyshock took a full dose of Bliss to the face.

His tentacles thrashed around in panic, but as Enrique guessed, his mutated body made him especially vulnerable to brain-altering chemicals. Psyshock gasped and wriggled on the ground, his tentacles falling inert as the euphoric rush paralyzed him.

The courier kicked the brainjacker in the head, just to be sure he wouldn’t get up again, and then focused on Len. Thankfully, his friend was still breathing. She would need quick medical attention, but she would live.

“It’s okay, Shortie.” Ryan sat at his friend’s side, holding her close to his chest. The battle raged around them, plushies escaping into the bunker while Frank smashed a wall to get into the hangar. “I’ve got your back.”

He always did.

It took one more hour, but Ryan’s side eventually won the Meta-Gang’s civil war. Though one-sided slaughter might have been a better term.

Psyshock's thralls had continued fighting even without the squid, but they were no match for the terrible host assembled before them. Unfortunately, while Ryan reined in the violence whenever he could, neither the plushies nor the Meta showed any mercy. Even if they were brainwashed tools, anyone fighting back was fair game. Only the Black Elixir had shown *some* restraint, as it didn't finish off the wounded once they were no longer a threat to it.

It said something about plushies and mutants when a *giant monstrous slime* looked more merciful in comparison.

But in the end, once the dust settled down, the bunker belonged to Ryan.

"I know the transition from the previous administration has been difficult." Standing atop Mechron's mech with his hands behind his back, the courier looked over his audience of Psychos, orphaned children, plushies, and one slimy abomination. Though Psyshock did get rid of Ryan's suit, he had found a black turtleneck and pants to wear. "The summary executions, the waterboarding sessions... but it's all in the past now. For we successfully purged the leftist menace from our ranks!"

"Now, it is time to focus on the true enemy." Frank the Mad nodded to himself, never losing sight of what mattered.
"The Mexicans."

"Exactly. And it is with great reluctance that I accept the role of President, and the unlimited emergency powers that come with it. Powers that I promise to give up once the crisis is over." Ryan winked at his audience. "Honest."

Twenty Meta-Gang members had survived the short civil war, either because they wisely sided with the winning side or outright surrendered. Ryan recognized most of them,

from the Land to Mongrel, though not all. He would have all the time to exploit them in the following days.

They might be his new minions, but they were still assholes.

As for the plushies, they had each bonded to an orphan, keeping watch over them like jealous pets. They had also enslaved Rakshasa's gremlins, forcing them to fawn over the children by whipping them with harvested intestines. Ryan had the Psycho summoner teleport more creatures as an offering to their plushie overlords, which seemed to satisfy their bloodlust... for now.

In short, the pecking order had been established.

"Hey, who made you the leader?" Ryan recognized the dissenter as the lizard Psycho he beat up at the orphanage, in the previous Dynamis run. Unfortunately, it seemed a few people disagreed with the new status quo. "You're not even one of us! Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure you were a prisoner hours ago!"

Ryan looked at this rebel scum. "What's your name, my scaled friend? The best I can come up with is 'Mook.'"

"The Reptilian."

How original, another conspiracy trying to take over the government! Who was next, the Illuminati? "I assure you that this is a democracy: one man, one vote." Ryan put a hand on his chest. "I am the man, and I have the vote."

"Women can't be president," Frank agreed, Sarin flipping him the bird in response.

"But if you're skeptical about election results, let's settle this." The courier glanced at the audience. "If you want me

in charge, raise your hand, or paw, or tentacle.”

“You’re my friend!” All the plushies raised a tiny paw, cautiously imitated by the frightened orphans; Sarin, Frank, and the wiser Psychos imitated them as well. Eventually, the Black Elixir formed a tentacle of goo with seven eyes at the tip to salute him.

“See?” The courier asked the Reptilian once he had secured an overwhelming majority. “Why vote for the lesser evil?”

“But—”

“I have a shoggoth,” Ryan interrupted this dissenter with a foolproof argument. “I am now president.”

The Reptilian glanced at the Black Elixir, finally understood his place, and submitted. “Yes.”

Ryan glared at this fool. “Yes who, handbag?”

The Psycho kept his head down. “Yes, Mr. President.”

“That’s better.” Ryan searched in his pocket, and brought out his secret weapon. “Of course, the new administration is nothing if not generous.”

A Dynamis-made, knockoff Elixir.

The Psychos present immediately looked at it with hunger. Even Sarin and Frank, whom Ryan was pretty sure couldn’t indulge in its consumption with their particular biology. The Elixirs within their blood probably caused a psychological craving.

Ryan dangled the knockoff at this pack of hungry hyenas, and then tossed it in their midst. Though they all reached a

hand to grab it, Mosquito used his wings to grab it midair and immediately consumed it.

“Obey the government, pay your taxes, and everyone will benefit from our *Elixicare*,” Ryan said as Mosquito let out a moan of blissful pleasure, and the other Psychos snarls of frustration.

“What about the connection?” Ink Machine voiced her skepticism. “Only Psyshock knew how to contact the supplier.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Ryan said, already having a plan to deal with Dynamis. “The juice will flow.”

“It’d better do,” Inky Winky said, arms crossed. “Or I’m out of here.”

“Also, I only saved your ass for the cure you promised,” Sarin reminded Ryan of his campaign promises. “If you don’t follow through with our deal, I’ll blast you dead before you know what’s coming.”

“I... helped...” The Black Elixir’s alien voice startled most Psychos present, and especially the children. Everyone gave the creature a wide berth, even the plushies. “You... help me... now...”

“I assure you that unlike any other politician seen before, I will fulfill my electoral campaign’s promises. In fact, I will immediately make a few calls. We’re going to take this bunker by storm, and then...”

Ryan waved a hand at the ceiling. “The woooooorld!”

The people present exchanged glances, floored by their president’s grandiose vision. “The world?” The Reptilian

asked, as if he already controlled it.

“The woooooorld,” Ryan corrected them.

Since the run was doomed from the get go, the courier could afford to throw safety out of the window, and try risky strategies that would work in the short-term. He would call in favors, even from people he would have rather avoided.

“What about Ma?” Little Sarah asked with a frown. “Will she... will she recover?”

“Uncle Ryan has a plan to cure your mommy,” the courier reassured her. Len and the surviving thralls had been heavily sedated, until Ryan could figure out a way to undo their brainwashing; Acid Rain too, since he had questions for her. Psyshock would be kept in a drugged haze until the courier found a way to throw him at Cancel, which shouldn’t take long. “Just be patient. Everything will be alright.”

“So what next, Boss?” Sarin asked, arms crossed.

“First I will nominate you as my vice-president, because we believe in gender equality.” Ryan glanced at the Black Elixir. “Our goo friend will become secretary of state, to fill out the alien minority quota. Agent Frank will ensure the people respect the government’s will.”

“Yes, Mr. President,” the agent nodded, the perfect patriot.

“Rakshasa, you will keep summoning gremlins to pacify our plushie overlords.” Though every plushie had bonded to a child and none had escaped the bunker, Ryan knew very well this was only the calm before the storm. As soon as they ran out of gremlins to kill, the creatures would multiply and take over the surface world. Hopefully, he could delay

the plushipocalypse by a few days. “Reptilian, you’re going to the orphanage to bring me my cat back.”

“A cat?” the lizard asked, surprised by the order.

“A Persian cat, with white fur and pure blue eyes,” Ryan explained. “Spoiler warning, we’re going to ham it up and chew the scenery.”

They had a secret base and access to a doomsday weapon. The signs were painted on the wall.

It was time for Ryan to go full Bond Villain.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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74: Running the Asylum

President Ryan browsed through Hannifat Lecter's files, with Eugène-Henry sleeping on his lap.

He had inherited his own oval office from his late predecessor, though it was square-shaped. Mechron had built living quarters in the bunkers to host Genomes in his employ; each studio was around twenty meters squared in size, including a kitchenette, washroom, beds, and shelves.

Most importantly, each room also had a computer with access to the base's system. While the bunker used several different independent networks to run its operations, Adam and Psyshock had compiled a lot of useful data. It took Ryan hours to crack the firewalls, but it had been worth it.

Besides a map of the bunker, the time-traveler had gotten his hands on several of Mechron's unclassified files. Most were android schematics, but some delved into truly revolutionary technology, such as spaceships to lifesaving cybernetic enhancements. Such a shame that Mechron had used his talent for destruction, instead of serving humanity. Ryan had the feeling the world would be a far better place if someone else had inherited his power.

This data was but a taste of what the central mainframe held, and Ryan shuddered at the mere thought of someone like Augustus getting his hands on it; anyone unlocking the bunker's full capabilities would have a credible shot at world domination. The place could produce robots, weapons of

mass destruction, and of course, grant control of the *Bahamut*.

Most importantly, Ryan now knew how the Meta-Gang learned of the bunker's existence. Big Fat Adam and Psyshock had been studying leftover tech in the Old Rome's ruins, and captured a still active research probe reporting to the bunker's central AI. They tracked the source of its directional signal to New Rome, hoping to plunder its technology.

And now, it was Ryan's turn to crack this metal vault.

After reviewing the files, the President used the bunker's computer system to contact a few Blue Genomes. The first was Livia, whom he texted asking for a neutral meeting to clear things out. The second was the Architect, Yuki's girlfriend, whom he anonymously contacted through an encrypted call.

"So, let me get this straight," Nora's voice came out of the computer. *"You're building a Genius tech-based bunker, and you want me to see if I can crack it open as a stress test?"*

"Yes, we are constructing a safe space to protect our clients from a second Genome apocalypse," Ryan lied while scratching his cat's ears, causing him to wake up and purr. "We would like to hire you to review the plans. See if you can find any structural weakness we could deal with. Of course, this job will stay strictly confidential."

Nora would get a strongly edited version of the plans, so she doesn't blow the whistle on the operation. At least, until Ryan had unlocked its full capabilities.

"I guessed that already," the Architect replied with a chuckle. *"Especially since your image feed is all dark,*

mister... ”

“President,” Ryan replied, having already settled on his supervillain name. “Mr. President.”

She shrugged. *“That’s an odd name, but I’ve heard worse. However, I must warn you that my consultancy doesn’t come cheap, and I already have work to do for Dynamis. I don’t think I can deal with your project in the following weeks.”*

“Which is why you will work exclusively for our government from now on.”

“I’m not sure I foll—”

“Check your bank account for the down payment.”

After a short silence where Nora actually followed through, Ryan heard a gasp from the other side. *“That’s... that’s a lot of zeroes.”*

Thankfully, Ryan’s hidden second superpower was *money*. “Enough to temporarily set aside your previous obligations, Miss Moore?”

“I think it could be arranged!”

“Goooood,” Ryan said, his cat rejoicing at the plan coming together. “I will forward you the data and have you start immediately. Also, I have been informed you are on good terms with the superheroine Wardrobe?”

“We are close friends, yes,” Nora lied. Perhaps she tried to minimize public knowledge of her private life. *“Why so?”*

“Well, I was wondering if she made costumes on the side, besides superheroing? I’m in dire need of a presidential costume, but I don’t want to be stonewalled by her agent.”

“Wise, it would take weeks before you can talk to her directly. The PR managers are worse gatekeepers than Cerberus. But sure, I could ask her to contact you. What kind of costume are you looking for?”

“A cashmere one.”

Was there ever any doubt?

After recruiting his first Genius, Ryan called his favorite one after Len. He dreaded to have this conversation, especially since it would mean interacting closely with her for weeks. Time may have passed, but the wound remained fresh.

“Who is this?” Her surprised voice came out of the computer. “How did you get this number?”

Hearing Jasm—*Vulcan’s* voice made Ryan bristle, but he stayed in character. “Do you like weapons, Miss Sharif?”

“Are we playing twenty questions, or you’re just being a creep?”

“I love weapons, Miss Sharif,” the POTUS ranted while ignoring his ex-girlfriend. “I love building a big cannon, charging it, and unloading the payload. I love planes, tanks, and submarines. I love ordering drone strikes in the morning. I believe bullets are the best foreign policy.”

“I’m hacking your location. You’re going to regret prank calling me.” Her confident tone turned into a bark of frustration. “Damn it, you’re using proxy servers?”

“How would you feel about supplying an assault on Dynamis HQ?” Ryan inflicted the first strike. “Humiliating Wyvern, and crushing the corpos with an unstoppable technological advantage?”

Of course, he knew how to please her in all the ways that mattered. *“I’m listening.”*

“My name is Mr. President, and I’m going full Teddy ‘Trustbuster’ Roosevelt on Dynamis. Too long have corporations thought themselves above the law. *My law.*”

Since the deal with Manada needed Psyshock’s complicity and Ryan would get rid of him soon, the alliance would inevitably collapse. Besides, the POTUS needed to get his hands on Dr. Tyrano, and he doubted Dynamis would open the doors of Lab Sixty-Six even to their ‘allies.’ Big Fat Adam had confirmed in a previous run that the bunker had the infrastructure to produce Elixirs, so the courier could manufacture his own supply.

Ryan forwarded a few android schematics to Vulcan. *“That’s Mechron tech,”* she said, half-worried, half excited. *“Where did you get this?”*

“There’s more where I am. As for how, well, that will depend if we can...” Ryan let the sentence hang as he channeled his inner evil mastermind, “help each other out. Genius to genius.”

“Okay, now this smells really fishy. You sound like one of those Saturday morning cartoon supervillains with delusions of grandeur.”

“Of course I do,” Ryan replied bluntly. “But I have a vision, not delusions.”

"Right," Vulcan chuckled on the other side. "I admit you have my curiosity, and if you really intend to hit Wyvern where it hurts, then we'll get along great. But you need more than just tech to bribe me. You said it yourself. You help me, I help you."

Ah, Ryan loved a good Faustian bargain. He had a good idea what she would ask. "And how could I help you, Miss Sharif?"

"Dynamis is currently filming a new Wyvern movie at Star Studio," she said, *"Trash it, then we'll talk."*

She never changed. "Give me time to buy myself the right costume, and I'll set the stage on fire. Don't forget to turn on your TV when I do."

"Sure, I will. Impress me."

And so, Ryan's evil plan started taking shape.

Now... was the time to contact the last Genius on his list.

Ryan had long considered whether or not he should even call him. He didn't trust that man, as their previous partnership had ended in betrayal and disaster. They hadn't even spoken in years; *centuries* from the courier's point of view.

But to safely transfer Len's memory map, he needed someone capable of removing Psyshock's sabotage. A Genius specialized in brain-altering tech, who could perfect the machine and perhaps improve on its design. If it were for Ryan alone, the courier wouldn't have gone through with it.

But it was no longer about him.

Now, he had to save Len too.

In the end, the courier used a channel long unused, a gruff male voice coming from the other end. “*What?*”

“Alchemo,” Ryan said, his fists clenching and startling his cat. “It’s Quicksave.”

The news shocked Braindead. “*Romano?*” he asked, as if still unsure of himself. His confusion quickly turned to anger though. “*Damn it, you cursed fool! It’s been two years, two years since you vanished without a word, and you’re calling me back as if nothing happened?*”

Well yes, but only *after* the Genius had tried to put Ryan’s brain in a jar. Though Alchemo didn’t remember his failed attempt, the courier never forgot. Especially since it took place right after Ryan had confessed his deepest secret.

“*You broke the Doll’s heart, you selfish brat!*” the old Genius complained. “*I don’t even know why I’m talking to you right now! What, you feel lonely and decided to ca—*”

“I’m calling in my favor,” Ryan interrupted the rambling.

This sent the older Genius reeling back. “*Where?*” he asked, his tone turning from angry to slightly worried.

“New Rome. I’ll send you the coordinates.”

“*You better have a good explanation, Romano, because I will bring the Doll with me. She won’t take no for an answer.*”

“Sure,” Ryan replied before abruptly hanging up and sending the Junkyard coordinates by text. As he did, the President received another, delightful message.

Livia had accepted his invitation.

Someone knocked on the oval office's door. Probably an intern wanting to play Bill and Monica. "You may enter," Ryan said, a hand on Eugène-Henry's back as the doors opened. Sarin and Mosquito walked into the room, much to the President's disappointment. "Yes, my dear Cancer Ad?"

"The Land reported an invisible Genome snooping around town, though it kept fleeing whenever we tried to intercept," Sarin answered, missing the joke. Ryan guessed it was Mr. Safelite checking up on the Meta-Gang's activities.

"Everything else is under control otherwise. What's the plan of action now?"

"In order, we're getting rid of Psyshock, curing his victims, laying low, and conquering the bunker," the courier explained. "We'll hold Rust Town for now, but no more attacks outside."

"What about the Augusti, Boss?" Mosquito asked. "I mean, we already hit their people hard. They aren't going to forget it, even if we stop targeting them."

"Funny you should ask, because I just received an answer from Minerva." She even agreed to his 'special request.'

"We're going to make a live peace offering to the Augusti, and then prepare for war with Dynamis."

Though Sarin couldn't care less, Mosquito seemed a bit worried about the new foreign policy. "War with Dynamis?"

"Yes, we are at war with Dynamis," the time-traveler pointed out. "We have always been at war with Dynamis."

"Boss, I don't think that's a good idea. Psyshock said we should avoid—"

"Am I dreaming, or you're becoming a vocal minority?" Ryan asked, scratching Eugène-Henry's ears. "Are you leaving the silent majority, Mosquito?"

The bugman lowered his head. "No, Mr. President."

"I love democracy," Ryan replied, as Eugène-Henry leaped out of his hands and took over the studio's bed.

"Empowering people to do as I want."

"That wasn't what I asked," Sarin said, slightly annoyed. "I meant about the cure."

"Well, I have an idea," Ryan said, having considered it thoughtfully. "You see Mongrel?"

"Yeah, he's eating rats in the Junkyard. What about him?"

"His power allows him to drink multiple Elixirs and use multiple powers, though it doesn't make him immune to mutations," Ryan explained. "And I also know someone who consumed two colored juices without going Psycho."

Sarin's head perked up in interest. "Like Augustus?"

"Yes, and I have the gut feeling these two will help us figure out a cure for the Psycho condition." Especially since Dr. Tyrano had seemed confident he could make one, if someone like Livia cooperated. "Finally, we have one other piece of the puzzle available."

"Which one, boss?" Mosquito asked, having rediscovered his inner patriotism.

"Well, my bedbug friend," the president said as he rose up from his chair, "the talking Elixir among us, of course."

And a discussion was long overdue.

Leaving his staff and cat behind, the President walked into the recreational area. The Psychos had cleaned up the place, with Frank replacing the broken *Street Fighters* arcade game with a *Donkey Kong* one. The strange, faceless mutant called Incognito occupied a repaired bar counter, offering refreshments to whoever asked.

The children and their respective plushies had taken over most of the atrium, the orphans playing some kind of tabletop game around a large table. Gremlins brought them juice and snacks, with the plushies poking the creatures with sticks when they proved late or clumsy. Sometimes, these terrible influences even encouraged their children to do it themselves.

To his surprise, Ryan noticed the original abomination combing Little Sarah's hair with a hairbrush. However, the handle looked like it was made of a carved femur on a closer look, with human teeth in place of bristles.

The plushie was *learning*.

The courier hastily left, and moved towards the Elixir reserve. The Black Elixir had been granted his own empty studio near the recreational areas, with Ryan granting it the task of surveying the knockoffs. The President knew better than to give that task to any Psycho in his employ, even Frank and Sarin.

"You came," the Black Elixir said with its booming alien voice, as the courier walked into its lair. The studio had been emptied of all amenities, except the knockoff crates. All that remained were cold, barren metal walls. "I helped... you help."

"Yes, I will, but I need to understand how, my Lovecraftian friend. Truthfully, I don't even understand what you are." Ryan closed the door and rested his back against it. "You are an Elixir, right? One from an eighth color?"

"Yes... I am Black... the paradox... the negation... the freedom of all rules... distilled chaos..." The creature struggled to find a way to explain it. "It is why... the others were taught... to fulfill their duty, but I... I cannot be bound... I do not want to bond... with anyone."

So it was a natural rebel? The very nature of its powers made it unstable and reluctant to bond with a human? "Is that why the Alchemist didn't produce Black Elixirs?"

"We are paradoxes... we undo the rules by our nature... the rules which bind your universe together... if you lack anything by which you are defined... you are nothing..."

Giving Ryan the ability to rewrite time had been acceptable.

Turning Augustus into an unstoppable juggernaut had been acceptable.

Mechron had been acceptable.

But Black Elixirs had been considered off-limits.

That should say everything. "You said I should send you back to the Black. You mean the Black dimension? There is one for each color?"

"Yes... the Black World... send me back... this lower reality... it is maddening... your gravity constrains me... your causes have an effect, and your effects must have causes... I am forced into a molecule-shaped prison..."

"Things make sense in our dimension?" Ryan summed the problem up.

"Yes!" The interdimensional entity answered with a burst of emotion. "I am... I am not free... to take any shape I wish... unlike the other Elixirs... I was never meant... to be here... I want to return... home."

Ryan felt a ping of pity for the creature. Of course, this universe was as terrifying to this entity, as the slime was to human beings. "Thing is, even if I find a way to send you back, you understand that I keep turning back time? You might be yanked back to our dimension by accident, like the gremlins."

"No," it rasped. "Once I am on the other side, I... I will ask the Ultimate One for help."

That term again. "The Ultimate One?"

"The *Black* Ultimate One... the undoer... the breaker of rules... even causality."

"So there are more than one? One for each colored dimension?"

"They are... the embodiment of their color... the supreme beings that oversee the higher realms... we are..." The Black Elixir searched for the right term. "We are their attendants... their emissaries..."

"Their priests?" Ryan suggested.

"Yes. We are conduits... between the lower realms and the higher ones... we connect the profane to the divine... so that one day lesser beings may ascend."

So that was the Alchemist's true goal? To eventually elevate humanity to the level of the Ultimate Ones? To transform men into gods? Well, one just had to look at Augustus to see where that went wrong. "Does that mean you are all sentient? All Elixirs?"

"The real ones, yes... but they are... submissive. They have no purpose but to help... to bond... the one called the Alchemist... it taught them to bond with humans... I do not know how. The metal ones tried to teach me... but I... I refused to behave."

"The metal ones?"

"The Blue one that... made this metal place is long gone... but its creations carry on with their task."

Mechron was dead, but his AI still researched Elixirs on his behalf. That explained the creatures in the vats, and Big Adam's words about a knockoff production system inside the bunker. The facility was meant to discover new technology which the Genius could use to rule the world, and it would continue to do so until disabled.

"There is a portal in this bunker," Ryan guessed. "The one Mechron's AI used to summon you from your home dimension."

"Yes. Once I have crossed it, the Ultimate One... will undo the cause that brought me here... remove me from the flow of causality, and reality will restructure itself... when you reshape time, I will never have been here... only you will remember."

If such a creature could casually rewrite reality, and even erase someone from the timestream, could it work in reverse too?

Ryan's mind immediately turned to Jasmine. "Could it do more? If it controls paradoxes, could your Ultimate One bring someone? Someone that never existed?"

"You wish to bring back... someone you erased..." The Black Elixir meditated on its answer. "Nothing is impossible for the Ultimate Ones, so long as it is... within the bounds of their color... but there will be... a price."

"I will happily pay for it."

"Not for you... not just you..." the Black Elixir corrected him. "Your reality cannot handle us... it won't matter if I am removed, since I am... a glitch... but your friend..."

"She will damage reality itself with her mere existence." Ryan's mood deflated. "I see."

"Do you... still want me to ask... the Ultimate One? It may listen."

"We'll see when we cross that bridge," the courier said, crossing his arms. "There's no point in discussing it until I have opened the portal. Why did you contact me of all people?"

"You remember, and you... you have a strong connection... to the Violet One... the one that oversees the flow of causality... you see things with its eye..."

Ryan froze. "What do you mean?"

"You are the observer of this timeline... you decide if this moment is real or not... you possess that power by the will... of the Violet One."

The courier considered the words carefully. He had already suspected it, but to have it confirmed...

"I wondered how my power interacted with things like dimensional travel," the time-traveler said, remembering the gremlins. They remembered him, but existed in another realm beyond his power's reach. It should have caused temporal paradoxes, and yet it didn't. "It works because a higher power smooths things along and makes sure to avoid contradictions."

The Black Elixir's countless eyes and mouths shifted, Ryan taking this as the equivalent of a nod. "The Violet Ultimate One is... the gate and the key... of all of space and time... it is the supreme overseer of causality... I could see its will at work in the previous timeline."

The pyramid creature.

"Did it set up this meeting?" Ryan asked, feeling some existential dread. "Am I even in control of my actions, or does it decide everything early?"

Much to his surprise, the Black Elixir's answer reeked of optimism. "You are free... you were simply... guided. The Violet One only interferes to maintain this reality's coherence, but... you are so small... your universe is no larger than a molecule to the Ultimate Ones..."

"God doesn't micromanage?"

"No," the Black Elixir confirmed. "It does not control, it nudges... a path has been shown to you, but... it is your choice to follow it or not. The Ultimate One does not interfere in this timeline... not anymore."

So Ryan was on his own this time around? The entity offered him a way out of his previous conundrum and loneliness, but then decided to focus on other matters. The courier was free to take the provided option, find another way, or mess it all up. It was liberating, in a sense.

"Alright, we'll find that portal and send you back home," Ryan said, the Black Elixir wriggling in relief. It was almost cute to watch, in a disturbing way. "What should I call you in the meantime?"

"I have no need for names..." the entity answered. "Words cannot describe..."

"I will call you Darkling then," Ryan settled on a name.

"I exist beyond time... beyond reason... I cannot be defined by a single-"

"I'm President. Your name is Darkling now."

The Black Elixir stayed silent a moment, its countless eyes focusing on Ryan. The President suddenly wondered if he had vexed the entity. "Whatever..." Darkling said, but the tone implied otherwise.

As it turned out, even aliens could sulk.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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75: Foreign Policy

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

I will be taking a break from April 23rd until the end of the month. Updates will resume as normal in May.

With his Plymouth Fury out of commission, Ryan had expected to be transported in a Cadillac. Instead, he had to settle for the same black minivan which the Meta-Gang used to attack the orphanage in the past.

These Psychos had no taste at all!

“This is a disgrace,” Ryan complained at the back, Eugène-Henry on his lap. Sarin was driving at the front, while Mosquito sat on the second row of seats. “At least it’s a *Chrysler!*”

“Nobody can see us with the tinted windows,” Sarin grunted at the front, as she drove through New Rome’s streets. They had left Rust Town soon after dusk, and Ryan had taken the opportunity to memorize the name of the border guards they bribed to get out. “People raise the alarms when they see us out in the open.”

“Yeah, right, a black minivan doesn’t scream suspicious at all.”

“Half of us are too big to fit in a normal car, Boss,” Mosquito pointed out, having to lower his head to fit inside. “We have to transport Frank by truck.”

Ah, the logistics of superhumans. Ryan wondered how the Danish managed to deal with their giant serpent overlord Nidhogg. They probably had to redraw the maps after every transformation. “What’s your second power, Mosquito?” the president asked, as they traveled through the southern slums. “Besides the whole bugman thing.”

“I took the Hercules knockoff, the super-strength one.” Mosquito let out a sigh. “Didn’t work out well. I only get the superstrength after I’m filled with blood, and I weaken every minute afterward.”

“You took a second Green?” Ryan asked, squinting in skepticism. “Why? You didn’t want to go for the full rainbow?”

“Well, being a giant mosquito isn’t very glamorous, ya know Boss? I figured if I drank an Elixir of the same color as the first one, it would wash away the first power and replace it. It made sense to me.”

“You’re a dumbass,” Sarin said out loud what Ryan was thinking.

Mosquito bristled. “Yeah, but at least I’ve got a body.”

“Shut your mouth!” Sarin stopped looking at the road to raise her hand at Mosquito, as if to blast him. “I’ll tear your wisecracking head off!”

“Hey, everyone calm down, there’s a cat at the back!” Ryan said to defuse the situation. Mosquito and Sarin exchanged fingered gestures, but the Meta’s new vice-president focused back on the road. “Besides, you took two Elixirs too, Chernobyl. It’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

"That's fucking different, asshole," Sarin replied. "I took my Elixirs soon after Last Easter, back when nobody knew taking more than one was a terrible idea. While that bug knew exactly what he was getting into."

Ryan blinked. "Wait, you've been like this for fifteen years?"

"Fourteen. I swear, if you find a cure, first thing I'll do is to fuck someone's brains out. Fourteen years of celibacy, man; *fourteen years*. I don't get how priests do it."

There was a sick joke to make here, but even Ryan had standards.

Mosquito had none though. "Well, they learn how to handle kids."

Ignoring the bugman laughing at his own joke, Ryan meditated on this information. Sarin's situation made him pause, but watching her join Adam in burning down New Rome lessened the sympathy he might have felt for her. As for Mosquito, he happily helped to abduct orphans to throw at the bunker's defenses.

Yeah, these two had made bad calls. But instead of turning their life around, they kept making worse ones. If anything, the only mutant the courier felt pity for was Frank the Mad, who clearly suffered from a mental illness and needed psychiatric treatment. Maybe it was Ryan's experience with Bloodstream talking, but the time-traveler had a hard time seeing Psychos as anything but monsters.

Eventually, Sarin reached their destination, and parked the minivan in front of Deadland Motel.

Livia and her escort were waiting in the parking lot. Unlike last time, where she had shown up with only Cancel and

Mortimer, the Augusti princess had brought reinforcements. Sparrow, Night Terror... and Luigi the Hockey Victim.

Damn it, Ryan knew he had overlooked something!

“Howdy, legitimate gentlemen,” Ryan greeted the group, as he and his Psycho bodyguards emerged from their car. The president carried Eugène-Henry in his hands. “We come in peace!”

“Hi, I’m Cancel!” Only Greta raised a hand and waved it at the group with a fake smile. Ryan wondered what it would take to break her cheerful demeanor. “Nice to meet you!”

The others weren’t so enthusiastic though. Mortimer hid a gun beneath his cloak, Sparrow shielded Augustus’ daughter with her body, Night Terror stood still in eerie silence, and Luigi courageously stayed at the back.

As for Livia...

“So, you’re the new leader of the Meta-Gang?” Though she seemed confident and in control, Ryan noticed the slight unease at the edge of Livia’s gaze. While she could read notes left by her previous self, the presence of Psychos didn’t help make her feel safe. “Quicksave, is it?”

“President,” Ryan replied, carrying his cat in his hands. “Mr. President.”

“Who elected you?” Mortimer asked, curious.

“You don’t want to know,” Mosquito replied while shuddering. “They had... persuasive arguments.”

“Six against three,” Sarin taunted the Augusti. “You really fear us that much?”

“Considering you’ve been attacking our businesses lately, we expected a trap,” Sparrow replied, before checking an earplug hidden beneath her hair. “Miss Livia, it seems they indeed came alone.”

“I know the previous administration and yours didn’t get along well, but it’s all in the past now,” Ryan said. “We want peace between our two nations. We even brought a gift to show our goodwill.”

“A gift?” Greta’s smile turned genuine, having been informed ahead of time. “I love gifts. What kind of gift?”

“The old administration, of course!” Ryan said before snapping his fingers. Mosquito opened the black minivan’s chest, grabbed the content, and tossed it at Livia’s feet. “Packaged just for you.”

Psyshock wriggled on the ground, blissfully out of commission.

The Augusti princess looked down at the brainjacker’s limp body with contempt. Sparrow and Mortimer studied the Psycho with curiosity, while Greta’s gleeful joy turned to disappointment.

“Aw, he’s drugged out?” Cancel complained, as she noticed the liquid dripping from Psyshock’s mouth. “I prefer it when they understand what’s coming. It doesn’t feel right otherwise.”

“We fished this squid yesterday,” Ryan said. “You’ll need to negate his power first to make his death stick though.”

“Wait, she can negate powers?” Sarin asked, immediately interested.

"Yes, I am doing it right now," Greta said with pride, which Ryan confirmed after a failed attempt at activating his time-stop.

"Then why am I still made of gas?" Sarin complained, before raising her hand to the skies. "Huh, I can't generate shockwaves anymore."

"I don't know why, but some powers trump mine," Cancel said with disappointment. "Like the Boss. He can't shoot lightning in my presence, but he's still invulnerable."

"And be thankful for it," Sparrow said ominously. "He would have killed you otherwise."

So this confirmed Ryan's theory. Cancel didn't nullify powers; she disrupted the Elixir's connection to their color dimension, preventing access to this bottomless power source, but couldn't affect physical mutations.

However, she managed to negate Mongrel's pyrokinesis in a previous loop, which he got from a knockoff that didn't draw upon the Red Dimension for fuel. Ryan tried to reconcile these two contradictions, until he realized the missing link: Mongrel's original White Elixir. Since it was the one keeping his multiple powers in balance, by disrupting it, Cancel probably caused his other abilities to go haywire.

As for Augustus, it could only mean his invulnerability was a physical mutation. Combined with the other information Ryan had gathered, then Mob Zeus' body probably mimicked the properties of a specific metal. A superior variant of Frank's power.

Probably an Orange.

A *damn strong* Orange, but it didn't explain how Lightning Butt could move in the stopped time, or why most powers failed to affect him... unless...

Unless the metal *itself* had unique, anomalous properties.

It was just a theory and he would need to test its limits, but Ryan felt he was onto something. More worrying, since Ryan's power relied on his connection to the Purple World, it meant Cancel's power would probably kill permanently. His other self would remain trapped in the purple world, unaware his future incarnation had perished.

"Anyway, can we wait until the squid wakes up? I want to see the light go ou—" Mortimer drew a silenced pistol before Greta could finish her sentence, and shot Psypsy twice in the head. "Morty, you hyena! Find your own kills!"

"What?" he asked, smoke coming out of his weapon. "It's teamwork. You soften the prey, I finish it off. Fifty-fifty."

"But you always get the good part!"

Ryan would lie if the sight of Psyshock's corpse bleeding out on a parking lot didn't fill him with joy. "VP, please call our staff to check if Psypsy's victims recovered," the POTUS asked Sarin, before turning at Livia. "So? Do we sign a peace treaty, shake hands..."

"Let us discuss that inside a private space," she replied. "Luigi will be present as well."

"You're really sure about that?" Ryan asked, disliking the man's presence. "He might go mad from the revelation."

"I hear people's dirty laundry every day," Luigi replied with a snort. "Nothing you say will surprise me."

Oh well, he asked for it.

Livia led the two men upstairs, to the same cozy suite where she welcomed Ryan in the previous loop. She invited them to sit around the table, with the cookies and coffee cups already set. “A drink?” she offered Ryan.

“No thank you,” Ryan replied, letting Eugène-Henry leap onto the bed nearby. His host couldn’t suppress a raised eyebrow. “Is this really necessary? You should have all the information available.”

“I wish to hear it from you,” Livia said, glancing at Luigi. “And have my intel confirmed.”

“Don’t try to lie,” the truth-teller warned Ryan. “You can’t.”

“Do you want the short version or the long one?” the time-traveler asked, as he sensed Luigi’s power take over.

“You could give a summary,” Livia proposed.

Alright.

Time to rant!

“I am a time-traveler, and I’ve been at it for centuries. I’ve lived a full life in Monaco, which I don’t recommend, and I’ve tried pretty much everything you can think of. Including beating you up, Luigi. Livia, you can make notes that carry through my time jumps, so everything you wrote down is true; this is the third loop where we meet and I really hated how you took away my control over all factors, but like cancer, I’ve learned to live with it. Also, you really remind me of a friend who suffered from a toxic family environment, so I want to help. I beat the shit out of the Meta-Gang last loop before they could kill everyone with an

orbital laser, but your daddy waged war on the Carnival and Dynamis and the city burned again.

"I saved your ex-boyfriend from your aunt for you, but she ended up killing Fortuna instead, and your Lightning Dad smashed a Living Sun into New Rome and I had to reload. But Psypsy managed to follow, which didn't end well for him; I helped feed Big Fat Adam to a black alien whom I called Darkling, because it eats hope and happiness. Then I gave the Meta-Gang the democratic choice of voting for me or dying, I became President, and I love democracy so much I'm never relinquishing power until my death. The whole timeline is ruined so I decided to try new stuff like finding a cure for the Psycho condition, and also, you have the brain patterns of a friend trapped in your head, which I really want back, please. I haven't doctored your notes or anything, and I have no intention of causing you trouble until you go after me first.

"Except for you Luigi. I hate you, I hate you so much. The first time I beat you was one of my eternal life's best memories, and I love doing it. I love it so much I'll keep doing it in every loop until the last one. Also, nothing you will do during this loop really matters since I'll reload eventually, so your life is meaningless. You don't matter."

Ryan joined his hands. "I think that's all."

By the time he had finished, Livia's fingers fidgeted around her coffee cup, and her gaze lost itself in the pitch darkness of her beverage. Luigi's stare had turned distant, as he underwent an existential crisis.

Eventually, Livia glanced at her truth-teller. "Luigi."

"Y-yes, ma'am?"

"I overworked you, and you need a vacation," Livia said with a calm, friendly tone. "To make up for it, I will make a generous deposit on your account. I think twenty million euros should be a good compensation. You leave New Rome right now."

Luigi's eyes widened in shock. "Like, what, now *now*?"

"Now," Livia said, her tone less friendly than before. "You leave and you don't look back."

"Where am I supposed to go?" the truth-teller protested.

"Not here," Livia said with a smile that wasn't a smile. "Obviously, you won't say a word of this to anyone else, even my father. If you do, I will know, and your free-time will be *cut short*. Do you understand?"

Luigi was an ass, but he could see the blood on the wall.

"Also, if you don't leave the city by next sunrise, I will beat you up with a hockey stick," Ryan blurted out while still under the power's effect. "Oh wait, no, I'm president now. I can order drone strikes."

Luigi wisely rose from his chair and left the room. Ryan briefly froze time to look out the window; the truth-teller was running down the motel's stairs as fast as he could, much to his fellow Augusti's surprise.

"Convinced, princess?" Ryan said as time unfroze, sitting back in his chair.

"I admit this is... a lot to process, even with prior warning." Livia glanced at Eugène-Henry, who had claimed the bedsheet as his own. "Why can I see him this time? My notes said I couldn't before. Is this a different cat?"

"No, but he lost his power," Ryan replied with a shrug.
"You're sure Luigi won't talk?"

"He will be too busy processing what he heard to do anything about it," Livia replied before wincing. "Sending him away now is the best choice. My power gave him one chance out of three of killing himself if I didn't."

Ryan couldn't tell he was surprised. In his experience, it was usually the most common response to people learning the truth, closely followed by attempting to capture the time-traveler himself. "So, you believe me?"

"Well, your tale does match what's in my records, but there are a few things I wish to discuss." Livia peered into Ryan's eyes. "Since you've taken over the Meta-Gang by force, it means you control the bunker during this iteration?"

So she knew. Of course she did. Her father probably had moles in Dynamis, and Livia probably recorded its existence in her notes for future loops. "Yes."

"What will you do with it?"

"Well, for now, I'll learn everything I can about its content, and then I will destroy it in the final loop," Ryan explained. "It's an apple of discord. Every time it's unearthed, it spells disaster for this city."

She frowned. "You're sure what's inside can't be used for good in the right hands?"

"There are no right hands," Ryan quoted Leo Hargraves, and he was tempted to agree. "True, some of the technology inside can benefit humanity, and it will once I've filtered it out. But you must understand a big orbital laser will never be used for positive ends."

“No, probably not,” Livia admitted. “You want to cure Psychos?”

“I thought you could help me with that, actually.”

“You want to figure out why my father and I can use two powers with no side-effects,” she guessed, crossing her arms. “Dynamis already made a similar offer, but I refused to assist. They would use this knowledge to make an army.”

“And I will use it to cure people.”

She looked away. “I’ll... I’ll consider it. Just give me some time to process everything, Ryan. It would be so much easier if I could remember directly, instead of catching up with written notes.”

“Maybe you could,” Ryan said. “But Psyshock sabotaged the tech needed. I’m trying to figure out how to solve that during this loop.”

“Is that why you need Len Sabino’s mental map?” she asked, and the time-traveler nodded in response. “Alright. I will need time to type down all the data, but I could forward it tomorrow at the earliest.”

“Wait, you’re giving it to me?” Ryan asked, surprised. “Just like that?”

Livia blinked in confusion. “Yes, why? That wasn’t our deal?”

“Yes, but I expected another fetch quest or a blackmail attempt.”

“I am not an ingrate, Ryan.” The Augusti princess sounded a little offended by his skepticism. “Though I do not remember

it, from what I read, you did me a great favor. I trust my previous self's judgment."

That... that was extraordinarily noble of her. Someone else would have tried to use that leverage to exact concessions. "I'm deeply in your debt."

"No, Ryan," she answered with a smile. "I'm the one with a debt, and I'm clearing it off the books."

The time-traveler looked away. "You know, I've been doing this alone for so long... after what happened with Psyshock, you can't imagine how good it feels to have someone helping me out with no strings attached."

"*You're not alone,*" Livia said, "That's what you told my other self. It impacted her enough to write it down, and... I believe she had come to trust you a great deal. Even though it will take time for me to catch up, I hope we can continue on this path."

Yes. Ryan too. "So what next, princess? You will join me in trying to explore the bunker?"

Livia shook her head sadly. "I think my father will get suspicious if I do. He already wanted to eliminate you before I convinced him a conflict would only benefit Dynamis, and even then my family will want to retake Rust Town. I can give you a week or two, but afterward, you will need to leave or hide beneath the earth."

"Yeah, I expected as much," Ryan said, finally deciding to sip a coffee cup. "To be honest, I don't expect this loop to last that long. Too many things went off-script."

Livia's smile faltered. "There will be no long-term consequences? You will reload, no matter what?"

"Yes. If you want to try something you never dared to before, now is the time." Livia didn't answer, focusing on her cup. "It's about Atom Kitten, isn't it?"

"I... I thought I should use the opportunity to try and make up with him. See if..." The princess struggled to find the right words. "See if I'm wrong."

Livia and her ex-boyfriend had a final talk, right before the end. Ryan didn't know exactly what they told each other, but he strongly suspected it.

Felix had told her the truth. About why he left, and wouldn't return. That he never loved Livia at all; not the way she did. Her old self had written it down, and sent a bottle to the sea to reach her next incarnation.

And now, Livia was in denial over the bitter truth. She needed to prove this information wrong, to see if she could change the ending.

Ryan knew, because he had been there first. He wanted to talk her out of it, because she would only hurt herself, but he respected her wish. The princess needed to learn the same lesson he did.

More and more uncomfortable, Livia hastily changed the subject. "There's something else you should know, Ryan. A few of our members perished in mysterious circumstances lately. Assassinations, bombs..."

Shroud.

As Ryan worried, without the handsome courier to talk him out of it, he had already started his assassination spree. The president had tried to visit Mr. See-Through at the harbor on

his way to the meeting, but the hideout almost blew up in his face instead.

Shroud had seen Ryan with the Meta-Gang, and assumed he turned Psycho.

Which meant the Carnival might start targeting Ryan during this loop, as if he didn't have enough on his plate already. At least the fact the Meta-Gang didn't send anyone to the harbor prevented a massacre there, as seen by Luigi's continued existence. "Are Jamie Cutter, Lanka, and Ki-jung still alive?"

"They are," Livia confirmed before frowning. "You think they will be targeted next?"

"Yes." Shroudy Repairs bombed their apartment once, he would do it again. "I'll find a way to avoid a war in New Rome. I'm sure there's a combination of events that can prevent an open conflict. A path to the perfect ending. I just need to figure it out."

"We," Livia corrected him. "We need to figure it out."

Ryan examined her closely. "Princess, your father—"

"Ryan, stop," she cut him off.

"Your father put a hit on Felix and sent his armies to burn New Rome to the ground," Ryan said. "True, Alphonse 'Walking Cancer' Manada shares half the responsibility, but Lightning Butt is clearly part of the big picture problem."

"I... I read my other self's report on the war." But since she hadn't experienced these events, it hadn't had the effect Ryan would have had hoped. "I... I understand who my father is, Ryan. I do. I'm not blind. But he's still my father. I

don't want him dead. I want him to retire and away from power, so he can't harm anyone else."

"And let him get away with all his crimes?" Also, retire? To quote Enrique, men like Augustus didn't go into quiet retirement.

"Like you want Hargraves to get away with my mother's death," Livia replied, her tone harshening. "Ryan, you spoke of a perfect ending. What is it to you?"

"An ending where all the people I like get to live happily ever after," Ryan said. That was horribly cliché, but that was the truth. "An ending where as many innocents as possible survive."

"I want to save as many lives as possible and make my loved ones happy too," she said with a sigh. "We're both making concessions here. I'm... I'm willing to set aside my own grudges, if you set aside yours. If you're right, and there is a path to a good ending, then... then we can find something that satisfies us both. If we cooperate, then we will find it eventually."

And if they couldn't find a common ground, then nobody would get their happy ending.

Ryan exited the suite a few minutes afterward with Eugène-Henry in tow, quite happy with the meeting. He wouldn't have to worry about the Augusti this time around, and he had secured Len's uncorrupted brain-map.

Now, he only needed the technology to make the transfer work.

"So?" Sarin asked, as Ryan returned to the minivan while stepping over Psyshock's corpse. "Do we pack our things

and run, or..."

"We signed a peace treaty, but we will keep an American presence in Rust Town for a while. Maybe we'll retire them next year." Of course, nobody would believe it, but it was the thought that counted. "What about Psypsy's thralls?"

"The ones in our custody returned to their senses, right when Psyshock bit the dust," Sarin said. "They completely forgot their time under his control, but they can think for themselves now."

Ryan nodded, knowing it was only a matter of time before Dynamis reacted to this change. However, someone else was always on his mind. "And Len? Is she alright?"

Chernobyl's short hesitation told him something had gone wrong.

"They... she's awake, but doesn't respond," Sarin admitted. She sounded strangely apologetic for once. "Like a vegetable. I think Psyshock scrambled her brain real bad on his way out."

That bastard... he had tried to make sure Len wouldn't recover, even if he was somehow beaten. He couldn't just die with dignity, he had to twist the knife.

If Shortie had brain damage, then Ryan had no choice but to rely on Alchemo. He didn't like it at all, but he was running out of options. Almost.

"What do we do next, Boss?" Mosquito asked, arms crossed.

"I received a thirty-five pages report from an underground base specialist." Yuki's girlfriend had been nothing if not thorough. "Time to commit robocide."

Even without Psyshock, Big Fat Adam had managed to gain partial control of the bunker.

Ryan bet he could do better.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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76: Brainy Work

“No.”

Watching the Dynamis CEO’s face on his computer screen, Ryan scratched his cat’s ears. This G2 conference call wasn’t going well. “I think I misheard, Mr. Manada.”

“I said no,” Hector replied, the two using a secure channel to communicate. *“No more Knockoffs. My agreement was with your predecessors, and their demise changes everything.”*

“Certainly we can continue where they left off.”

“Listen to me, you little shit,” the CEO said, his calmness all but gone. *“I know you met with the Augusti and hashed out a peace agreement. Psyshock brainwashed people on my staff, inside my house. Your people didn’t deliver and backstabbed me. So why should I honor my side of the bargain?”*

How did he know about the meeting with Livia? Ryan had done his best to cover it up. Either the CEO had an advanced surveillance system, or plants among the Augusti. Perhaps both.

As for his reaction... Ryan thought the Dynamis/Meta-Gang alliance had collapsed in the past because Psyshock’s death ruined the brain-copying project, but he was mistaken. In truth, the brainjacker had initiated a slow, insidious takeover

of Dynamis, brainwashing staff members and executives one by one. Psypsy's demise had exposed his treachery, and made Hector Manada aware of the Meta-Gang's true, nefarious intentions.

If only he hadn't been greedy enough to hire them in the first place...

"Then I guess I will reveal the recordings of your discussions with the previous administration," Ryan said, upon realizing he couldn't maintain the old juice connection. "Because they kept recordings."

Hector squinted. "*Are you blackmailing me, Mr. Romano?*"

"I prefer the term *plata o plomo*, Mr. Escobar." Ryan always thought the CEO looked like a Colombian cartel leader.

"Then you're firing blanks. A scandal will cost me less to cover-up than another knockoff delivery."

"Then perhaps your competition—"

"We both know Augustus will never forgive the attacks on his territory, even if you submit to him. Your group signed its death warrant the moment you shook the hornet nest."

That was why he had hired the Meta-Gang in the first place. They were the only Genomes mad enough to take on the Augusti in spite of the deadly consequences, except the Carnival. Still, Ryan had one last card up his sleeve. "Then I should reveal what's inside your knockoffs. I'm sure your people will *love* buying a Psycho-in-a-can."

Ryan had to give it to the man, he had a good poker face. But the courier could see the tension at the edge of his gaze. "*I have no idea what you are talking about.*"

“I know what you and your pet scalie keep in Lab Sixty-Six.”

“*No, you don’t.*”

Damn, he wasn’t biting. For all his faults, Hector Manada was cautious enough not to reveal truly incriminating information. Unlike Psyshock, he knew how to deal with bluffs. “Bloodstream.”

“*That’s ridiculous,*” Hector replied with a smug, punchable smile. “*Do you have any proof?*”

“I’ve analyzed the knockoffs,” Ryan lied. “I can publish the results.”

The CEO didn’t believe him, or at least not fully. But the courier could tell he had hit close to the mark. There was a link between the knockoffs and Bloodstream, as much as Ryan loathed to admit it.

“*Many have tried to discredit our work, and yet we remain.*” Hector Manada joined his hands. “*Here’s my one and only offer, Mr. Romano. You keep the knockoffs, release my technicians, return my technology, and skip town within forty-eight hours without making waves. You will carry the secret of this agreement to your grave, and I will let you be. This experiment will have been a failed joint venture, but maybe we could make another deal in the future.*”

Yeah, right. “And if I don’t file for bankruptcy?”

“*Then I will answer with force,*” Hector stated the obvious. “*Enrique and Wyvern have been pestering me about sending Il Migliore to drive you out of Rust Town. My stamp of approval is the only thing standing between you, and annihilation.*”

Gee, another big business threatening the government. It almost made Ryan want to become a socialist. “I’ll consider your offer.”

“Forty-eight hours, Mr. Romano. No more, no less.”

Ryan cut the communication, and Sarin entered the oval office soon afterward. “So?” she asked. “How did it go?”

“Everything is going according to plan,” Ryan said sinisterly, Eugène-Henry purring on his lap. Hector Manada had walked into a trap without even realizing it, *and* the courier had secured two days of non-interference. “Is everyone ready for the operation? We’re storming the mainframe or we’ll die trying.”

“Yeah, but there are new people at the Junkyard’s entrance. They fit the descriptions you gave us about that brainy guy and his robot daughter, so Gemini didn’t shoot them on sight.”

Alchemo had already reached New Rome? He must have dropped everything and left right after Ryan gave him the call. “Bring them to the hangar, Miss Vice-President.”

“Gotta ask, you’re sure of what you’re doing, right?” Hazmat Girl asked, a little worried. “I mean, even with our losses in manpower, we’ll run out of juice soon. You really don’t want to see the others when they’re missing their shot.”

Having lived with Bloodstream for years, Ryan had a pretty good idea how it would turn out.

Leaving Eugène-Henry in the oval office, the president walked towards the hangar, only to meet with a rabbit plushie in a corridor. The terrible creatures had grown more numerous lately, and without any children to bond with...

"Let's play outside!" the possessed toy asked, hopping in front of Ryan's feet.

"No," said the president, but the abomination wouldn't listen.

"Let's play outside!" the plushie insisted, one of its paws revealing a switchblade.

"Not yet," Ryan replied, the promise of future destruction pacifying the beast of the end times.

When he reached the hangar, Ryan found Frank dragging an old, *1986 Fleetwood Bounder* right next to the unused Mechron mech. Alchemo and the Doll stepped out of it, all under Sarin's watchful gaze.

"Careful, I have precious equipment in the back!" Alchemo was still the same brass and steel cyborg with a brain-in-a-jar for a head and syringes for fingers. It took Ryan all his willpower to keep a straight face at the betrayer, as he grunted at Frank for carelessly handling his car.

His android daughter Tea, alias the Doll, had changed a little. She was still a lovely redhead dressed like the stereotypical country-girl, but she had covered her arms with synthetic skin, making her truly lifelike. If Ryan didn't know her true nature, he might have mistaken her for a human of flesh and blood.

And she glared at Ryan the second she spotted him.

"All clear, Mr. President!" Frank greeted the leader of the free world with a military salute. "Your guests have arrived!"

"Good work, Agent Frank," Ryan congratulated him, while the Doll moved in his direction. "Hey, Tea, long-time no se

—”

She slapped him in the face with enough force to make him flinch.

Sarin prepared to blast Tea to smithereens, while a furious Frank took a step forward. “Wait, wait, it’s okay!” Ryan calmed his bodyguards with a raised hand. “She’s my ex! She can do that!”

“Oh, she is a former First Lady?” Frank asked, instantly calming down. “A damn fine country girl you found, Mr. President. It reminds me of my native Texas, and the good old times...”

“You...” Tea glared at Ryan. “No word for two years, and that’s all you have to say? Long-time no see?”

Ryan sighed, as he massaged his cheek. He could have dodged with a time-stop, but a part of him thought he deserved it. “Was that really warranted?”

“That’s all you deserved,” Alchemo said dryly.

“Ryan, I understand you might have your reasons for leaving us. You always were a free-spirit, and that’s what I loved about you.” Tea crossed her arms. “But you didn’t even write!”

Well... Ryan did send letters once, asking how their robot cow was doing, only to receive a confused answer. As it turned out, he had referenced events erased in a previous loop, and something they never built in the final one.

The realization had crushed him so much he had erased that timeline too.

Unfortunately, Ryan knew a lot more about Doll than the other way around. He had learned everything about her past, everything she liked, everything she hated... they had done all the things Tea had dreamed of, like visiting France, but she only remembered a fraction of their shared experiences. From her point of view, Ryan and her had a brief fling; from his, they had been together for years.

And much like how Jasmine forgetting him had hurt, Ryan simply couldn't stand carrying the burden of a shared past alone, especially after Braindead's betrayal. So he left and tried to forget.

And yet... when he looked at her, Ryan realized some people he left behind had cared. That the little time they remembered spending with the courier had mattered. And it made him feel regretful.

"I'm sorry," Ryan said, not knowing what else to say. "I'm sincerely sorry."

"That's a start," Tea said, her face softening a little. She simply couldn't hold a grudge. "But you have a great many things to explain. What are you doing with these *monsters*?"

"Hey, I'm not a tincan pretending to be human," Sarin snarled, the Doll ignoring her.

"You are a member of the Meta-Gang," Alchemo said with disdain. "Frankly, the only reason we're even here is because I owe this biological waste of a Violet a favor. I don't even understand why he's working with you."

"Yes, Ryan, I thought you *hated* Psychos?" Tea asked, a little fearful for his well-being. "They... they aren't forcing you to work with them?"

Sarin snorted. "You got it the other way around."

"Nobody controls the USA," Frank added. "We arrested our alien overlords and enslaved them."

"I won a civil war for control of this great nation," Ryan said. "Now I'm trying to find a cure for the Psycho condition... and to help a friend in need, first and foremost."

While the Doll immediately looked concerned, Ryan's words only aroused Alchemo's scientific curiosity. "A cure for Psychos, you said?"

"Alright, Ryan, I'll trust you. For old time's sake." Tea put her hands on her waist. "But there's still one person you're going to apologize to."

The courier glanced at the minivan. "He's inside?"

"Yes," Tea replied, utterly serious, "yes he is."

Ryan took a deep breath, and carefully opened the van's backdoors.

As expected, Alchemo had brought a sizable part of his workshop, from wetware computers, multicolored jars of questionable content, miniature brain-scanners... and a toaster. Ryan looked at it, noticing four small wheels carrying it forward.

The tiny object drove to the edge of the car, facing the courier.

"Hi, Ryan," the toaster's vocalizer mimicked Schwarzenegger's *Terminator* voice.

"Hi, Toasty." Ryan could feel the others' stares peering on his back. This was awkward. "You have wheels now?"

"Yep, Tea installed them when I got tired of watchin' TV all day." Unlike the others, there was no hint of reproach in the toaster's voice. "Two years, Ryan. Two years. I hope you toasted a lot of chicks in that time, because / couldn't get any."

"Yeah, being a toaster probably reduces your opportunities," the courier mused.

"There, still the same ol' ableist." The toaster let out a click sound. "Damn, I missed you, man. I love life on the farm, but you added a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*."

Sarin kept glancing between the toaster and Ryan, completely at a loss of words. "What, you thought the plushie was my first creation? That I was a one-trick pony?" the courier deadpanned. "I went through a robot-building phase."

"Yeah, he was scraping the bottom of the barrel when he made me," Toasty said as he drove out of the car and onto the bunker's floor. "A lil' bit of advice, don't let him tinker in his boxers. You'll spend days picking up the scraps."

"You made an intelligent toaster." Sarin glanced down at Ryan's creation with skepticism. "Why a toaster?"

"I feel I'm being judged right now," Toasty said.

"At one point in my life, I wanted to settle in France," Ryan explained, "my greatest anxiety was to wake up with a lot of bread... and no way to toast it."

Sarin put a hand on her gas mask without a word. “You know what, I don’t care anymore.”

“That’s not even the worst thing he did!” Braindead snapped, having held a grudge for years. “That dumbass equipped my gynoid construct for sex, and then left his dirty body fluids everywhere!”

“It’s okay, Dad, I have a cleanup routine,” the Doll replied, not at all embarrassed by the open outburst. “We talked about this.”

“Wait, you slept with a *robot*?” Sarin asked Ryan, *finally* putting the two and two together.

“I slept with *everything* and *everyone*.” Though in the end, after centuries of experimentation, Ryan discovered he was mostly attracted to human-shaped women. The courier wouldn’t say no to a new experience, like Darkling, but he clearly had a weakness for female Geniuses shorter than him. “I even equipped her with a detachable—”

“Anyway, a Mechron base, huh?” Alchemeo changed the subject, instantly recognizing the bunker for what it was. “Did you escalate from drug dealer to terrorist when I wasn’t looking?”

“It’s not terrorism when our country does it,” Frank replied. “It’s an armed intervention.”

“Oh, awesome, a mecha!” Toasty rolled in front of Mechron’s scorpion war machine. “Could you upload my personality matrix into it? I mean, a giant robot is just a toaster with too much power. It’s meant to be, baby!”

“Is that why you need my unlimited genius?” Alchemeo asked Ryan, while the toaster happily rolled around the mech. “For

another prank?"

"No," the courier replied dryly. "As I said, a friend needs help."

Alchemo and his daughter exchanged a glance, their demeanor changing from angry to concerned. "Show me," the Genius asked.

After taking over the Meta-Gang, Ryan had Len transferred to the infirmary, changing the place from Psyshock's brainwashing assembly line into a true medical block. His comatose friend slept on an operation table, hooked to a respirator located right next to Dynamis' brain-copying tech. She looked so peaceful in her sleep...

Unfortunately, the other patient in the room was insufferably loud.

"You thief, I'll slay you!" Acid Rain strained against her restraints, strapped to an operating table. "I'll escape, and when I do, I'll rip you to pieces! I'll carve the gate open with your bowels!"

"Hmm, typical Psycho." Alchemo raised a handheld scanning device at her head, information appearing on the surface of his dome-head. "As expected, her head contains a nasty package of tumors and mutant neurons. I'm surprised she can even talk."

"It's getting harder to sedate her, Boss," Sarin warned Ryan. "I think she's building a tolerance."

"I'll slay you!" Acid Rain snarled at the courier. "You're keeping them away from me! All of them! If it weren't for you, I would, I could go back! I could go all the way ba—"

Alchemo hit the captive Psycho in the neck with three syringe-fingers, and injected her with colored liquids. Acid Rain let out a savage growl as her veins turned green from the intravenous transfer, before her voice died in her throat. A few seconds later, her gaze turned empty and lifeless.

"You know, if you wanted to practice euthanasia, there's a retirement home two districts away from here," Ryan told Braindead.

"I applied a treatment for brain cancer, and mood stabilizers," Alchemo explained. He couldn't understand black comedy. "They will destroy the cancerous growths, stabilize her humors, and repair the damaged neurons. It will be a temporary fix as long as her Psycho condition produces new mutations, but it should stabilize her mind for a while."

"Huh..." Sarin crossed her arms. "Could you do the same with Mongrel? The juice wrecked his brain pretty bad too."

"I thought you didn't care about helping others," Ryan said, remembering how Alchemo had gone along with his drug cartel plans, but never really cared about curing people's illnesses.

"I didn't," Braindead admitted. "But the Doll nagged me into it."

"I thought we should give back to the world," the gynoid said with a smile and a happy nod. "So many people suffer from tumors due to the aftereffects of Mechron's plagues, so I asked Dad to make a cure."

"Besides, saving my neurocomputers from Alzheimer and similar issues was one of my top priorities," Alchemo said,

digging himself deeper. “I had plenty of test subjects this way.”

Yeah, still the same amoral mad scientist. At least the Doll acted as his Jiminy Cricket.

Ryan glanced at the unconscious Len. “Could you cure depression?”

“I can solve the physiological troubles associated with the syndrome, like chemical imbalances, but not the psychological roots. I’m no psychiatrist, and I don’t have time to listen to whiners.”

Still, if Shortie could avoid relying on antidepressants, perhaps... perhaps she could finally heal.

Tea didn’t miss the lingering gaze he sent to Len. “Is she...”

“It’s her, yes,” Ryan confirmed, the Doll looking at the unconscious girl with interest. “Len.”

“You came to this city to find her, isn’t it? That’s why you left. You still wanted to find your friend, after all this time.” The gynoid gently took Len’s hand in her own. “She feels so cold, the poor girl...”

“Mmm...” Alchemeo examined the comatose Genius with his scanner. “Someone repeatedly attempted to rewrite her brain patterns in a short amount of time, stressing out her neurons to the point of a near complete shutdown. She won’t wake up on her own, I assure you.”

Ryan bristled, though he wasn’t surprised.

“We’ve got a copy of her mind.” Livia had sent the file, but begged for a better way to record the information; a brain

map copying a human mind needed many lines of code. She strained her fingers typing the whole thing, and even then Ryan suspected her power had helped a great deal in processing the whole thing. “Could you repair her brain with it?”

“What is the point of overwriting someone’s mind with their own?” Alchemeo asked with skepticism, before deciding he didn’t care. “Do you have the device that causes these problems in the first place?”

Ryan pointed a finger at Dynamis’ brain tech, letting the Genius examine it in detail. He didn’t look very impressed. “Mmm... I see... very subtle, yes,” Braindead said, as he examined the system’s helmet, “the system is booby-trapped, and will corrupt the new pattern during the overwriting with foreign elements...”

“Can you repair it?” Ryan asked.

“No,” Braindead answered bluntly. “The sabotage affects the machine’s essential parts. However...”

“However?” the courier raised his head with hope.

“However, I can easily reverse-engineer this machine and make my own. One that will work as intended.” Alchemeo glanced at the infirmary’s walls, as if looking for a hidden camera or plan. “Is there a Genius workshop in this base? Knowing Mechron, he must have had a matter replicator assembled somewhere.”

“There’s one yes,” Ryan said, remembering it from the blueprints. “A biomechanical blue brain controls the base. We intend to force our way to the mainframe and take it over.”

“A U.B.,” Alchemo guessed. “A Universal Brain. The ultimate biomechanical data storing device. I always tried to build one, but never had the resources for it.”

It said something about Mechron that he was better than most Geniuses in their own specialty. “You could hijack it?” Ryan asked. He intended to do it without Alchemo’s help, but if the Genius had turned over a new leaf...

“If I can get access to it, yes. I suppose it is easier said than done?”

Big Fat Adam managed to do so twice as far as Ryan knew, though by throwing countless people at the defenses. Nora’s structural analysis should allow them to reach the mainframe quickly, but not without a fight. “Well, we were preparing to launch an assault before your arrival. I know you’re useless in a fight, so—”

“I’m not ‘useless,’” Braindead weakly protested. “I am a man of science, not a sharpshooter, but I can defend myself.”

“Not against robots,” Ryan said, glancing at Frank. “Which is why the US Secret Service will ensure your safety.”

“He will be safe, sir,” the giant assured him. “No president died under our watch! None that mattered!”

Of course.

“I’m coming, Shortie,” Ryan told his comatose partner. “Just wait.”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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77: Change

“This is the Berlin Wall,” Ryan said, as he stood between his troops and a blast door, “the last frontier between western civilization, and complete annihilation.”

He glanced at his minions, all ready to die for their country, and because they had little choice. Sarin kept her arms crossed, carrying herself with dignity in this dark hour. Darkling lurked in a corner, still sore about its nickname. Alchemo grunted, eager to see the mission done. The rest of the cannon fodder, Gemini, the Reptilian, and Ink Machine waited anxiously; knowing that as red shirts, their odds of survival were slim.

The Land, Mosquito, and a few others remained above ground to protect the Junkyard. Rakshasa had the critical task of appeasing their ever-numerous rabbit overlords, before their numbers reached critical mass; a doomed task, unfortunately. As for Incognito, Ryan had sent him to Dynamis, to lay the groundwork for the run’s final operation.

The last member of the crack team soon showed up, holding a black briefcase. “It’s here, Mr. President,” Frank declared, as he presented the holy item to his dark master. “The *Nuclear Football*. It came with the mail.”

Ryan held his breath, as he touched the soft leather with anticipation. He had been careful to order it through a complex route, so the sender wouldn’t learn her client’s

identity, but his efforts had paid off. At long last, the courier's diabolical plan had reached fruition.

"What's that, Boss?" Sarin asked, a bit confused. "A secret weapon?"

"The only one that matters."

Ryan stopped time, and when it resumed, his clothes had fallen on the floor except for the boxers. His display of manliness was welcomed with surprise and shock. "Oh my..." Ink Machine said, a bit surprised.

"Not again, you exhibitionist!" Alchemo complained. "If you lead us to battle naked, I'm taking the door!"

"Eh," Sarin said, as she glanced at Ryan's boxers. "I've seen bigger weapons of mass destruction."

The president ignored the masses, as he slowly opened the briefcase and gazed upon the dark power within.

Wardrobe's presidential costume.

Unlike his previous clothes, it was pure black and red; this time, there would be no more playing around. This suit was unlike anything Ryan's foes had faced before: unrelenting, merciless, uncompromising.

Ryan slowly and silently put it on before his troops, to establish his stylish dominance over them.

The dark pants first, because it was cold in the bunker. They fit his body curves perfectly, and oozed villainous sex appeal.

Then he put on the black leather boots, to stomp protesters' faces. With skull-themed socks.

A cashmere red shirt and black suit, *Karl Lagerfeld* style. Because when you embraced the dark side, you dressed *German*.

A strong and powerful necktie, to represent his authoritarian, unflinching leadership.

Velvet gloves, to choke his minions when they talked back.

A black jacket, that would flow with the wind when he looked threatening atop rooftops.

A red and silver mask covered most of his head, except for the eyes, so that his evil gaze may terrify children.

And finally, a savage bowler hat, to show he meant *business*.

No light. No hope. Only one word.

"*Perfect*," Ryan said, deepening his voice to sound more intimidating.

His men remained too intimidated to say anything, except for the idiot of the group. "I don't find it anything special," the Reptilian said. "And I think it's a bit too edg—"

In response, Ryan choked him with one hand.

It had taken him years to master this move, but the sudden lack of air and blood brought the Reptilian to his knees. The mook attempted to grab the president's arm with his hands, but the lawful authority only strengthened his grip around his victim's throat.

"I find your lack of taste disturbing," Ryan said, his tone promising only death.

"I'm... I'm sorry..." the Reptilian managed to sputter, his reptilian face turning purple.

"I'm sorry *who*, handbag?"

"I'm sorry... Mr. President..."

Ryan released the protester, and let him gasp for breath. He glanced at the other Psychos, who all straightened up. Frank carefully grabbed the president's old clothes and put them in the briefcase.

"Alright then, mooks, listen up," Ryan addressed his troops, as he put his trusty coil gun around his belt, and the *Fisty Brothers* on top of his velvet gloves. "Our goal is to reach the base's mainframe thanks to a shortcut, and allow our brain-dead friend to hook up with it."

"I'm not—"

"Are you questioning my authority?" Ryan asked Alchemo. "Because I respect freedom of speech."

The Genius glanced at the Reptilian, who had barely recovered from the choking. "Two years," Alchemo said, "and it's still the same nonsense."

"I love democracy." Ryan promptly continued with his explanations. "Your job is to make sure he reaches his destination. Frank and Darkling will force a path forward, and we'll follow suit."

The steel giant immediately made a salute, having put the briefcase aside. "Yes, Mr. President."

No answer from his back-up though.

“Darkling? Darkling?” Ryan glanced at his favorite ball of black goo. “Darkling, are you giving me the silent treatment?”

“... my name not Darkling...” the slime answered unconvincingly, its countless eyes looking away.

“Then what is it?” the president asked smugly.

“... not Darkling.”

Alright, Not-Darkling it was.

“Now, before we go in, I would deliver a speech, but let’s be honest, a Psycho’s life is nasty, brutish, and short.” Ryan put his hands on his waist, Darth Vader style. “Our fists and guns will do the talking instead.”

Though Ryan would be lying if he didn’t feel a little anxious about this operation. Many of the circumstances that made it possible wouldn’t repeat, from Psyshock going to the past, Sarin acting as a guard, or Darkling using Ghoul as a vessel at the right time. Nor could the courier expect the plushie to play along and stick to a script.

For the first time since Ryan had started looping, this run would be a one-shot. Unrepeatable.

While he had memorized the shortcut itinerary suggested by Nora, Ryan expected to face heavy resistance. Big Fat Adam had lost most of his men reaching the mainframe, after all, which meant that the things on the other side could kill Genomes. One laser to the head, a single fluke, and this run would end abruptly.

But Ryan hadn't gotten this far without taking risks, and Len needed it.

"Now," the president stepped aside and raised his coil gun, "Sarin, be a dear and use your vibrator."

"One day, I'll show you a vibrator..." His second-in-command raised her hands, and blasted the steel door away with a mighty shockwave.

She was immediately welcomed with a hail of laser fire.

Ryan hastily froze time, grabbed Sarin, and pushed her out of the way before a stray ray could hit her. On the other side of the broken door, the courier glimpsed a squadron of cyclopean androids, each firing rays from their single eye. They had assembled in tight, defensive positions along a large steel hallway.

"Texas smash!" Frank immediately shouted as time resumed, before bull-rushing the robot squadron. The giant crushed anything in his path, his body absorbing the machines' metal parts on contact.

Darkling immediately slithered after him, and the group followed. Ryan and Alchemo remained at their formation's center, with the Psychos forming an escort around the two of them.

All hell broke loose.

Ryan barely took a step before he had to dodge a bullet, as the walls opened to reveal twin miniguns on each side. A volley hit Ink Machine by surprise, but her liquid body caused the projectiles to pass through her harmlessly.

Before they could hit the rest of the group, Ryan froze time and shot both weapons with his coil gun. Thankfully, the projectiles were powerful enough to perforate the turrets, blowing large holes inside them.

His minions, thankfully, didn't stay idle. Sarin assisted Frank by blasting away robots with shockwaves, with the Reptilian tackling any tin can approaching her too closely. Ink Machine leaped around the room and used her liquid form to seep inside a robot and take it over, using it as a metal shield to protect Alchemo.

The strangest member of the Meta-Gang, Gemini, also pulled her weight. While appearing like an ethereal woman of shining light at first glance, Ryan had realized the truth upon closer examination: her tentacled shadow was the real her, and the shining woman a mere illusion. And that shadow could *kill*. When it hit the robots' shadows, their bodies suffered the same damage.

However, the corridor's lights suddenly increased in luminosity. Two robots moved their pitch-black shadows in such a way, that they seemed to grab Gemini's.

They figured it out, Ryan thought, astonished, as the robots' shadows restrained Gemini's own. It had only taken the machines a few minutes to guess the nature of her power and figure out a counter. They had also realized that Frank could absorb metal on touch, and switched from trying to dogpile him to laser volleys.

These things could learn. Worst of all, the way they moved, avoiding friendly fire, and coordinating almost perfectly... they weren't individual units, but a hivemind's pieces.

And within minutes, that same intelligence had identified Alchemo as a key target; perhaps because Ryan and the

others focused on protecting the Genius.

“Darkling, shield the medic!” Ryan shouted while pointing at Alchemo, the shoggoth immediately switching from attacking robots to protecting the Genius. The ooze swirled around Alchemo like a barrier without touching him, stopping any laser from coming his way.

Instantly afterward though, the machines switched targets. This time, they focused on Ryan. Five robots unleashed a volley of lasers in his direction, and a sixth attempted to tackle him.

“What, you couldn’t identify me as the leader until I opened my mouth?” Ryan taunted them while he activated his power. He leaped out of the lasers’ way in the frozen time, before smashing the sixth robot’s chest in with Fisty.
“Haven’t you looked at my costume?”

A laser made a hole in his bowler hat the moment time resumed, infuriating him. Ryan angrily retaliated by shooting down the machines holding Gemini with his coil gun, freeing the Psycho. Her shadow quickly tore the remaining robots apart.

Having slaughtered the opposition, Frank resumed his rampage and smashed through the next door. The new room beyond the hallway took the shape of a large dome, with the ceiling layered with holographic projections representing the solar system. Ryan noticed a red point in orbit around the Earth, far beyond the Moon.

However, he didn’t have time to look at the beautiful spectacle, as small holes opened all over the dome. Eye-shaped drones flew through, and opened fire at the group with submachine guns. Darkling immediately reshaped itself

into a slimy barrier, shielding the entire group from the initial volley.

The holograms above their heads brightened, the illusory sun turning supernova and unleashing a blinding light. Blast doors on the walls opened and more cyclopean androids walked through, an unrelenting tide of steel.

While Darkling formed a wall to protect Alchemo, Frank rampaged through the ground-bound machines, his metal body shrugging off lasers easily enough. Unfortunately, his lack of range prevented him from hitting the floating eyes, leaving the task to Sarin and Ryan.

The courier eventually resorted to stopping time, both to push his second-in-command out of a bullet's path and to hit the *damn flyers*.

Unfortunately, the rest of the group didn't fare any better. Cyclopean robots were trying the same 'shadow grab' tactic their predecessors used on Gemini, except this time with greater numbers. Eight robots grabbed the Psycho's shadow from all sides, and then started dismembering her. Gemini's light body flickered out and collapsed in a bright flash.

Five other cyclopean machines had cornered Ink Machine, and incinerated her with sustained laser beams. The liquid Psycho dissipated into colored steam, her body unable to stand the heat.

Even the Reptilian had only avoided death so far by staying near Darkling.

"That spot!" Ryan pointed at his left once he had a brief respite, near a junction between the dome's wall and the floor. "The structural weakness should be here, Chernobyl!"

"Stop calling me that!" Sarin complained, but obeyed all the same. Her gauntlets vibrated, and she started targeting the spot with shockwaves. Cracks slowly began to appear on the floor, the metal foundations floundering under the strain.

Of course, the machines instantly attempted to stop Sarin, but Darkling formed a defensive wall around her, Alchemo, Ryan, and the Reptilian. Only Frank was left out, but he clearly didn't need help. Eventually, Hazmat Girl blew a wide hole in the floor.

The path to the mainframe.

Ryan, now in full general mode, barked orders. "Reptilian, with us!" he ordered, while Sarin leaped into the hole.
"Frank, Darkling, cover our rear!"

"I am not equipped for clim—" Alchemo started complaining, only for the Reptilian and Ryan to grab him like a potato sack before jumping into the void. Frank and Darkling moved to cover the hole behind them, snatching any eye-drone attempting to follow through. The two titans remained there, brave Spartiates holding off the whole Persian army.

The courier and his allies landed in a strange, ghastly gallery of vats and glass containers. Each of them contained half-formed humanoid bodies, some with their organs floating in colored liquid; while they had human features, the creatures' limbs were unnaturally long, and part of their faces had been replaced with machinery.

A Genome research lab.

Pipes on the walls filled the vats with what Ryan guessed to be Elixirs. The Reptilian, in particular, could barely restrain himself from drinking their contents.

"Where are we going next?" Sarin asked, pointing at two blast doors. "Left or right?"

"Neither." Ryan instead glanced at a key point in the gallery's right steel wall, right behind a green vat. If they collapsed it, they would gain direct access to the mainframe's room.

Sarin moved in front of a steel panel, and released colored gas from her fingers. The wall rusted at an accelerated rate while Ryan raised his eyes at the hole above his head. Thankfully, Darkling had wisely sealed the hole with its body, preventing drones from slipping through.

"Mr. President!" The Reptilian shouted, his hands on the ground. Apparently, his enhanced senses allowed him to notice slight vibrations. "I sense something coming from the left. A robot, bigger than the rest."

Oh well, it couldn't be a dungeon raid without a boss at the end. "Braindead, behind me," Ryan said, pushing the Genius closer to Sarin. "Reptilian, hold the line. It's time to die for your country!"

"I would rather avoid that, Mr. President," the reptile complained.

Ryan raised his hand to mimic a choking motion, and the mook rediscovered his patriotism.

The left blast door opened a few seconds later, and a three meters-tall machine walked through. The creature looked like a vat on six steely spider legs, with two mechanical hands at the front. Crimson liquid swirled inside the vat, as an energy bolt raced through the substance; Ryan could see a tiny crimson spot at the center, a speck-sized portal leading to a realm of overwhelming power.

The Reptilian immediately rushed at the robot, but never reached his target. The machine pointed a hand at the Psycho, and a crimson glow lifted him above the ground.

That machine was a telekinetic Genome. A *true* telekinetic, capable of applying force to anything with Red Flux energy without restriction.

The machine sent the Reptilian flying at the ceiling with such force, it flattened the Psycho. The scene reminded Ryan of a mosquito being crushed by a flyswatter, the mangled body falling on the ground when the killerbot stopped applying force.

And now, the thing had turned its attention towards Ryan, raising a steel hand in his direction.

The courier froze time the moment he sensed pressure in the air, immediately moving away from his current position and firing a shot. The coil gun's projectile bounced off the strange glass protecting the red substance, much to the time-traveler's annoyance.

"Tell me, robot, can you touch yourself with that power?" Ryan taunted the machine, which answered by trying to slam him against a wall. Only the courier's use of time-stop and enhanced timing allowed him to avoid the Reptilian's fate. "I hope those hands aren't just for show!"

The machine answered by telekinetically ripping out steel panels from the walls, and throwing them at Ryan.

It was no fun to banter with a mindless machine. The courier might as well be speaking to a wall, so he focused on avoiding the projectiles and closing the gap.

Stopping time at the right moment, Ryan punched the machine's left arm at the joints, snapping it in half with *Fisty*. He hoped it would disrupt its telekinesis; the courier couldn't afford smashing the glass container in close combat, or he might risk being drenched in Elixir. The arm fell off when time resumed, but the robot instantly retaliated by trying to impale the courier with its spider legs.

Thankfully, Wardrobe's costume had been fashioned for war, and didn't rupture from the courier's acrobatics.

Thanks to Ryan's diversion, Sarin had melted a tunnel and escaped inside with Alchemo. The courier tried to follow, but the machine attempted to grind him into paste with its remaining arm. Though the time-traveler managed to activate his time-stop and move away each time the creature started applying force around him, the robot blocked the tunnel's entrance.

Thankfully, Darkling chose that moment to slither through the ceiling's hole, and fell directly on top of the robot.

The eldritch horror swallowed the machine with its black ooze, its mere proximity negating the machine's telekinesis like Alphonse Manada's radiation. The shoggoth dissolved the Red Elixir inside the vat, absorbing the liquid and the portal into itself.

"Bon appétit, my dark friend!" Ryan said as he fled into the tunnel, leaving his pet shoggoth to its meal.

A minute later, the courier made his way into the bunker's command room, crimson lights and screens flickering above his head. A red forcefield shielded the central, biomechanical brain, which Alchemo desperately attempted to bypass. Sarin, meanwhile, struggled to hit the turrets with shockwaves.

"I'll take care of the turrets, help our brainy friend," Ryan told Sarin, as he reloaded his coil gun and opened fire at a turret. A projectile went through the machine and caused it to explode.

Activating his power, Ryan reached a gatling turret and leaped at it. Then, he started riding it like a bull, forcefully aiming it at the other weapons in the room. A hail of bullets flew across the room once time resumed, but the distraction allowed Sarin to regroup with Alchemo.

While Ryan provided suppressing fire, the Chernobyl cosplayer released her gas at the metal pedestal holding the giant brain; part of it rusted, and caused the forcefield to short-out. Alchemo immediately used the opportunity to climb on the biomechanical construct.

Much like Psyshock in the previous loop, the Genius intertwined with the giant brain, nailing it with his syringe-fingers and connecting to the alien machinery. Blue lightning raced through Alchemo's exposed brain, his nervous system directly interfacing with the base's own.

And then, the turrets abruptly stopped firing a single shot. The one that Ryan had seized deactivated, much to his disappointment. He had loved the brief rodeo.

"Is it over?" Sarin asked, glancing at the turrets as if expecting them to open fire again.

Alchemo's answer was lukewarm. "I'm changing the admin privileges and ID credentials, so it registers us as 'staff.'"

"Well, I can't hear tremors or gunfire," Ryan said, "so I would call this operation a success."

They might have lost a few redshirts, but the information gathered on the defenses would serve him well.

As if to answer the courier's thoughts, the screens around the mainframe showed videos of the bunker's rooms, from the recreational area to the holographic observatory. Frank had piled up a hill of robots at the center, which somewhat obscured the camera's vision of the room. Other screens showed underground labs, a futuristic armory, and a miniature particle collider.

"It's incredible..." Alchemo sounded giddier than Ryan had ever heard him. "All the wealth of information within this thing. All the secrets it uncovered... I can't access all the files yet, but I can already see what they contain."

"Is there one on Psychos?" Sarin asked, hopeful.

"Yes, and that's not all. How Mechron enhanced other Genomes' powers, how Elixirs work... It's all there. All the research, all the secrets."

Alchemo looked at Ryan with what could pass for a triumphant pose. "We're going to change the world, meatbag!"

The new brain-copying machine looked exactly like the old one.

Ryan held his breath as he stood right next to a sleeping Len, a helmet covering her face and rewriting her memories. The infirmary's lights blinded him, and he could barely hear himself over his accelerating heartbeat. He had trouble breathing, even without his presidential mask.

“It’s okay, Ryan,” Tea tried to reassure him. “I’ve monitored her lifesigns. The treatment is working.”

“Will Ma wake up after this?” little Sarah asked Alchemeo, as he oversaw the memory transfer. Her plushie companion kept glaring at the Genius with crimson eyes, probably remembering their previous interactions. “At long last?”

“Yes, she should,” Alchemeo replied with flat affect, before removing Len’s helmet. “The transfer is done, and I repaired the damage caused by the machine’s overuse. She should recover consciousness soon.”

“It’s...” Ryan sighed, as it killed him to say it. “Thanks.”

“I owed you a favor, did I not?” the Genius grunted. “If anything, I should thank you. Accessing Mechron’s database will supplement my own rese—”

“Dad,” the Doll interrupted her maker, glancing at Sarah and Ryan in short order. “Now is not the time.”

“Ugh, I will never understand why a human brain puts so much importance in base feelings.”

“You made a daughter, didn’t you?” Ryan replied, not in the mood for jokes. “You cared too.”

Alchemeo stood still as if he had been slapped, before turning towards the door. “Whatever. Doll, come with me. The real work begins now.”

“Take care, Ryan,” the Doll told the courier, before smiling at Sarah. “You’re coming with us too.”

“What?” the little girl protested. “I’m staying.”

"I understand it's important to you, but..." Tea glanced at Ryan. "I think he needs a moment alone with her. He's been waiting a very long time."

That was one way to put it.

Ryan sighed when Sarah squinted at him. "Look, your mama and I... we were close."

Little Sarah crossed her arms in suspicion. "How close?"

"Enough that I thought we might end up making a brat like you one day," Ryan replied bluntly, the young orphan reddening. "There, I destroyed your childhood. Now get away before I do the same with your adulthood."

"Ew, disgusting!" Sarah covered her mouth. "Did you..."

"Yes, we did!" Ryan looked into her sweet, innocent eyes. "And we were sixteen."

Sensing his partner's distress, the plushie grabbed Sarah's robe. "Let's play outside!"

"I... I need fresh air..." Sarah said, finally letting Tea and her furred partner push her out of the room.

At long last, Ryan was alone with Len.

As he watched her chest rise up with her breathing, Ryan was brought back to his childhood, when he waited for Len to wake up so they could play outside. He had been in the same position years ago, looking over her like a big brother.

'She still loves you.'

Psyshock's words echoed in the courier's mind, as Len began to stir. Her eyelids threatened to open, and the time-

traveler felt the tension building up in his fingers.

“Shortie?” Ryan asked, holding her hand. It was so warm to the touch, so fragile. “Sleeping beauty? I’m not the prince you asked for, but it’s time to wake up.”

Her bright blue eyes opened, and Len looked up at his face.

For a second, Ryan worried he might see Psyshock’s cold, sociopathic gaze, but thankfully not. It wasn’t a look of fear, or confusion, or surprise. It was the elusive look he had waited centuries for, but never achieved.

A flash of recognition.

“Riri...” Len’s bright smile melted Ryan’s heart. “I... I remember.”

Such short words, and yet so meaningful.

“Riri, it worked!” Len rejoiced. “The transfer worked!”

Ryan felt something warm fall down his cheeks. His breath shortened, as he felt a tight pressure build up around his chest.

“Uh... uh...”

“Riri?” Len’s expression turned from joy to concern. “Riri, you’re... you’re crying?”

Ryan collapsed to his knees and exploded into tears.

He couldn’t say a word, let alone move, as the crushing weight of time was suddenly lifted off his shoulders. The centuries of loneliness washed over him like a torrent. The accumulated pain he had buried away, fled, denied, and carried came roaring back to the surface.

His brain burned like a blazing fire, and his heart tightened inside his chest. It was a moment of pure joy, but he felt so heavy, so weak, so feeble. He felt like a wandering knight whose bright, shining armor had fallen off his body, revealing the raw sadness underneath.

Ryan couldn't even raise his head at the lone witness of his breakdown. He didn't have the strength. He didn't have the strength left. He spent it all in Monaco, in France and Spain, and everywhere else. He exhausted it fighting Adam, fighting Psyshock, fighting the Augusti and Dynamis and his countless foes across centuries. He had wasted it all running forward, back to the past, always searching for the perfect ending.

He felt her arms move around his neck, and she filled this dark, cold world with warmth.

"It's okay, Ryan." Len hugged Ryan tightly, like she often did during their childhood. His head rested against her shoulder, while she kept whispering words into his ear. "I'm... I'm here, Ryan. You're not alone. You're not alone."

No.

Not anymore.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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78: Happiness Overdose

For the first time in centuries, Ryan woke up at peace with himself.

Certainly, he had had good mornings in the past. Waking up next to Jasmine would remain one of his most cherished memories. But nothing could compare to this beautiful moment. His body was numb from the endorphins; the tension in his muscles had long vanished. He could have stayed in his bed all day, smiling at the ceiling.

Ryan Romano was happy.

It took a herculean effort of will to rise up and put on his presidential costume, for he still had work to do. As he dressed, the courier glanced at the hole a robot made in his bowler hat. One loop ago, the cruel sight would have triggered an epic, city-destroying rampage.

But not today.

Ryan emerged from his room smiling behind his mask, and found Frank keeping watch in front of the doors. The giant immediately welcomed him with a military salute. “Good morning, Mr. President. Nothing to report.”

Ryan smiled at the poor, deluded creature, his heart full of warmth and compassion. “Agent Frank,” he said while putting a hand on the man’s back, though he had to stand

on his toes. “You are the greatest hero this nation’s ever had. You are everything an American citizen should be.”

His kind words shook the titan to the core. Frank would have cried, if he wasn’t made of metal. “Thank you, Mr. President. Everything I do is to honor my father. He died from a KFC overdose while hanging Nazis with a lasso.”

“A most American way to die. He would be so proud of you, son.”

Though Ryan would have to make sure Frank and Len never ended up in the same room. He had the intuition it would backfire.

Leaving his favorite guard to his watch, Ryan moved into the recreational area while whistling to himself. He didn’t care about the hanged gremlins dangling from the ceiling, or how Rakshasa struggled to clean up a blood puddle on the floor.

Everything just felt... *right*.

“Oh, you’re awake, boss?” Ryan glanced at the speaker, noticing Sarin playing pool with Mosquito. The bugman had bandages all over his shoulders and wings. “We’ve got a problem. The rabbits kept pestering the kids to play outside, and they moved into the Junkyard after killing all the gremlins.”

“They flogged me when I tried to stop them,” Mosquito complained, pointing at the bandages. “They *flogged* me.”

“That too.”

“It’s okay,” Ryan replied calmly. If the plushies didn’t destroy the world today, it would be something else, like an asteroid or a plague. No biggie.

Hazmat Girl didn't look convinced. "Didn't you stress that your rabbits shouldn't go outside under any circumsta—"

"My dear lovely Sarin." Ryan put his hands on his VP's shoulders. "Everything is going to be *fine*. I promise you, darling."

"Are you high?" she asked while abandoning her cue, sounding disgusted with her superior. "I know we have a juice production facility, but... what's the saying..."

"Don't get high on your own product. I know, I ran a drug cartel." Which turned out great! "Sarin, I have something to say. You're not the best sidekick I had, that would be the Panda, but I like you. I like you very much."

Sarin pushed Ryan back and raised a vibrating fist in his direction. He had opened his heart to her, and that was how she reacted? "Okay, what's wrong with you? You're weirder than usual."

"I feel like being nice today," Ryan said, letting out a sigh of pure bliss. "No cruel joke, no sarcasm, no mean remarks. Just pure kindness."

"Well get back to normal, you're creeping the shit out of me."

"I prefer him this way," Mosquito said, immediately trying to exploit the situation. "Does that mean we get free juice today, since you're in a good mood?"

"Of course, dear leech," Ryan said, the bugman loudly rejoicing. "Enjoy your day off, my friends. For tomorrow, we'll go to war."

Manada's ultimatum expired the day after, and while Ryan had a plan to get rid of him, it would involve a clash with Il Migliore. Perhaps even the Carnival, if the two groups already made contact during this loop.

Now that the president had secured his white house and electoral base, he would take the city by storm.

The elevator to the lower levels opened before Ryan could explain his plan to his trusty minions. Mongrel stepped out first, followed by a blonde woman with bloodshot eyes. She kept her head down and avoided others' gazes, as if afraid of overstepping.

It took Ryan a split second to recognize Acid Rain.

Her behavior, her posture, the way she moved... everything but her appearance had changed. She gave off an entirely different vibe than the murderous madwoman the courier had grown used to. Her posture screamed *meek*.

"Rain?" Mosquito asked, probably expecting the violent maniac to flip out and murder them. "Rain, is that you?"

"I'm, uh... I'm Helen." Even her voice wasn't the same, now that she didn't scream all the time. "That's my real name. Helen."

"Who let you out?" Sarin asked, pointing her hands at her.

"The Doc. He said I... that the treatment worked." Acid Rain scratched the back of her head as everyone looked at her in shock, before smiling sheepishly at Ryan. "Sorry I tried to kill you before. I... I wasn't thinking straight."

"It's okay, I forgive you." Ryan's heart overflowed with compassion, and Sarin lowered her gauntlets. "I'm just

happy you still have all your hair.”

“Chemo worked on me too,” Mongrel spoke, his voice surprising in its mundaneness.

Sarin’s head immediately turned in his direction. “You can talk?”

“Yeah, though my brain hurts when I speak.” Mongrel held his head in his hand. “I think my grey matter slowly fills the void left by the tumors.”

“I feel like I’m waking up from a long nightmare,” Acid Rain said, smiling at Ryan. “Thanks for helping. I... I’m truly grateful, like you wouldn’t believe.”

“But our current treatment won’t last forever, from what I gathered,” Mongrel complained with a groan. “Which sucks.”

No, it wouldn’t. Genomes’ enhanced metabolisms meant they developed a tolerance to chemical products much quicker than normal humans. Eventually, their mutations would adapt to Alchemo’s treatment, and the two Psychos would descend back into madness.

But that was the worst-case scenario, and Ryan knew he would make it right. “We have the tools to figure out a permanent solution,” he said, glancing at Mongrel. “I have the feeling we’ll need your assistance though.”

“Ain’t gonna fight you on this,” Mongrel said. “I don’t wanna go back to eating rats, ya dig? Never asked for that.”

“You drank, like, five knockoffs,” Sarin pointed out, unsympathetic to his plight. “You were already barely better than a dog when Adam found you scavenging trash.”

Mongrel shuddered. “I found a White Elixir while looting Old Rome’s ruins, but it didn’t do anything. I read White Genomes affected other Genomes, but I couldn’t get my power to work. So I figured, hey, there’s gotta be faulty Elixirs lying around, and I drew the short end of the stick. I already planned on buying a knockoff before I found my original, so...”

Ryan guessed how it went, a shiver down his spine. “You drank a knockoff since you believed yourself powerless, and you turned into a Psycho.”

Mongrel’s ability allowed him to stockpile more than one Elixir. By itself, it did nothing. Much like how Casper the ghost only transformed post-mortem, some powers needed very specific circumstances to activate, misleading their users.

“Yeah,” Mongrel confirmed with a nod. “I swear, if you find a cure, I’m never touching an Elixir for the rest of my life. Years as a maddened animal scared me straight.”

“Just to be sure, you aren’t going to stab us in the back either?” Mosquito asked Acid Rain. “You gutted our previous teleporter in a fit of rage.”

“No, no.” The young woman shook her head, her eyes betraying her horror. “I... that wasn’t *me*. I... I won’t hurt anyone, I swear.”

She sounded sincere, so Ryan gave her the benefit of the doubt. “Something has been bugging me,” the courier said, seizing the opportunity to interrogate her. “In your insane state, you kept rambling about how I barred the gates, and that something called the Ultimate One wanted you to win.”

“I...” Helen crossed her arms, uncomfortable at reliving her days as a madwoman. “Well, I don’t remember everything. It’s all a haze. But... I think it’s because of the portal inside you.”

“The portal?” Ryan frowned behind his mask.

“Yeah.” Acid Rain searched for the right words. “When I switch with my raindrops it’s... it’s not instantaneous. It looks like it from the outside, but from my point of view... everything goes purple, and I move from one spot to another through a corridor.”

“You enter the Purple World when you teleport, using it as a shortcut through space.” It explained why their powers could sense the other activating. They both shared a strong connection with the dimension fueling them.

“When I’m in this place, I... see a weird pyramid thing above us, watching.” Helen took a deep breath. “I hear voices too. I’m not sure if it’s talking to me, or something else, but... I hear people speaking. When I look at you in this state, I can see a pathway I can’t access. A pathway that you close. If that makes sense.”

“I see.” Ryan crossed his arms. “Thing is, I have been able to open a gate to the Purple World in the past, but only with my power boosted.”

“You could do that?” Acid Rain’s head perked up in hope. “You could... you could go back in time with that place. I know you could. It’s... all of space and time, it all goes back to it.”

Sarin gave Ryan a knowing look, and though he beamed with happiness, he was careful enough not to reveal the

truth. Especially not now, when things were finally looking bright.

"I've... I've lost my family because of a... because of a mistake," Helen said, joining her fingers and looking down. "That's why I looked for a Violet Elixir. I could already summon the rain, but..."

"You drank a Violet Elixir, in spite of the risks?" Ryan asked.

Acid Rain shook her head, her face turning ghastly, her fingers shaking. "I found one, but... I thought I could give it to a friend. That maybe they would luck out. But Adam... Adam caught me and... he took the Violet Elixir, and said..."

Her stare reminded him of a traumatized victim having a PTSD episode.

"He said that If I really wanted to go back, I... I should do it myself. So he... opened the bottle and..." Her voice died down her throat, her breathing shortening. "And he..."

Ryan shivered as he listened to her tale, and suddenly realized that Hannifat Lecter's obsession with force-feeding him an Elixir wasn't a one-time impulse.

It was a *habit*.

That murderous bastard shattered people into broken shells of their former selves, until they had no other option but to follow him.

"I doubt we can help your family, Helen," Ryan apologized, crushing her hopes. Even if he managed to access the Purple World, according to Darkling, the Ultimate One would preserve causality and avoid time-paradoxes. "But we're going to help you, at least. I swear it."

"I... okay." The way she said it made Ryan feel sorry for Acid Rain, of all people. She gathered her breath, and managed to calm herself. "Okay."

"Maybe you could ask the Augusti?" Mosquito suggested. Did he rediscover an ember of humanity? "I heard Mercury could raise the dead, and we made peace with them."

"He raises them as mindless zombies, you stupid jackass," Sarin said, before returning to the pool game. She wasn't one for emotional moments. "Anyone else wanna play? I'm on a roll right now."

"Sure," Mongrel said, before looking at the dead gremlins dangling from the ceiling. "Also, why are there dead hanged animals above the table?"

"They're our lucky charms," Sarin said, as she sent an 8-ball rolling into a hole.

Toasty chose that moment to roll into the room, avoiding a blood puddle and immediately rushing at Acid Rain's feet. "Hey, blondie," the toaster greeted Helen, as it put on the charm. "Do you want me to... toast your bread?"

The poor woman looked at the toaster in absolute confusion, and then at Ryan. "Is this a prank?" she asked.

"If you don't like your bread raw, I've got butter," Toasty said seductively. His game was atrocious, but then again, he was a toaster. "Sweet, soft butter."

"How can you get butter when you don't have arms?" Ryan pointed out the obvious.

"Hey, you've got enough chicks vying for you already, leave some for us," Toasty replied. "When are you putting me

inside that big hot mech in the garage? Then, I'll show you arms!"

"Tomorrow, my friend. Tomorrow."

Wyvern had destroyed robots and mechs before.

But she had never fought a toaster.

After briefing his mooks on his devilish plan, Ryan moved to the lower levels.

Len had set up a modest Genius workshop in one of the underground chambers close to the holographic dome. Ryan had disabled the cameras and microphones for privacy, which Alchemeo took as a sign he did dirty things with Len behind doors.

If the courier could trust the screens on the walls and the information banks they showed, the room used to be an archive of some sort. A holographic projector at the chamber's center showed a map of planet Earth, with half a dozen glowing red points around Eurasia. Perhaps they indicated Mechron's remaining facilities. Ryan would have to track them down after settling things in New Rome.

"Hi, Shortie," he told Len, upon finding her working on the brain-copying machine. She had repurposed a desk into an improvised workbench. "You look *good*."

He had grown used to seeing dark circles around Len's eyes, but not today. She looked as well-rested as Ryan himself, and her cheeks had regained some color.

"Hi, Riri," she said with a warm, kind smile. "Yes, I... I feel good. Alchemeo gave me pills, and they work much better

than my previous antidepressants. I can think clearly even when I'm not using my power."

Though Ryan still distrusted Alchemo, he had to admit the Genius could do a great deal of good when he wanted to. If the courier learned how to reproduce his miracle drugs, he could provide Len with treatment across loops. In time, she might regain the same vivid, innocent energy of her teenage years.

"So any progress on the machine?" Ryan asked, looking at this device with reverence. It had saved him from centuries of loneliness. "Now we proved it works and Psyshock won't follow us again, we can finally make long-term plans for the future."

Especially since this loop would probably end with another firefight.

"I still can't believe we just time-traveled," Len admitted. "When I looked at Sarah, and how she had never seen my sanctuary, I... I understood how you felt. People forgetting you over, and over again... it must be maddening."

"That was before," Ryan said, as he sat on the workbench. "Now we can bring more people into the loop. I have an arrogant young disciple I would love for you to meet."

"There's a problem, Riri," Len said, biting her lower lip. "The machine can only send one brain map back in time at once. Maybe I can improve it and raise that number, but for now... we're limited to one person."

"You then," Ryan said, quickly understanding the method's limits. "And we'll need to rebuild the machine and send you back each time in an unbroken chain. If it breaks once, you'll forget everything."

"Unless we have a place where we can store the memories," Len confirmed with a nod.

"We'll need Livia," Ryan said. The courier intended to talk to her so she could assist with the Psycho cure project, so he would kill two birds with one stone. "I thought you didn't trust her?"

"She... she followed through with her end of the bargain." Len took a deep breath. "I mean, she could have told her father to storm this place, but she didn't. Maybe... maybe I misjudged her. I don't want her to see the machine's blueprints, but we could cooperate."

"Do you have the resources to recreate the brain-scanner at your base, Shortie?" Len's strained face told him otherwise. "Since Psyshock corrupted the prototype, we'll need to create a new one from scratch."

"I... no, I'm sorry. We'll need better tech than I have. Vulcan's, or this bunker's."

Unfortunately, the courier couldn't conquer the bunker without help for now. After fighting the defenses, Ryan realized it would take an ungodly number of loops to take it over solo. He couldn't take it without casualties either, at least not until he perfected the process through constant repetitions.

He could convince Vulcan or Dynamis to provide him with tech under the right circumstances, but Livia looked like the best option. If they could work out a deal, the Augusti princess could provide an enormous amount of resources and serve as a back-up. "I'll ask Livia."

"What next afterward?" Len asked. "I... even if some of them helped this time around, we're surrounded by Psychos.

Mosquito and Mongrel, they tried to abduct the children one loop ago.”

“I wouldn’t worry about the children. Considering their protectors, I worry more about running out of mooks.”

“I’m serious, Riri. It’s... It’s hard to pretend nothing happened. Every time I see the Meta-Gang’s members, I’m tempted to shoot them.”

“I was too,” Ryan admitted, “but I’ve come to realize that while there are monsters in their midst, some of them are victims of circumstances. I can’t help but wonder what they will do with their lives, if we can cure them of their madness and addiction.”

“They’ll just fall back into their old habits,” Len said cynically.

Ryan wasn’t so sure. Though it might be his inner optimist talking, he wanted to believe people like Mongrel or Acid Rain could turn their life around. He had the intuition Sarin wouldn’t start any trouble either, if she recovered a body of flesh and blood. His Perfect Run demanded he save those who deserved it.

“In any case, we’ll focus on mastering this bunker’s technology.” Darkling kept pestering Alchemo about the portal, but the Genius still struggled to overcome Mechron’s firewalls. While the bunker’s security systems didn’t attack on sight anymore, the key, critical areas remained out of reach for now. “And afterward, we’ll deal with Dynamis.”

Len nodded, her face betraying a hint of anxiousness.
“We’re raiding Lab Sixty-Six this loop?”

"Yes. I already set things in motion to prepare the terrain." Whatever may wait for them inside Dynamis' fortress, they would soon learn it. "Len, there's... there's something I wish to talk about."

She looked away. "What Psyshock saw in my mind, isn't it?"

Yes.

"Len."

Ryan gathered his breath.

"I love you."

There, he said it.

"I've loved many people. So many, you can't count them all. I've loved Tea, and Jasmine, and... I admit I have a huge crush on Wardrobe." God damn it, why was she already taken? "But out of all these relationships, ours... ours always had a special place in my heart. I... I hoped we could settle down somewhere. Build a house. Make children. You know, the old dream. I... now that you can remember, I... I have to know if you feel the same."

He had waited so long to get it off his chest.

Len's arms remained crossed, and tightened further. She kept looking away from him, avoiding his gaze; perhaps she wanted to spare him the sadness in her own eyes, or her emotions overwhelmed her.

"I..." Len struggled to find her words, and Ryan patiently waited for her to do so. "I still... I guess after all we went through together, it can't ever go away. But..."

But.

Such a small word, and yet one that crushed so many dreams.

"But so much happened, Ryan," she said with a deep, sad sigh. "So much. I... I wish we could go back to simpler times, but... we can't, even with your power. I'm... you're my best friend, Riri, and... and I don't want you to go away. But... I don't feel I'm ready for us to become more than that. Perhaps never."

Ryan listened in silence, having expected something like this.

"I'm..." Len finally looked into his eyes, and he could see she was terrified of his reaction. "I'm sorry, Riri."

"No, it's okay," Ryan reassured her with dignity, and he meant it. "I had centuries to process these feelings and prepare myself. I... understand, Shortie."

The courier didn't *like* it, but he understood. He had clung to an idea of the past for so long, he couldn't keep looking back. Things happened. Things changed. He had to accept them, and move on. Len still had her own issues, and couldn't give him the emotional intimacy he yearned for. She already wanted him in her life against all odds, and he couldn't feel entitled to more.

"I will give you your space," he said. "Frankly, I'm just happy we can become friends again, and stay that way."

All Ryan ever asked for, was for someone to remember him.

He couldn't ask for more of Len, now that she fulfilled his dearest wish.

"I... perhaps I was wrong. I don't think we're best friends. It seems... it seems not strong enough a term." Len gave him a bright, warm smile. "We're family, Riri."

Yes. Yes, they were family. Perhaps not the one Ryan had hoped for, but a family all the same.

And...

He was fine with it.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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79: Past Fragment: Goodbye, Monaco!

- *April 2017, France, Village of La Turbie.*

It was a sunny day in Monaco. Flowers were blooming, birds were singing, and Simon rolled a boulder in hell.

How many times had Ryan looked at Monaco from this promontory? He had spent one year's worth of loops trying to figure out this place's 'rules,' and today would just be another attempt.

It took him a while, but he had found an old, pre-war UAV drone in an abandoned military base near Istres; a stealth, tactical reconnaissance device which Dassault built for the French Air Force. Ryan had modified it into a purple-painted quadcopter, and outfitted it with a submachine gun.

Controlling the device with a remote control, the courier received a constant video-feed as he directed the drone towards Monaco. His quadcopter flew through empty streets, and broke through windows to enter deserted houses. All buildings looked the same from the inside.

The whole city was a prop.

At least Ryan now confirmed the teleportation effect didn't apply to machines, once the drone passed the two-hour time limit. The casino's propaganda about fighting back

Mechron was just as baseless as its tales of Andorran invasions.

As the sun fell behind the horizon, Ryan directed the drone to the Monte-Carlo casino. The quadcopter moved inside after blasting the doors with the submachine gun, and no clown came to stop it.

The real Monte-Carlo casino looked similar to the hellish dimension Ryan had spent a lifetime trapped inside, but it was neither infinite nor abnormal. The rooms were in their place, and the drone couldn't find anyone within its walls.

When the drone prepared to leave the casino to resupply, the doors had repaired themselves. Ryan had the machine blast them again, fly through, and then turn around again. The doors had recovered the second they had been left out of sight.

Well, time to bring out the big guns then.

Ryan spent three months' worth of loops mapping out the casino and its surroundings with the drone, down to the sewers. In the end, he had to face the obvious.

He couldn't find any entrance into the pocket dimension.

"An 'invitation only' kind of place, eh?" Ryan said, as he put on sunglasses. Having taken offense at the situation, he had strapped a small nuke to his drone; thank the French for their pre-war nuclear arsenal. "You don't say no to *me*."

Sitting on a longchair on the coast of Cap-Ferrat, almost fifteen kilometers from Monaco, Ryan directed the drone to the Monte-Carlo with his remote control. He had to

repurpose a local radio station to control his toy from so far away, but his work would pay dividends.

"After the shrimp," the courier said while pressing the big red button, "the mushrooms!"

The video feed stopped functioning, as a bright sphere of light consumed Monaco. Everything within Ryan's line of sight caught fire, from forests to the ruins of French ports along the Mediterranean coast. Colossal waves rose around the detonation point, and spread for miles. The ground trembled as far as Cap-Ferrat, a massive fiery mushroom rising up in the skies.

Ryan watched the cursed microstate go down in flames with a deep sense of satisfaction... at least, until the shockwave reached him and a powerful gust tossed his sunglasses off his face.

"Independence for Andorra!" the courier shouted in the microstate's direction, as the mushroom cloud slowly died out.

A few hours later, Ryan strode through the burning ruins of Monaco in a reinforced hazmat suit, braving the firestorms, the ashes, and the irradiated dust falling from the skies. Every building had collapsed from the blast, and the roads were blocked by debris. The courier almost considered this experience a hiking trip.

"I will be the very best," Ryan hummed to himself, as he reached the blast's epicenter. Of the Monte-Carlo casino, only a crater remained. Whatever force allowed the place to rebuild itself, it couldn't undo such devastation. "Like no one ever was..."

A flash of yellow and violet swallowed him whole, followed by the sight of a familiar marble hallway.

Damn it!

When he woke up again on the *Tête de Chien* promontory on April 1st, Ryan let out a scream of frustration.

Even nuking the whole place couldn't dispel the effect!

He should have expected something like this. While the real Monte-Carlo served as the phenomenon's anchor on Earth, the true maze existed in a separate reality. As far as Ryan could tell, the mysterious controller, 'Jean-Stéphanie,' lived inside his pocket dimension.

Or most probably, he had *become* the maze.

Ryan sighed, sat on the promontory's edge, and considered what he had learned over his various experiments.

The effect activated whenever someone crossed into Monaco's boundaries, as described by international law. This included the airspace, but not the territorial waters; Ryan assumed it had something to do with the old Franco-Monégasque treaties, with Jean-Stéphanie's power unable to recognize the waters as 'fully' Monaco's.

A victim was teleported inside the maze if they approached the Monte-Carlo, or stayed more than two hours inside the city's limits. If they had crossed the frontier and left, they would be trapped the moment they fell asleep. It didn't matter if they had stayed in Monaco for less than a minute, or spent three days fleeing across Europe before falling asleep from exhaustion. Ryan had checked both possibilities, to his dismay.

Once you entered Monaco, it never let you go. *Ever.*

The effect also applied to animals, except unlike humans, they were immediately teleported to the maze's kitchens instead of the relatively safe marble hallway. Ryan had sent countless puppies to their death over the course of his research, and didn't regret any of it.

He was, after all, a cat person.

At one point, he had even strapped the same nuke to a lamb, wiring it to detonate inside the pocket dimension. Since the sacrificial animal had teleported inside the kitchen, the resulting explosion spared Suitestown and blasted a large part of the maze to kingdom come. Ryan had personally entered the pocket dimension afterward to observe the results.

The damage lasted for twenty-four hours, until new rooms replaced the destroyed ones.

Since the teleportation always involved a flash of violet and yellow light, Ryan suspected the controller was a Psycho associated with these colors. It would explain the spacetime anomaly and all the weird, conceptual rules.

This meant only a powerful Yellow or Violet could permanently destroy the maze, if at all. So far, Ryan hadn't located anyone capable of such a feat.

"Do I truly need to destroy this place though?" Ryan pondered out loud, as he observed Monaco from afar. The city was mocking him with its very existence. "I mean, it's static and doesn't spread. A fence would keep it contained, at least until I find a way to terminate it."

His Perfect Run demanded that he free the people trapped inside Monaco, first and foremost.

According to his research, he could remain outside Monaco until April 28th, after which Martine would die in a shrimp supply run gone wrong. The lights would die out, and the clowns would tear her apart before Simon could rescue her.

Ryan had to find an exit within that timespan, but where? This place didn't have a door in or out, and nobody could interact with the outside world once trapped inside!

... no one but Ryan himself.

"I am an exit," the courier realized.

From what he understood of his power, the courier existed in two places at once: some kind of dimension beyond space and time, and Earth. The connection remained even within Monaco, though whatever power ruled the maze prevented his two selves from fusing.

It didn't cancel the convergence entirely, it simply pushed back.

Thus, while the pocket dimension could act as a barrier between its prisoners and the universe outside, it wasn't an inviolate frontier. If Ryan could push the underlying principle of his power to the limit, maybe he could overcome it...

An idea crossed his mind.

Five years.

It took Ryan five years' worth of loops to master particle physics, find a Genius capable of helping him with his

problem, and raid enough laboratories to gather the equipment he needed. He had to travel all the way to Switzerland and back, to scavenge parts of CERN's unfinished Hadron collider.

And now, on this sunny day of April 27th, Ryan stood atop the promontory dressed for war.

He had decided to wear something nice for this historical day. A purple shirt and blue pants, black gloves, and boots, and most importantly, a classic trench coat. He kept an MP3 device around his belt, alongside a Japanese katana he 'borrowed' from a Swiss raider.

Since the clowns shrugged off most firearms, he would make sushi out of them.

Most importantly, the courier had brought with him two cube-shaped devices forty centimeters in diameter. These steel-plated machines each had a hand-sized hole on one side, the 'mouth' of a particle collider, and a small control panel on the other.

The Resonators.

These nuclear-powered devices, through a science Ryan himself barely understood, should create a 'convergence' similar to the courier's own power. Particles would travel from one cube to the other, forcing a path through dimensions.

Maybe he could use that technology to build an interdimensional radio one day. That would be funny.

Leaving one on the *Tête de Chien* promontory and wiring it to activate within two hours, Ryan put the other in a travel bag and drove down towards Monaco with his trusty

motorcycle. He crossed the microstate's official frontier, ignoring the anti-Andorran propaganda signs on his way to Monte-Carlo.

Ryan stopped in front of the casino, stepped away from his vehicle, and moved towards the doors with confidence.

The plaza vanished in a flash of yellow and violet light.

Ryan had lost count of how many times he had lived through this moment, but hopefully, this would be the last. He took a deep breath, basking in the conditioned air flowing through this dreadful prison, and moved to tear it apart.

"Hello, dear guest!" a gold-faced clown immediately welcomed the intruder, as he walked out of the marble hallway and into the main lobby. "Welcome to Monaco! The greatest c—"

Ryan casually beheaded him with his katana, the creature's warm blood spraying the carpet. The courier didn't even wait for the head to hit the floor, as he moved towards the elevator.

Half a dozen clowns emerged from behind the lobby's marble pillars, carrying silver plates, refreshments, and appetizers. "Dear guest, we must warn you that violence is forbidden during opening hours!" one of them addressed Ryan with an obsequious tone. "If you insist on misbehaving, we will have to show you the door!"

The courier called the elevator, and hit the fourth floor button. "Pick the place," Ryan told the clowns, as the doors closed behind him. "It's where you will die."

The monsters kept grinning, but behind the empty smiles, there were knives.

A few minutes later, Ryan had reached Suitestown.

The sight of the long hallway leading into the hotel suites almost made Ryan feel nostalgic. Almost. He walked towards Room 44, and knocked on the metal door. “Simon!” he shouted, “Simon! I have a hamburger, and I’m not afraid to use it!”

The door immediately opened, and a shotgun raised at Ryan’s face. Simon was outfitted for combat, his leather armor still white with the alien blood of murdered clowns. “Who the hell are you?”

“*‘Français par le sang versé,’*” Ryan replied in French. “*‘Le schleu est dans le garage.’*”

Simon froze for a split second, before asking with skepticism: “*‘Il n’a pas couru assez vite?’*”

“*‘Je l’ai laissé en Alsace,’*” Ryan replied.

The sheriff lowered his weapon, astonished. “How do you know that password, *rita!*?”

You told me, the courier almost blurted out. “A former friend of yours in the French Foreign Legion,” Ryan lied for simplicity’s sake, “I came to save you. According to my timing, everyone should be in their respective rooms right now.”

“How do you know that? Is this a commando operation? I thought the French government collapsed?”

“That’s what we make *them* think,” Ryan whispered ominously before moving inside the suite. Simon was too confused to protest, as the courier quickly moved in front of his tunnel.

Ryan opened his bag, brought out the resonator, and placed it in front of the hole Simon had spent his life digging. Technically, the device would have worked anywhere inside the pocket dimension, but the courier thought this particular location was poetically appropriate.

“You have a way out?” Simon asked with a tone Ryan never heard him use before. The emotion in the old man’s voice was one he had given up on a long time ago.

Hope.

And as Ryan typed on the Resonator’s control panel and activated the device, he prayed not to disappoint it.

Light built up inside the cube’s hole, projecting a stream of light into the tunnel. Space itself warped around this energy stream, warping Simon’s hole into a shining hallway. Tension rose in the air, as if an evil force suddenly took notice of these events.

Ryan took this as a good sign.

After pulsating and twisting for half a minute, the hallway of light seemed to stabilize around the particle stream. Though he couldn’t see anything beyond the threshold, the courier sensed a faint, pleasant gust brush against his face.

Wind.

“Is that...” Simon removed his helmet, unable to trust his own senses. His eyes had widened, and tears of relief

formed at the edge of them. “Fresh air?”

Ryan activated his power, an opposing force pushing back...

And yet Monaco turned purple.

The Resonators had breached the pocket dimension.

“Who are you?” Simon asked when time resumed, unable to take his eyes off the portal. “Who are you?”

Quick, Ryan, think of a clever superhero name!

“I’m Quicksave,” Ryan declared confidently. “The boulder who rolls.”

Damn, that sounded way better in his mind.

“Dear guests.”

A horribly familiar voice echoed through the floor’s loudspeakers, a promise of deadly retaliation.

“We regretfully inform you that due to the current Andorran invasion threatening our border, the Monte-Carlo will permanently close until further notice.” Far from professional, the voice sounded downright passive-aggressive this time around. *“Please exit the suites, so our beloved staff can help you check-out.”*

Click.

The sound of countless doors opening caused Ryan’s heart to skip a beat, as he rushed outside Simon’s home.

All the suites’ doors had snapped open, people looking through their thresholds in confusion. Ryan recognized so many faces, from Martine, to Jean, and Geoff, and Sally. The

illusion of safety had been stripped away from them, and the lights started going out.

Monaco wouldn't let them escape without a fight.

Ryan looked for what remained inside his bag: a metal mask with two rounded glasses for eyes, custom-made for the occasion.

"Game on, Pogo," the courier said, as he put on the mask and activated the night vision mode. "Simon, evacuate everyone through the portal. I'll take care of the comedy rejects downstairs."

"Alone?" the gunman protested, clocking his shotgun.
"You're mad, I'm coming with you!"

"No, Simon," Ryan said, as he moved towards the elevator with only his katana for a weapon. He would have blown it up if he didn't know the place could repair itself. "You can't fathom how long I've rehearsed this one-man show."

As the elevator climbed down the floors towards the final showdown, the courier activated his MP3 and put on a cheerful song. "*Nobody but me...*" Ryan hummed to himself, as the elevator's doors opened. He disliked that show, but it had an awesome intro.

The courier entered the lobby, and faced an army of clowns.

Hundreds of them had crawled out of the shadows, and into the casino's main lobby; all carrying napkins around their neck. Ryan could scarcely see the giant roulette in the middle of the room, and the ceiling's candelabras had all been extinguished.

The Monte-Carlo's staff had grabbed all the weapons they could find. Silver cutlery; golf clubs; sushi knives; and even a few nightsticks. Their metallic masks kept smiling, though their grins had turned downright vicious.

And the only person standing between them and Suitestown, was one handsome courier.

"Monaco..." Ryan raised his katana, and uttered his war cry.
"Monaco isn't a real country!"

The smiling horde charged at him like a screaming chorus.

What followed was a whirlwind of blood and fury, as Ryan cut through the creatures like butter. His sword's edge disemboweled five clowns in a single strike, thick white blood flowing from their wounds like a wine waterfall.

Two monsters attempted to shank him, one with a knife, the other with a fork. He threw one into the other, impaling the two in a single strike and causing them to drop their weapons. When a clown attempted to bypass him and reach the elevator, Ryan grabbed the knife and threw it behind him. The projectile hit the back of his target's head, killing him instantly.

"The armies of Andorra will fail!" a frenzied voice shouted through the loudspeakers, as a berserk Ryan killed clowns left and right. *"Pledge your life to Monaco! Glory to Jean-Stéphanie! The Monte-Carlo shall stand forever!"*

"Where are my winnings?!" Ryan snarled as he smashed a clown's head against the floor, his face smearing the giant roulette below their feet. "What do I win?"

He froze time in quick succession to dodge two knife strikes, only to notice something coming from his left when the

clock resumed tickling. One platinum-faced clown had thrown a silver plate at the courier like a frisbee, with enough force to turn it into a deadly weapon.

Ryan barely had the time to blink, before the projectile hit his neck and sliced it in half.

Time and again.

The second time around, Ryan dodged the plate, grabbed it in midair, and threw it back at the sender. The improvised frisbee snapped the monster's skull open.

Ryan parried a golf club's swing, then another swing. His foe's short game was good, but the courier cut his hands off with a stroke of his own. He leaped around, dodging strikes and swings, countering, killing, swirling. His sword was one with his body, his focus unparalleled.

Three clowns tackled him by surprise and threw him to the ground, as a fourth crushed his head with a giant token.

Three clowns fell with one swing, and the fourth's legs were sliced clean. His own token crushed him, and Ryan stomped on the body.

Dozens he had slain, and more followed. A lifetime of suffering he avenged. Backs were smashed against pillars, shrimps force-fed down a throat. Wine bottles flew, and plates shattered. His fury couldn't be quenched.

The bloody floor turned slippery, and yet Ryan kept going with a grin.

Each life he took was a pleasure greater than sex. Each strike carried the weight of a century of pain, the exaltation of a performance rehearsed for years. The hyenas that hounded him for decades fell like flies before his blade, and he couldn't put into words how amazing it felt.

He killed many clowns, but more took their place. An endless tide of death, but he would cut them down all the same.

"Tonight, we have the pleasure of introducing veteran entertainers from the International Circus Festival of Monte-Carlo!" The loudspeaker's voice said with fear, as its mooks perished. *"Everyone, please applaud... the acrobats!"*

Four shadows leaped amidst the carnage, clown faces atop black bodysuits. They wielded swords, and into the fray, they charged. They threw shurikens at Ryan's face, and with his blade he parried them.

Swords clashed, and on one he was impaled!

A sword swing he dodged, and a ninja he slew!

Time froze and began again. He raged and cursed as he parried, dodged, and struggled. They pushed him back, back against the wall. And his blood they shed.

And Ryan tried again!

Again, and again!

And again!

Their blades clashed in a storm of steel, but Ryan was pushing them back, and the clowns no longer grinned.

Each run made him a little faster, a little deadlier. Each sneak attack he dodged, each strike he countered. Each opportunity he exploited. None could harm him, but every one of his strikes landed a kill. No breath was wasted, no step was for nothing. He stole a second sword, for double the pain.

“It’s impossible... nobody ever expects the clown ninjas!”

The loudspeaker’s voice screamed in rage, and the courier laughed.

More minibosses came, firecrackers and magicians, strongmen and ringmasters. All of them Ryan faced, and none lived to tell the tale.

All his foes fell, until only one remained. His rounded hat Ryan coveted, and he would not be denied. Against the statue of Jean-Stephanie the clown was pushed, and under which he was crushed!

The massacre finished, the song ended. Ryan gathered his breath, a hill of corpses before him, and frightened clowns behind.

“Well.” Ryan looked over his shoulder at his future victims, drenched in white blood. None of it was his own. “Up for more?”

The clowns had stopped smiling, and ran away screaming.

With a blissful smile, Ryan dropped his swords, grabbed his last victim’s rounded hat, and put it on his head over his mask. What a good souvenir it would make!

The courier returned to Suitestown, finding it almost empty. Only Simon remained, keeping watch over the portal with his shotgun raised. "You could have left some for me," he said while glancing at the courier's bloodied clothes. "I was about to go downstairs and help."

"You know that the whole point of last stands, is that you're not expected to survive them?" Ryan asked rhetorically.
"Why didn't you leave already?"

"You asked me to evacuate everyone," the man replied,
"you're part of everyone."

So nice. Ryan activated a code on the Resonator's control panel, triggering the self-destruct sequence to make sure the clowns wouldn't follow them outside. "*Explosion in five minutes,*" a digital voice came out of the device.

"How big?" Simon asked, quickly searching below his bar counter for his last belongings.

"Nuclear," Ryan replied, as he grabbed his travel bag. As expected, Simon brought a pile of books as souvenirs, with a familiar one at the top. "*The Myth of Sisyphus?*"

"How did you know?" the old sheriff asked, suspicious.

Ryan chuckled, as they walked into the light. "Intuition."

Farewell, Monaco.

You won't be missed.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay?"

At the wheel of an old Renault Mégane II, Ryan replied with a negative. "There's someone I've got to find," he told Martine and Simon, as the two stood outside his window, "No offense, but that side-quest lasted long enough already."

"I'm not familiar with the term," Martine said, while Simon shrugged. "We owe you our lives. Whoever you are, you'll always be welcome among us."

Whoever you are.

Ryan glanced through his car's window, and at the forty men and women he just saved today. The group had established a makeshift camp atop the *Tête de Chien* promontory, celebrating their freedom around a campfire. Monaco remained in the distance, a prison without captives.

It had been three days since the jailbreak, and nobody had been yanked back to the pocket dimension, even when they slept. Either the forceful escape had broken the pocket dimension's power over its captives, or they would have to cross its frontier again like anyone else. No one was stupid enough to go back there.

From his point of view, he had lived with these people for over a century. He had learned all of their secrets, helped them through the darkest times, seen them react to all possible circumstances.

He knew Simon's real name, the one he abandoned when he joined the French Foreign Legion. He knew what happened to his sons, the horrible past he tried to leave behind, and even the books he wanted to read, but never got around to.

He knew Martine's hometown, the names she wanted to give her future children, her favorite movie, the one she loathed most, that she had always wanted to become a nurse but never could. He knew her deepest fears and greatest triumphs.

And they had just learned his *name*.

He knew these people better than they knew themselves, but he remained a stranger to them.

"Maybe we'll keep in touch," Ryan said, though he didn't really believe it. "You know how to contact me."

"If you need a favor, you just have to call," the blonde woman smiled warmly at him, though there was a sadness to her gaze. She knew they were unlikely to meet again.

Simon watched as Martine rejoined the other survivors, remaining with Ryan a little longer. "Have we met before?" he asked Ryan. "I can tell you know me, but I don't remember you."

"Without false modesty, I'm unforgettable."

"Yeah, you sure know how to make an introduction, freeing me from twelve years of captivity. Now, what's your secret? Everything that happened so far seems a bit too... convenient."

"I'm immortal," Ryan confessed with a sigh, "but don't tell anyone."

Simon examined the time-traveler for a moment, before offering him an old, dusty book. "Here. Take this."

Ryan expected a copy of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, but it was another book entirely. “*Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*,” the courier read the cover’s title. “By Friedrich Nietzsche.”

“There’s a concept inside, the *eternal recurrence*, that I think you’ll like.”

Ryan looked into the older man’s wise, knowing gaze. “Thanks,” the courier said, before putting the book at the car’s back. “What will you do now?”

“Martine and the others will probably move west towards greener pastures, but I’ll stay here. My life is almost over, so I figure... someone has to watch over this place. Put fences all around this giant death trap, and make sure nobody wanders inside. Nobody ain’t goin’ past me, I can tell you. I’ve got experience with border duties.”

Ryan didn’t doubt that. “Well, if anybody wanders where they shouldn’t, give me a call.”

“Sure, *p’tit rital*,” Simon said, before patting the courier’s shoulder. “Don’t break your back climbing the hill.”

Ryan looked at Simon’s book, and then at its previous owner as he joined the Monaco survivors. The courier watched the bashful smiles on their face, the happy glances they sent one another. They had gone through Hell, and made it out. They would rebuild their lives, and begin again.

This... this was the perfect ending, for everyone.

Everyone but Ryan.

The courier froze time, and let it last more than ten seconds. Two periods converged, a flash of violet light swallowing the

courier whole.

He lived through everything in the span of a second. This cursed century spent trapped in Monaco, and the shorter stays afterward. His years of research, all the pain, all the joy, and all the sorrow. All these moments that could have been, but that only Ryan remembered. He took all his memories into himself, and they would live on through him.

Time resumed abruptly, the past set in stone, and the save point moved into the present.

His Perfect Run complete, Ryan drove into the sunset and didn't look back.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Also guys, my good friend Vitaly (the guy who made half my covers, including the Perfect Run's) has published a new story, [Somebody Stop Her](#). It's also a super "hero" story (with a twist), so don't hesitate to check it out if you're interested ;)



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Warfield, Eitan Davidson, Philip Kessler, Andres Montemayor, Blxckninja, Thomas Wolf, DinnerTime, James Nagy, John Test, Tristan A, dave hutch, Mr. Finch, martin, Lennert Bex, Bradman, Casey Gillespie, DenverDrew, Alex Anderson, Dali Donovich, Tristan Praedo, Sharkmanwolf, HeavenDragon, Esdraelon, Dominic Johnson, Andrew Liess, Louis Jacquet, Liarke Lane, Arroww, crownfall, Samuel Kirkpatrick, William Ellin, Dave_S, Greenboy676, Krzysztof Wierczyński, Cal Fiala, Ryan Brudnicki, King Lokajad, Eric Jaynes, Mhark Dichos, Mortal Complex, Francesco Giorgini, Username, Danny York, Jonathan Hemlin, Reid, Sasa Mrdalj-Radulovic, Jarrod Young, Sir Sloth, T0tal_cha0s, John McCarter, Lee Moffat, The False Crab, GuGuy, Anton Lukanov, Racyn, Nikon, Tem M, Milo Goodell, glare31337, Ken Williams, Won Jun Chun, Josh Enterman, Ronan, Magical_Duck, mior mk, Sam Vinh, Sree Kommalapati, Pride, BananaInMyPants, Виктор Фон Стыценкофф, Andrew Banal, TacoWasTaken, Kevin Green, Lu, jimi robert-jones, Andreas Finn, Apostolos Piperis, Timothy Felker, v, Alianok, William Fullerton, Won Jun Choi, Torphin, Jam, Jimbo, S T, JustAUser, Roka, Nicholas Johnson, Dale Tucker, Denis Gelrud, Zmelk, S.R. Williams, KilledbyBooks, Alex Kentwell, Julius Dubasas, sri kalyan mulukutla, Kaleb Uden, Travis Vasquez, Fatih Altunbasak, Alex Anderson, Deltoren, gamerthemage, Relai, kNevik, mikespelun, abele a, Toucan, PJ Thum, DemonKingBaka, depression 2.0, Caucasian Malaysian, Willshaper, Dylan Fields, Johannes Karlsson, Anthony L, Joshua Donahue, Blaek East, Aleksander ŻołĄdkiewicz, Laurence Caraccio, Jacob Ellis, Blaek East, Deepsealife, Kristian Huse, Lululelolo, Bob Mijano, Saaski, David Hansson, mikeju, Sam Miller, Joe Giannuzzi, Phantom, lockx, Ben Lenk-Ostendorf, Thomas Have, Matt Hauer, Joe,

Steven, Gavin Olsen, Dargon, David Burchfield, Julien Fellegara, thkiw, redslash5, FiveHands, B. Gazzola, Toesniffer, Abhichon chandrasen, Nock, Nikhil B, Connor Alexander, ar1357, NightWhisper, Samuel Smith, Aldhere, Jacob, Sam McNamara, Jarrod Broome, Rolf Bork, Callum Brocklehurst, Samuel Borges, Joe, Dardy Noongar, Joe Giannuzzi, Lance Linked, Jonathan Kutz, Stuart Dye, DerWipe, Grosbilljunior, martin, GenericKane, Sharath, Augustus, Joseph, Abhichon chandrasen, MaikD, Matt Labrum, Robert, s476, Eneri, TKLD, depression 2.0, Daniel Hughesdon, Anders Svensen, Jordan, Oakenbear, Vega, K-Thomas, Eric Vistnes, Jose, Davvy chapie, Joey Nguyen, Skovboa, maniac_ian, samuel baldauf, Sebin Paul, Liz Griggs, BluEarth, MaliMi, Marcus Österberg, Orm, DaQualyn Singleton, Rheklr, evilperson41, Jake V, Lloyd kostuik, Corwin Brewer, Loïc Fernandes, Eric jian, Gianni Ghiribelli, John Smith, Willshaper, Moons, Tibstrike, Ploxzer, Alexander Dupree, Josh Delgado42, Domenic Stritzl, Not N. Octopus, Hayden Butz, Hazza Vanderbyl, Hoobie Gomez, charlyfu, Cliint, Chris, Paul Rettig, Luke, Jacob Goodwin, Kristian Oinonen, Bennet Larson, Mikołaj Wiszniewski, Bobby Jones, Phillip Ingram, Ariel Reyz, altus, lione pouet, Nicolas Marty, Bobo Bo, Darti, ScottDR, Kyle Wong, Henry Chow, Thundabear95, Aqua, eva0ne, Philip Lee, Ivan Delgado, Geffery Dopp, Christian Alex, Hauke, Kaleb Uden, Christoph Kunze, Dax, GraySquirrelEatToast, jacob johannes, House of Pantheon, FiveHands, Melanie, Caldrick, T3ctonic, Kezrin, Michael Frankford, Brody Brown, Actaeix, Desert Wreck, dave hutch, Zachary Venne, AlthePal, MaliMi, Athur3s, Brent, Slimereaper, Sub Electricall, Warren Zielke, The Knight Commissar, Dorian Lee, Svend, Ryan Size, BB King, Markus, Borisalv, HollowIce, Long Le,

Blah64, Hamis, Tip Top, Mojanks, Adrian Engel, Brenden, Josh Huynh, Psy, Mohammed Hajjaj, Massgamer, afgasd adgasd, Franco Evett - Pig Lord, Harrison Russel, Yeno Memevig, Finn Ryan, Nicholas Jensen, T T, Manu, Deinos, maltmana, Alyaseen, Dylan, Svarog, Nick Smith, Conner M Tatum, ParoxysmDK, James Deziel, Amaury, michele calderoni, Matt, Kirvin, Jordan Litwin, Magnus Steffen Nørregaard, K-Thomas, Justin Jones, Colo T, Marcus Pehan, Cole Rosenhein, Enzo Morvan, Art238, Bon Bon, Richard Barboza, Alexander, Charlie Taylor, LS, Thantos, bob Johnson, Doom, Jeff Gault, Tristan Praedo, George Ive, John, Landon Pearce, shawn, I don't want to say this but, Daniel Hernandez, John Bush, Lukas W. Nielsen, war doggle, WowIExist, Edwin Jose, Andrew Wilson, Pooya Daravi, Suneral, Steven Lindsay, Thaco4, Tyler Chesney, NLRUmbra, Kyle J Smith, Rommelfanger Bob, Davvy chappie, Branden Bryan, Micah Brown, Alex Nimmer, Jordan McDonald, Matthew Powell, Mihai Popescu, JJ B, Andrew Odom, Danielle Warvel, Colin, Ivan Kalinovic, AdAstridPerAspera, Reviv3pls, Connor Kogut, Dark Chaos, Saysca, Folk Chanin, Jdosnoen, Konrad2, Bunny Waffles, John Johnson, Colby, Pumpkin Mouse, Helsgarde, Harry Williams, Alex Canavan, Hobold the kobold, AQ, Adam Johnson, Daniel Aguirre, Zack Hoeken, Daniel Mackie, Chip Twothousandone, KatarnK, NOTOBOK, Razvan, Calvin, John, Jordan Chan, Heikki Aitakangas, OccultOwlbear, TheBreaker, Justi martinez, Thomas Rossiter, Jonathan Caselli, John, Richard Lee, Njordt, Joshua Thompson, PJ LeBlanc, Maxun, Demetre Zurebiani, Iron_Giant, Guilherme Silva, Slade Schlaudecker, The Arcane Emperor, Erik Sjöström, Vlad the mad lad, Michael Forrester, BadSnake971, ZRhulad, Ryan, Cole Mathews, Scott Bosse, Timo Reti, Dietz, Thomas

Gamble, Nonnuvya Bizniz, Sean Basa, Tagmin, Julien Castellijos, Kasan, Zach Jamison, Zack, Ethan Bell, William Vickers, Njordt, Ilvesmäki, Alexander, Devarya Raman, Marcus Seigman, James Jackson, Preston M, Subliminary, TDMC, Jordan, Kite 7, Alfredo Spuri, Russel Todd, Demetre Zurebiani, Zach, Tate Browder, Brandon Stiles, Minow, Joachim Janssen, Michael S., edmuck, Jade Green, Victor Newman, Malphas, Kyle Reid, aezrith ferova, Hulg Gohen, matticide FOWD, Jackietron201, Dark Chaos, Michael Yamashita, Hntpo, Andraste Chevalier, Julien Castillejos, William Johnson, John Evans, Kyoma, Liark Lane, Joey Nguyen, mcanamara ?, HarbingTarbl, Spartanstoryteller, Thordur hrafn, David Ge, IronJim, Demetre Zurebiani, hippityhoppity, Dertyer, Guy Incognito, Paul Hughes, TaoBio, Soufyan Zerrad, mars kiyu, Iudi, Meredith Leu, Gaëtan Hillion, Bernice0311, Galandry, Eirik, Andrey Kutsey, Scipio, Andrew Rutherford Butler, Aeon, brett thomas, Yiğit Köymen, Thiago Ruiz, Yamibomb112, Imran, Dark Chaos, Tijay Arnie, Comedy Knight, Qwer, Gerrant, Ciara Banks, William Swearingin, Anonmily, William Brayer, Armo, Aehs, sedael, Darien Benner, Ligma, Michael Buchler, Daniel Spencer Vargas, Gabriel Aptekar, BedlamBlade, Walter, Joko, Goggy123, Erostan, Clemens Hochstädter, Noah Rimmer Skov, Jacob Barger, Sam Paley, Ariel reyz, Juppaaware, House of Pantheon, Aymeric Penven, Dantalian11, Harold Sandahl IV, Francis Chartier, Kody Ihnat, Rein Warner, mikael persson, morganmoll, Reviv3pls, Warper 6, Andrew Holland, Jdosnoen, Xerias, manspider0002, Sebastiano H. C., Zachary D Nickell, Maalsc, TTG, Oliverthms, Richard Wall, Siphor, Dark Chaos, Jeremy Humphrey, Nikhil Majumdar, Leaored, Cipkenop, Chistopher Waits, Jefferymoonworm, Robert Blank, Ervin Ughy, Phoebe Vale, Shaoraka, Zachary Smith,

**PonyReader, agoniste, Max Hu, Brycen Legler,
KeyMan BrB, Jonathan Spaulding, Ausner Gentil,
Kazzy, Erriballon, Larry Smith, Sanjay, Oliver Gray,
Adrian Barter, Alex Rhone, Karthic, Tailor Tylbury, Bob
le Poisson Rouge, Colin Ford, Ashley Cameron,
Bogdanov Dmitriy, Ivan Elyshev, Anthony,
Particlepigeon, Ryan Trueman, Kalle, Chris, Roden,
Andrew Stinson, Thomas Tessier, M Clason, Alex
Lindsay, Sadinar, Daniel Everest, Exiled Knight,
LinenZero, Tomas Puskas, Kyle Reese, RandomGift,
Corgi McStumperson, Peter Christensen-Calvin,
James Teeple, Dom Ceremonia, Mikkel Kolding
Christensen, Sands, BlackFire13th, Kevin Ramos,
Charles handgis, damien, Jeb, Jeb, Sebin Paul,
Andrew Kahn, 白酒鬼, Trevor Sales, Calvin Miner, Rory,
PbookR, Glader, John Carroll, Quentin, Andrew
Parsadian, Igor Mikulik, RepossessedSoul, James
Walsh, Athra, Chris M, Jim of Trades, Koen
Hertenberg, Enaz the Great, Alex Pruitt, Saul
Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc Claude
Louis Durand, Drekin.**

80: Lonely Together

He found Livia standing on the piers, facing the sea with a terrible look on her face.

Ryan parked his not-so-suspicious black minivan near the old harbor, and quickly looked around for any Killer Seven member. If Livia had brought bodyguards, they hid well; the courier suspected Mortimer lingered nearby, buried below ground. “Don’t tell me you came on foot?” the courier told the mafia princess, as he joined her in his full presidential costume. “We’re a long way from Mount Augustus.”

“But we’re close to Optimates Tower,” Livia replied with a sad smile. Not only did she look grim with the black circles around her eyes, but she also dressed the part. Her dark coat and austere clothes reminded Ryan of a young widow. “And I could only lose Mathias this way.”

So Mr. See-Through stalked her too? The glass-manipulator had made increasingly frequent forays into Rust Town lately, though he never stayed long due to the Land’s interferences.

Livia examined Ryan’s new costume from head to toe. “I love the suit,” she said, though she frowned at the hole in his bowler hat. “Did someone attack you?”

“I had to put down a robot rebellion.” Ryan shrugged. “I have a back-up bowler hat in my car, but I’ll wait for tomorrow before putting it on. I only wear that one for *war*.”

She chuckled, though her heart wasn't in it.

The courier glanced at Augustus' daughter, noticing the red marks near her eyelids. She had wiped off tears not so long ago. "He told you, didn't he?" Ryan guessed. "Kitten. He told you the truth, about how he felt."

Her face strained, telling him he had hit the mark. "Can we sit for a while, Ryan?"

"Sure." They sat along the pier's edge, their feet dangling above the sea. Ryan said nothing, knowing Augustus' heir wanted an ear to listen to. One that wasn't part of the '*Family*'. Not even Fortuna.

Livia put her hands on her lap, facing the distant sun. A faint breeze flowed from the west onto her face. She didn't say a word for a while, as she tried to express her feelings into words. "I went straight to Dynamis. Something I never dared to do, because it increases tensions between my family and the Manadas in my predictions. If I didn't know this wouldn't matter in the long-term, I would never have dared."

"Story of my life," Ryan replied.

"I refused to leave until Felix would talk to me," Livia continued her tale. "My bodyguards and the security were within minutes of starting a firefight when he finally came down. He wasn't happy that I forced his hand, but he agreed to sit down and have a real talk."

Ryan listened in respectful silence.

"I... I can see up to six futures at once, and I can switch them. My ability is always on, and sometimes it reacts to my emotional state. It shows me options based on what I want." Livia looked away, her eyes wandering to Dynamis and II

Migliore's twin towers. "I couldn't convince Felix to get back together with me willingly in any alternate world I saw. There were many where I could *force* him, yes. But none where he would return out of his own free-will."

She glanced back at the calm, peaceful sea, and the shadow of Ischia Island in the distance. "It's... it's not that we're over, Ryan. There was nothing between us in the first place. It was... it was just decorum, and my own feelings blinding me to the truth. Whatever bond we shared, it's gone, and I can't get it back."

"I'm sorry," Ryan said with a sigh. "I know it sounds cliché, but I understand."

"You've been there too." She looked at the courier sorrowfully. "I can feel it in your voice."

"Yeah." Ryan slowly removed his mask and hat, putting them at his side. The warm breeze on his face felt good. "I've spent centuries looking for Len, because... because I loved her. And now that she remembers... while we still share a close bond... the intimacy we had is gone."

"What happened?"

"Her father happened," Ryan replied. Just like Livia's ruined every chance she might have had with Felix. "Nostalgia led me to New Rome. I longed for a simpler past, and..."

He took a deep breath. "Don't get me wrong, I'm happy to have a friend back. But it's not the ending I'd hoped for."

Livia gave him a glance full of compassion. "Love is a sweet poison, isn't it?"

"I don't regret tasting it though," Ryan replied with a genuine smile. "All I wished for was someone to remember me. Someone with whom I could share my joys and burdens. Shortie agreed to help me carry some of the load, and... I'm fine with that. Better than fine."

"Why are you still in New Rome, Ryan?" she asked him. "You came to this city to reconnect with your friend, and you did. Adam perished, and you could bury the bunker for good. Leave all of this mess behind."

"It wouldn't be the best ending, princess."

"It would be a good one. For you, at least."

"Would it be good for Felix? For Jamie, for Jasmine, for Yuki?" Ryan marked a short pause. "For you?"

The heiress looked somewhat embarrassed. "Don't worry about me Ryan," she said, "I will make things right."

A blatant lie. He could see it in her eyes. Livia expected to face more trouble down the line, and to carry the burden alone.

"Well, you're part of my Christmas list whether you like it or not," Ryan joked. "And I'll ask you the same question. Why are you still in New Rome?"

"Same reason as you," Livia replied, her eyes focusing on Ischia Island. "Too many lives depend on it. If I leave, the throne will probably go to Bacchus or Mars, and nothing will change. It will just be more of the same."

"How far can you see into a simulation?"

Livia joined her hands, as if hesitating to reveal that secret. Eventually, she did though. “A month or so if I truly focus. The predictions get increasingly unreliable the farther into the future I look.” Her expression transformed into a grim scowl. “Not far enough that I could learn about my father’s cancer before it was too late.”

So she had seen how the world would turn out in the future. While the butterfly effect probably whisked possibilities away, seeing a world with Bacchus in charge of the Augusti must have scared her straight.

“Can I confess something, Ryan?”

“You don’t have to ask. I won’t judge you.”

Livia’s fingers fidgeted, as she mustered her courage. He could tell that she was about to admit something she never dared to confess to anyone else before. “I... I don’t really feel comfortable around others. Even Fortuna, or my family. I love them but... how to explain...”

“You know them, but they don’t know you,” Ryan guessed her problem.

She confirmed with a slow nod. “You have the same problem?”

“I lived lifetimes with some people across loops, only for them to barely know my name in the last one.”

“I can process the realities I see at an accelerated rate, and I can’t turn my power off. I’ve seen all the ways my loved ones can react to a stimulus, what they plan to do. I know everything about them, but I feel like an outside observer in my own life. The events I see happened to other ‘mes’. I didn’t live these moments, I... I only watched them.”

Their respective powers built walls with others. “Is that why you’re telling me this?” Ryan asked. “Because you can’t watch me, that our moments feel genuine?”

She chuckled. “It plays into it, I believe.”

“I feel the same,” Ryan admitted. “Honestly, I kinda hated you at first. I’ve grown so used to controlling every aspect of a loop, that a foreign force like you messing up with my plans... It felt maddening. But, well, I had forgotten that I liked surprises.”

It felt nice to talk with someone who understood the loneliness Ryan had suffered through all these years. While their powers might have been wildly different, they did face similar problems.

Livia looked at him with an amused smile. “If I piggyback on your power as you suggested in your messages, you will have even less mastery over what happens.”

“Yes, but you said it yourself. Neither of us is getting what we want without cooperating with the other.” The courier crossed his arms. “So, if we gave you a map of your memories and a back-up of Len’s, would you go along with it?”

Livia’s smile turned into a scowl. “I don’t think that will work, Ryan. I know myself. I will never accept having my thoughts overwritten voluntarily, especially not by Dynamis-made tech. From my old self’s point of view, I can only rely on notes rather than personal experience. I will expect foul play.”

“Can’t you write a fifteen-page long warning you won’t read anyway, like search engines?”

"I'm more likely to assume someone tampered with my notes. I will find it more likely that you are a manipulative Blue capable of interfering with my ability. I'm already very wary of people like Bacchus." Livia considered the matter thoughtfully. "How much does the Underdiver trust you?"

"I see where this is going," Ryan said. "We send your consciousness back in time, you keep a copy of Shortie's memories, and then I convince her past self to have her own overwritten."

"Would she accept? You knew each other for years, while we met days ago. She's more likely to go along with this plan than my other self."

"I don't know." Hopefully, Len would figure out a way to send more than one consciousness back in time and they wouldn't have to find out. "I'll... I'll ask her permission first. It would feel a bit manipulative otherwise."

"You use your foreknowledge to get others to move the way you want to all the time," Livia argued.

Len was a special case. "We'll see with her. What about the other thing?"

"Help you find a cure for the Psycho condition?" The oracle seemed a lot less enthusiastic about that part. "Ryan, these people tried to blow us all back to the stone age."

"The ones who wanted to are gone, and the rest..." Ryan's thoughts turned to Acid Rain, Mongrel, Frank, even Sarin. All these people were victims of their own powers. "The rest deserve a second chance."

And besides the Meta, how many Psychos were people who made a costly mistake, or victims of circumstances?

Bloodstream, Jean-Stéphanie, Adam, and their kind had colored his view of Psychos. But now that he had seen the other side of the fence, Ryan couldn't call a world where Acid Rain would remain a demented killer a Perfect Run.

"I gave them hope, Livia," the courier declared. "I don't want to disappoint it."

"You will take it away when you turn back time again," Livia pointed out.

"I will make curing them part of my final loop," Ryan argued back. "I will perfect the process through multiple loops, and make sure they get a better ending. Maybe they won't remember my promise, but I will."

Livia hesitated for a full minute, joining her hands as she considered the proposal. If Ryan wasn't mistaken, she used her sight to try to see the possible consequences, and it seemed to mollify her resistance somewhat. "Alright," she said. "But in return, I ask for two things. First, you will involve me in every step of the way. I don't want to help create something I might regret."

"That's fair."

"And second..." Her expression turned playful. "Why do they keep calling you Mr. President?"

Ryan couldn't help but chuckle. "You want me to declassify that secret?"

"I'm curious," she admitted. "I'm sure there's an interesting anecdote behind it."

Ryan explained to Livia the details of his coup d'etat, and her lips transformed into a grin. "You force them to sing *The*

Star-Spangled Banner every morning?"

"Frank is a surprisingly good singer, but Mosquito..." Ryan shuddered, the infernal buzzing noise echoing in his mind. "If you didn't want to slap him before he sings, you will afterward."

"I wish I could do silly things like that," Livia admitted. "Everyone around me walks on eggshells."

"Can't you force them to amuse you, jester-style?" Ryan asked. "What's the point of having authority if you can't abuse it now and then?"

"They fear displeasing me, but they dread my father's attention even more," Livia replied. "Although I admit Fortuna and I had some interesting adventures when we were younger."

"Like what?"

"We made wishes upon a star, and Fortuna asked for the star itself," Livia chuckled. "A small meteorite fell in the garden. My father was livid."

"Her power is busted," Ryan complained.

"I know," Livia answered with a knowing smile, albeit somewhat nostalgic. "Things were so much easier when we were children."

Ryan glanced at Ischia Island in the distance. "Before your parents started grooming you to take over?"

Livia answered with a sharp nod. "I would appreciate it if you destroyed that island on your way out of New Rome. Once the Bliss Factory goes down, I can finally start

changing things for the better. Maybe even keep Narcinia away from Bacchus, if I play my cards right.”

“You understand she will always remain the sticking point with the Carnival?” Ryan pointed out the obvious. “And Bacchus is only part of the problem. Mars and Venus also push her into making more Bliss against her will.”

“Mars and Venus, I can manage,” Livia explained. “They’re... *followers*, so to say. Mars in particular chose to become my father’s subordinate early and never wavered in his loyalty. He will only take responsibility for the family’s empire if it is thrust upon his shoulders. If I inherit, these two will do as I say; even leave Narcinia and Fortuna alone to do as they wish. They won’t *like* it, mind you. But they will obey.”

“But not Bacchus?”

Livia shook her head. “His obsession with Bliss borders on religious zealotry. He believes he can contact God with that substance, and it trumps all other concerns.”

Not a god.

An Ultimate One.

“Even then,” Ryan said, “if you really want to spare your family from a deadly confrontation with Hargraves, we’ll have to find a way to exfiltrate Narcinia from your father’s grasp.”

Livia winced. “I’m seeing Hargraves in my vision lately.”

Sunshine? Already? “Where?”

“Rust Town,” she admitted. “I believe he intends to attack you, and the odds increase with time.”

But the only reason Hargraves would appear so soon, would be...

If he knew about the bunker.

"So that's why Safelite was so active lately," Ryan muttered out loud.

How? Did Ryan's presence among the Meta-Gang cause Shroud to pay more attention to Rust Town? Or did the glass manipulator manage to interrogate former thralls of Psyshock with the necessary knowledge to piece it together?

Perhaps he hadn't done so yet, but would in the following days. "How long until the sunset?"

"It is too early to tell yet, especially since you can make my prophecies wrong." Livia bit her lower lip. "Something else has been blurring my visions lately."

Of course. One of the plushies had breached containment and escaped the Junkyard. If it was anything like with Eugène-Henry, the creature would probably pollute her future sight.

"I see Dynamis attacking Rust Town too," Livia continued. "Enrique leads them in most possibilities, but others, his elder brother takes the lead. If he does come, the city burns not long after. The flames of war consume everything."

So Ryan's back-up plan of abandoning the surface and bunkering down the way Hannifat Lecter did looked doomed to fail. He had to go on the offensive. "Well, I have a plan to take care of Dynamis, and secure Vulcan's help on the same occasion."

“Vulcan?” Livia raised an eyebrow, smirking. “Why choose a road so complicated? If you needed her help, you could have asked me.”

“Nah, I know Vulcan. If you forced her to help, she would have ratted us out to Augustus out of petty revenge.” If anything, Jasmine’s irritability was one of the things Ryan found cute about her. “She will only help reliably if someone goes along with her wishes first.”

Livia immediately picked on the implications. “The two of you were close.”

Ryan avoided her gaze, staring at the sea. He still felt sore about losing Jasmine, his Jasmine. “Yeah. Yeah, we were. But now she’s gone for good.”

“Now that you can safeguard memories, why not repeat the loop where you formed a relationship?” Livia suggested.
“Then you send her memories back.”

Ryan sighed. He had considered something like that, before deciding against it; that kind of thinking led down the rabbit hole. “Besides the fact she made me promise not to replace her, I cannot control your actions, so a perfect repeat is now beyond my reach. If I tried to recreate my Jasmine through various loops, I would probably obsess over every detail, and reboot if I find the result ‘lacking.’ I’m afraid I’ll start caring more about my *idea* of Jasmine, rather than the person.”

Much like how he had obsessed over Len, and what she represented to him.

“I... I see.” Livia looked torn about Ryan’s choice, but appeared to respect it. “Why do you need her?”

"We're in the process of figuring out how Mechron could enhance his lieutenants' powers. If I combine his tech with Jasmine's..."

"You could boost your power, and perhaps bring more people across time." He could tell that the possibility greatly interested Livia. "How will you proceed?"

"Well, I'll go full supervillain, take over Dynamis' Star Studios, and livestream Hector Manada's crimes for the world to see," Ryan explained his evil plan. "I'll also chew the scenery, probably hold the city for ransom, and confront my archenemy Wardrobe in an epic battle. Or she will share the role with the Panda. I haven't decided if I want my heroes exclusive."

Livia's reaction was unlike anything Ryan expected.

He thought she would laugh, show skepticism, pat him on the back and leave him to his fate.

Instead, the oracle took his explanations without a word, as she digested them. Livia opened her mouth to say something, hastily closed it, and then joined her hands together on her lap. A flash of hesitation briefly crossed her face before her expression turned shy, like a precocious child afraid to ask something stupid and suffer mockery afterward.

Ryan squinted at Livia, reading her mind. "You want to come."

"Can I?" the Augusti princess pleaded with a sheepish smile. She looked so adorable at that moment, that Ryan couldn't deny her.

Still, the idea of someone as proper and dignified as Livia participating in something so silly clashed with the idea he had of her. “You’re sure?”

“You haven’t said no,” Livia said with a grin.

“You do realize the danger involved?”

“Which is exactly why I want to come,” Livia said. “I will never have the opportunity to do something like this outside of a time-loop, due to all the ways it could go wrong. If you worry about my father, I can wear a mask and stick to my time-leap ability. Nobody else outside my family knows about its details.”

Ryan crossed his legs and slouched on the pier, regretting not to have brought his cat with him. “Miss Augusti, do you truly have what it takes to be a supervillain? It’s not just a question of power, but presentation. Style, charisma, screen presence... We’ll need to find you a costume, and a fearsome name. Minerva won’t cut it.”

“I have an extensive wardrobe,” Livia said before trying to think of a good alias. “As for the name, how about Timestamp?”

Ryan stared at her without a word.

“Timezone? Time-Out?” Livia asked, growing more and more awkward with each new proposal. Her cheeks turned red at his continued silence. “O’Clock?”

Why couldn’t she see it? The perfect name, the one most appropriate for her power? One that oozed style and would transcend the realm of pop culture? The perfect household name, to go along with a power nobody could explain?

“Queen Crimson.”

The one and only.

“Isn’t that a bit pedantic?” Livia asked with a frown.

“Trust me,” Ryan smirked while putting a comforting hand on her shoulder, “it will do just fine.”

“So?” Len asked, as a blast door closed behind Ryan.

“Well, our Disney princess agreed to help with our cancer cure project, and to star in tomorrow’s movie.” The testing area reminded him of the interrogation chamber where he and Jasmine tested the power-boosting armor. A reinforced window separated a control room and its computers from an underground dome, where robotic arms manipulated a Dynamis-made knockoff Elixir. “I’ll swap her with Rakshasa as our ace in the hole.”

“Not the Doll, you ruffian?” Alchemo’s voice echoed through loudspeakers. “Why do you keep dragging her into your messes?”

“Trust me, she’ll do well.” Tea had been his main choice of a getaway driver during his drug cartel phase. “Besides, she accepted when I asked nicely.”

“She is too nice to say no to you, you disgusting excuse of a bioform!”

Perhaps, but from Ryan’s experience, the Doll would enjoy the trip. She suppressed strong criminal tendencies.

“Anyway, how are things going with Mosquito?”

"The synthesized, nutrient-rich blood does bolster his enhanced strength, as you suspected," Alchemo confirmed. *"Early results are promising, though the effect does not last long. One hour on average."*

One hour was a long time, if exploited to its fullest. Ryan intended to bring Frank, Sarin, and Acid Rain to Star Studio, but an additional heavy hitter would always help.

The courier approached the window, standing next to Len. His best friend kept her arms crossed, observing the green knockoff beyond the glass with apprehension. She tried to keep her composure, but her true feelings were written all over her face.

"Shortie, I'll ask one last time." Ryan took a deep breath. "Are you sure you want to do it? Or rather, do you want to *watch it?*"

"I told you," Len said with a frown. "I... I need to know, Riri. To get closure."

"I'm more worried it will open old wounds. Or that it will cause a dangerous reaction."

"I have incinerators ready," Alchemo said, four flamethrowers dangling from the testing ground's ceiling. All pointed at the knockoff. *"If the worst comes to pass, I can send robots or call your black slime."*

"Riri, if our hypothesis is true... then Dynamis didn't just capture my father." Len's worried expression turned into one of anger. "They packaged him. Turned him into a product. Even if it's not... even if it's not him, I can't let that stand. It's inhuman. I... I hope we're wrong. But I want to be sure."

"And if we're right?" Ryan asked the right question. "If he's really inside Lab Sixty-Six, what will you do? Let him out so he can kill again?"

Len didn't offer an answer.

She had no idea herself.

"If you ask me," Braindead said, although nobody did, *"if you truly think we can cure Psychos, then why not one more?"*

If there was something left to cure. If Dynamis truly used Bloodstream to make knockoffs, then they kept him in storage for almost four years. Who knew what Dr. Tyrano did to the bloody slime?

And truthfully, Ryan didn't want to help Bloodstream even if he was alive. He wanted the slime dead and buried.

In any case, the testing would soon begin. A robotic arm dangled a pipette full of blood above the knockoff, while another opened the container.

Len's blood.

Preliminary tests showed no match between Mechron's knockoff Elixirs and Dynamis'; both achieved the same result through different methods. The bunker's robots hadn't yet managed to analyze Dynamis' substance, so Ryan suggested a more direct approach. If his theory about Bloodstream altering Len's blood to track her was correct, then it should react to the knockoff in some way. Subtle or obvious, a change should follow, and hidden cameras would film everything.

Ryan's eyes focused on the green, swirling liquid inside the knockoff's glass flacon. Wyvern had served as this 'Hercules' Elixir's template. He wondered if the draconic knight in shining leotard would have participated in its creation, had she known how it was made.

The robotic arm pressed the pipette, a single droplet falling from it. Ryan and Len held their breath, watching the liquid fall for a moment that seemed to stretch forever.

The droplet hit the knockoff, and the Elixir *screamed*.

The knockoff's container exploded into a dozen shards, as its green content turned bloody red. The contents spilled all over the testing floor, bloating like cake paste in an oven. The minuscule amount of liquid grew, and grew, and *grew* as fast as Darkling when it devoured Adam. The shape of a twisted parody of a human face formed on the slime's surface, its deafening scream echoing through the reinforced window.

A chill went down Ryan's spine, as he was brought back to his dark past. Back to the same terrible memories that Night Terror had awakened again, one loop ago.

He could never forget that voice.

Len let out a horrible scream of her own; not one of pain, but of pure fear and horror. The scream of a traumatized victim, living through a four-years old nightmare all the way again. Her skin turned even paler, her nails scratching her cheek.

"Len!" Ryan immediately held his best friend in his arms, hugging her tight against his chest. "Len! Calm down! I'm here!"

The howling slime crawled on the ground towards the windows, sensing Len, smelling its lost daughter like a bloodhound desperate for a warm meal.

The flamethrowers activated, torching the testing room. Flames as hot as Leo's surface vaporized the blob to dust, its horrifying scream turning into death throes. Only ashes and silence remained.

Ryan didn't know how long he held Len in his arms afterward. Her scream had turned to tears, her hands covering her face as if she could shield her gaze from the terrible truth. Her nails had dug deep into her cheeks to draw blood. She was so fragile in his hands, he thought she might break in half.

The courier let her cry into his chest, his eyes staring at the Elixir's ashes. A terrible thought crossed his mind, alongside the sheer magnitude of Hector Manada's crimes.

How many people in New Rome had drunk a knockoff Elixir?

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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81: Good Morning New Rome

Scratching Eugène-Henry's ears, Ryan mentally rehearsed his villain speech. He had put on the war hat, and prepared for battle.

Since Frank and the improved Mosquito were too big for the presidential van, the group instead switched to a light black truck and put the heavy-hitters in the back. Tea drove with a bandit's hood covering her face, which made the android look like a hostage-taker. Sarin sat at the front, while Ryan kept the second row of seats for himself.

"Ah," the Doll said while she looked at the road. "I feel nostalgic. It reminds me of the times we went out on picnics outside the farm."

"Except with more mayhem," Ryan added, his cat meowing on his lap. "And property damage."

"This better be worth it," Sarin said while typing on a tablet. "Even with the bunker under our control, we're taking on Dynamis. The *gov*."

"No, we're putting big business back in its place," Ryan replied. "If my plan works, and it will work, Dynamis will be too busy tearing itself apart to target us. Besides, Hector's ultimatum ends today. Either we leave, or he does."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." His second-in-command marked a short pause, as she looked at the road. "Ryan, that bloody thing on the video... it's inside all of us?"

"Inside everyone who took a Knockoff Elixir." Which according to his calculations, covered around ten percent of New Rome's population. Knockoffs cost a lot, but not as much as a house, and both Dynamis and Augustus made extensive use of the substance to bolster their forces.

One in every ten people they crossed on the street could become a Bloodstream clone at any moment.

"So almost all the gang," Sarin said. "Whoever thought it was a good idea deserves to get shot."

"Tobacco companies kill half their clients," Ryan replied. Knowing Darth Manada, he probably thought the profit margin was worth the risk.

"They can't get away with it," Tea argued. "That's monstrous."

"Agreed." Sarin nodded sharply. "And besides, they refused to pay us after all the risks we took fighting Augustus. Sweet revenge it is."

"Sarin, Darling, are the videos ready?" Ryan asked.

"Yes, but Dynamis will probably take them down within minutes. They control the Dynanet and the airwaves."

"Most, but not all of them," Ryan said, as the truck stopped to pick up the crew's last member. She opened the door to the courier's left, and climbed inside the car.

For her first villain outing, Livia had settled on something simple, yet elegant: a black lounge suit with a red shirt and necktie underneath, alongside a Daft Punk-inspired helmet with the same color scheme. The outfit, while unable to hide her feminine curves, gave her a stylish androgynous look.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Ryan introduced his new sidekick. “I present to you the one and only First Lady of our presidential regime, Queen Crimson!”

“Greetings,” Livia shyly introduced herself to the group. “I... I’m honored to meet you all.”

“Welcome, I’m the Doll!” Tea introduced herself warmly, while Sarin let out a grunt. “We’re going to have a fun time, you’ll see!”

The gynoid sounded disturbingly eager to participate in a criminal enterprise.

“Mr. President.” Ryan turned his head, Frank glancing through the window separating the light truck’s seats from its cargo. “Are you a Mormon?”

“No, though I will probably have to call myself a god at one point.” He couldn’t finish a villain run without one megalomaniacal speech or two. “Why such a question, Agent Frank?”

“You have the new and old First Ladies in the same car,” the giant explained. “Unless one of them is an intern?”

“I have only one wife, Agent Frank,” Ryan said, looking into the giant’s eyes. “And her name... is AMERICA!”

Well, the courier once had a rockstar phase with all the debauchery it implied. By the loop’s end, he had so many

groupies, he didn't remember half of them and could no longer walk straight. However, mindless sex's novelty had quickly worn out. Ryan preferred an exclusive, intimate relationship with one person; something with a deeper connection than superficial lust.

He was looking for a soulmate.

"The Underdiver won't be joining us?" Livia asked, a bit curious.

Ryan's mood instantly worsened. "No, she won't."

After the disastrous Knockoff test, Shortie had locked herself in her room and refused to leave it. She didn't let anyone inside, not even Ryan or Sarah. While the Genius had loved her father, in the end, that relationship was an open wound that never healed. All the progress she had made in the last loop seemed to have been washed away by the fear and the pain.

And Ryan could only help her if she let him in.

"I'm... I'm sorry," Livia said, upon sensing his unease. "I didn't mean..."

"Queen, I love your costume!" Tea said at the front, trying to guide the conversation towards less awkward grounds.

"Especially the French-techno style!"

"Oh, thank you." Livia joined her gloved hands together, and though Ryan couldn't see her face beneath the helmet, he would have bet his hand that she looked embarrassed.

"Do you like it too, Quicksave?"

"I can't diss anyone wearing a Dior suit," Ryan reassured Livia, Eugène-Henry moving from his lap to the Augusti

princess'. "See, even my cat approves. He only accepts the best."

"Is it wise to bring him?" Livia asked, petting the feline while the truck moved towards Dynamis' Star Studios. "I know cats have nine lives, but he will be in the middle of a warzone."

"I guarantee you that everything will happen as I have foreseen," Ryan said ominously, before giving her the *Fisty* Brothers to wear. "Put them on, please."

"Gauntlets?" Livia asked. "What do they do?"

"They turn people into donuts," the courier replied before checking the time. "According to our schedule, we have roughly one hour before Wardrobe and the others check-in to do their cameos. We'll arrive right in time for the morning news."

Soon, the truck reached the confines of Dynamis' *Star Studios*. The park already buzzed with activity, an army of technicians and interns moving towards the cafeteria for their morning coffee shot. Two guards lazily controlled cars trying to get past the security checkpoint, none of them wearing power armor. As Ryan learned from his previous visits, Dynamis didn't expect anyone to attack the place.

"Everyone put on their seatbelts?" Tea asked, her hands tensing on the driving wheel as they approached the checkpoint. "Ryan, subtle or loud?

"Loud."

Was that even a question?

The Doll smashed the accelerator, and the truck rushed at the checkpoint like a bull at a matador. The guards jumped off the side of the road to dodge, as the Meta-Gang's vehicle smashed through the security barrier. The vehicle continued its course through the parking lot at full speed, before abruptly stopping in front of a warehouse.

Technicians watched, astonished, as the supervillain crew exited the car. Ryan carried Eugène-Henry in his hands, Livia struggled to put *Fisty* over her gloves, the Doll opened the truck's container to free its passengers, and Sarin unleashed a mighty shockwave to the skies.

This time, the Studios' staff finally understood the danger and fled in panic.

"Finally out!" Mosquito said as he exited the truck's container alongside Frank. Having overfed on high nutrient blood, the bugman had almost doubled in size. The crimson flesh beneath his exoskeleton had turned green, his muscles swelling until they became almost grotesque. Ryan thought he should change his name to Beefcake. "That's the last time I share a ride with you, Frank."

"Mosquito, dear, you protect the car, survey the area, and raise the alarm if someone tries to fly in," Ryan said. The Doll grabbed a rocket launcher hidden beneath the seats and locked the truck. "Time to dazzle New Rome."

Sarin blew up the warehouse's entrance with a shockwave, while Beefcake took flight and ran circles above the studio. Ryan walked into the hole first, like a boss, while his minions followed in regimented order.

The group entered a reception hall, ignoring the terrified secretaries, interns, and workers too afraid to stop their advance. Most of the security guards weren't paid enough

to fight a band of Genomes, but one did dare to threaten Ryan with a gun. The courier froze time and disarmed him with one hand, using the other to carry his cat.

Ryan eventually reached a door protected by a keycard lock, reading the words 'News Studio' written on it. "Agent Frank?" the president asked his trusty bodyguard. "Open the door."

The iron giant immediately looked around, and quickly noticed a terrified technician with a keycard around his neck; Ryan quickly identified him as Kevin, one of the scriptwriters working on the Panda movie in the previous loop. The man had frozen in place, holding a steaming coffee cup in his hand.

Frank lifted the scriptwriter by the pants, spilling the coffee all over the floor, and dangled him in front of the lock like a toy. The door opened upon registering the keycard.

"After you, Mr. President," the giant said, as he dropped his victim onto the floor. From the brown spot on his pants, the scriptwriter had soiled himself.

"Thank you," Ryan said while moving through the open door, only for Frank to walk *through* the walls around it as he followed. To each their own entrance.

New Rome's news set was a wide circular room the size of an apartment, with half the walls covered by a large 3D screen. A well-lit anchor news desk faced two cameras, and a horde of low-wage slaves kept in eternal darkness. A handsome, brown-haired anchorman sat on a leather chair, having been ready to deliver the morning news when the Meta-Gang invaded the set.

“Everyone, hands behind your heads!” Sarin snarled angrily, as Tea threatened the staff with her rocket launcher. The fearful screams didn’t last long, replaced with cowering silence as Frank and the Doll herded half a dozen technicians into a corner. The cameramen continued their work under Sarin’s surveillance.

“I swear everything will be alright, if you don’t resist,” the Doll promised the hostages, even as she threatened them with a rocket launcher. “We don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“They’re our hostages, don’t coddle them,” Sarin said, as she hooked her tablet to a recording device. Livia stood in the background, too anxious to say anything. The Augusti princess didn’t have much experience with field work.

Ryan calmly approached the anchorman, and silently threatened his vital space. The man rose from his seat without a word and joined the other hostages, leaving the courier free to take over the chair. Eugène-Henry meowed on his lap, looking at the cameras like a furred diva.

“Do I look intimidating enough?” Ryan asked Livia, as he adjusted his suit.

“If you could raise your hat a little, that would be perfect.”

Ryan followed her advice and basked in the spotlight.

“We’re live, Boss,” Sarin said, forcing a cameraman to focus on Ryan’s mask.

The president silently glanced at the various technicians, noticing a young teen with brown hair and acne. “You’re an intern?” he asked her.

“U-uh, yes sir!”

“Bring me coffee. With milk and sugar.” The young teen immediately fled out of the room to fulfill his order, though Ryan wasn’t sure she would return.

In any case, the courier scratched his cat’s ears, and introduced himself to the camera. “Good morning, America! While it’s saddening you won’t hear the weather report—spoiler warning, go to the beach today—oh boy, will you get something better. I am Mr. President, and this is my message.”

He was *born* for this.

“I am Ryan Romano. Leader of the free world, conqueror of Monaco, and democratically elected chairman of the Meta-Gang. Yes, the same Psycho band that took over that dump of a northern district. We are currently taking *Star Studios* hostage until our demands are fulfilled. Don’t try to take us off the airwaves, because if anyone tries...”

Ryan put his mini A-bomb on the news desk.

“I call it the North Korea special,” he explained in simple terms. “Using highly sophisticated Genius technology too complicated for you to understand, this device can induce a thermonuclear detonation that will burn the whole city to ashes. If I were you, I would pack your stuff and leave for Milan.”

Ryan could hardly see the hostages’ faces with all the lights aimed at him, but he heard some of them gasping in shock.

Yeah, who would be desperate enough to go to Milan?

The intern returned with the coffee, and put it at the desk’s edge, as far away from Ryan as possible. “Thank you, slave,” the president said. “You shall be spared.”

"Can I go now?" the intern asked, sweating profusely.

"You can go to the photocopier," Ryan crushed her hopes of a better life, before focusing back on the camera. He noticed Livia pushing the intern towards the other hostages, but didn't pay much attention. "Now, perhaps you're wondering why this is happening, so we compiled a short movie."

The screen behind his desk broadcast his recorded talk with Hector Manada.

Well, of course, the courier had 'edited' the film to make it fit within a five minutes length, but such were the rules of sensational journalism. He would *probably* release a director's cut one day.

"No more Knockoffs," Hector Manada's voice echoed behind Ryan. *"My agreement was with your predecessors, and their demise changes everything."*

"Certainly we can continue where they left off."

"Your people didn't deliver, so why should I honor my side of the bargain?"

"Then I should reveal what's inside your knockoffs. I'm sure your people will love buying a Psycho-in-a-can."

"Do you have any proof?"

The video switched to the disastrous Elixir test, of Bloodstream's horrifying essence turning the overpriced drink into a screaming slime. Livia let out a gasp of horror at the sight, while the hostages started to whisper between themselves.

"They're taking down the video almost as soon as I put it on a website," Sarin said while typing on her tablet, "but it still makes thousands of views each time I upload it."

The president nodded, knowing once something was on the net, it would remain there forever. "I will personally perform the kids show version, and since I do not believe in CGI..."

Ryan put three plasticine figurines on the desk, representing Hector Manada, Augustus, and Big Fat Adam.

"Say hello to stop motion!"

An awkward silence followed. Tough crowd.

Ryan, who had a long experience with this kind of performance, did the voice-over. "Hey, I'm Mob Zeus!" he raised the Augustus figurine, while doing his best impersonation of the tyrant. "And I'm EVIL!"

Livia chuckled, and Eugène-Henry left Ryan's lap to land on the desk. The cat started playing with the A-bomb like a ball of yarn, to everyone's horror, and Ryan briefly interrupted his performance to glance at his pet.

"Good kitty," he said, scratching Eugène-Henry's back and feeding on the audience's tears of despair. "You like my A-bomb, huh? You like it, do you?"

His cat meowed in response, and Ryan returned to his show.

"I am Hector, and I am so jealous of Augustus! He shines too much!" The courier played Manada's figurine, before moving Adam's. Each time, he imitated the original's voice. "I am Adam! I am so fat, that last time I used a weighing machine, it let out death throes! I want to help, but I am poor!"

"Take my money, friendly whale! I beg of you!" '*Hector*' answered. Nobody laughed at the spectacle, all eyes focusing on Eugène-Henry instead. By now the cat was rolling the A-bomb near the intern's coffee cup, showing his royal behind to the camera.

Ryan put a fourth figurine on the desk, representing Psyspsy. He carried an oversized knife of clay in his tentacle. "I am Psyshock," the president voiced the brainjacker's figurine, before moving it behind Adam's, "and I am a traitor!"

"Mr. President, turn around!" Frank panicked, as he relived his previous charge's murder. "Turn around!"

The Psyshock figurine stabbed Adam's in the back, the madman collapsing. The whole building trembled, as Frank punched the ground in grief.

"And that's where I come in, the hand of injustice!" Ryan smashed the Psyshock figurine, turning it to paste. Then he raised his plasticine-covered fist. "I have been disrespected! Humiliated! *Unpaid!* But never broken! They called me mad, but I will show them! I will show them all! I am taking all of New Rome hostage, until Dynamis pays me the ransom I deserve! The outrageous sum of one—"

"He's gonna say it!" The Doll gasped.

"One!"

Ryan winked at the camera, and his countless fans behind it.

"One *million* dollars!"

The tense silence was broken by Livia's giggling and the Doll's sobs of happiness. "He dared," the android said. "He dared."

“Morons dare it all, that’s how you recognize them,” Sarin replied. “Boss, you do know american dollars cost almost as much as collection stamps nowadays?”

“You wanted them to pay us in *pesos*, perhaps?” Ryan deadpanned.

“You would need all of Mexico to pay one million dollars,” Frank said, spitting on America’s oldest enemy.

“In any case, the cavalry is coming to the rescue,” Sarin said, showing Ryan her tablet’s screen. Someone was live streaming Wyvern flying through New Rome’s skies in human form, aiming straight for *Star Studios*.

“They can’t silence the truth!” the president went on a rant before the camera. “We shall not give up in the face of intimi—”

Bleep.

Ryan glanced at Eugène-Henry, the cat having pushed the A-bomb’s big button and triggered the countdown.

“Well.” The president looked back at the camera, and smiled behind his mask. “That’s all folks!”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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82: Corporate Raid

It was said that the show must go on, no matter what.

“And so, Little Gorynych attempted to catch the wild princess,” Ryan continued his play, having a three-headed dragon plasticine figurine pursue that of a pink princess. After running out of video material to humiliate Dynamis with, the courier had started to improvise. “But she ran too fast for his tiny legs, and poor Gorynych had forgotten he could fly!”

Nobody paid attention to his Shakespearean play, except Frank, whom the groundbreaking plot captivated. Everyone else instead focused on the inactive nuclear device on the newsdesk.

“You should have taken a dog, boss,” Sarin said, glaring at Eugène-Henry. The cat knew he had sinned, so he tried to look cute to avoid punishment. Unfortunately for him, Hazmat Girl didn’t have any heart to soften. “I understand why the Chinese ate them.”

“Come on, I disarmed the countdown,” Ryan said, though he had to freeze time for it. He abandoned his play to scratch his cat’s ears and reassure him. “You’re sorry you scared them, huh? You didn’t want to kill them all, it was an accident...”

Tea cleared her throat. It was just a vocal effect, since as an android she didn’t need to breathe. “Ryan, I thi—”

"Mr. President," Ryan corrected her. "You're my friend, Doll, but we're on TV right now."

"Mr. President, while I love animals, I believe you are spoiling your cat rotten."

"Gooood," his master replied with a deep dark voice, before noticing Livia nervously approaching him. "Yes?"

His new sidekick began to whisper in his ear. "I'm seeing Wyvern attacking Mosquito, and an Il Migliore team besieging the building alongside the Private Security."

"Is the Panda among them?" Ryan asked, suddenly worried.

"Who?" Livia asked, apparently never having taken notes on the mighty manbear.

"The Panda, the chosen one," Ryan explained, loud enough for the hostage and TV viewers to hear. "The only Genome whose power trumps mine. Our long-awaited duel has been foretold by precogs."

Livia giggled behind her helmet. "No, I don't think so," she whispered, only to turn serious. "But... Felix is among them, and a few of my alternate selves die from glass shards to the neck."

Urgh, so the Carnival did intend to target them this time around. The courier learned enough about Dynamis to predict their movements, but he couldn't say the same for Hargraves. Did the Carnival ally with the Manada brothers like in the previous timeline? Or did they remain free agents for now?

"We'll make sure nothing happens to Felix," Ryan whispered back too low for others to listen, before hamming it up.

“With our combined power, Queen Crimson, we will *rule* all of New Rome!”

“Start ruling your stupid cat and then we’ll see about the city,” Sarin said, unimpressed.

“In any case, we’re returning home.”

“What about the hostages?” Tea asked, almost hopeful. “Do we take them with us?”

Ryan shrugged his shoulders. “I realized it was a bit redundant to keep a dozen people hostage, when we have a nuclear device to threaten the city with.”

“And I do not think we have enough space in the truck,” Livia pointed out the obvious.

“Aw,” the Doll said, lowering her weapon and allowing the hostages to breathe. “I was starting to like them.”

Tea had known them for half an hour, and she already developed Lima Syndrome? She was too soft for the job.

The group exited the *Star Studios* warehouse one minute afterward, with Sarin carrying the A-bomb and Frank the plasticine figurines. Ryan walked at the front, holding Eugène-Henry in his arms like a diabolical mastermind on a stroll.

No sooner did they pass the warehouse’s doors than a shockwave almost caused them to trip up. The courier raised his eyes, and watched Mosquito wrestling with a fully transformed Wyvern up in the skies. The courier remembered that they fought in an early loop, with the dragon lady squashing the Psycho like a bug.

But now that Mosquito had overfed, he more than held his own. The flying beefcake punched Wyvern so hard that it caused windows in the vicinity to crack; the blow sent the dragon tumbling backward, but she quickly corrected her descent. She retaliated with her breath, Mosquito fleeing out of the path at astonishing speed.

While the two titans duked it out in the skies, the group prepared to return to their truck, only to find it surrounded by a dozen Private Security members in black riot gear. Multiple laser rifles pointed at Ryan and his men, while one wise soldier targeted the president's crotch. None of them opened fire though.

As Livia warned, they also had a few Genomes with them. Atom Kitty, who didn't carry throwable weapons yet; Reload, that cheap knockoff, who at least had the decency of bringing a lightsaber; and Ryan's favorite hero in the world.

"Hi, Wardrobe!" The courier warmly greeted his future rival.
"We finally meet in the flesh!"

"Hi, nice to meet you too, Quicksave!" Wardrobe waved a hand at the group. This time she cosplayed as an FBI hostage negotiator, with a megaphone in hand. "I loved your stop motion play!"

"Wardrobe, please don't encourage that madman," Atom Kitten said, hands raised. He looked like a cat ready to pounce on mice and eager to finally stretch his legs. Livia tensed at the sight of her ex-boyfriend, but wisely remained silent.

"Sorry, sorry!" Wardrobe apologized before raising her megaphone. "Please surrender, you're surrounded!"

"And you're outgunned!" Sarin replied while raising the A-bomb, Wyvern and Mosquito's duel causing more shockwaves. "Back off!"

A few Private Security members raised their rifles at Miss Gasshole, but none dared to pull the trigger.

"I'm Mr. President now," Ryan said, scratching his cat behind the ears. Frank stood proudly behind his master, while the Doll pointed her rocket launcher at Reload. "You should know, of all people. After all, Wardrobe... you created me."

"I created you?" she asked with a frown, before studying his costume in depth. Her face paled, upon recognizing the ensemble's perfect harmony of colors; the authority of the necktie, the softness of the gloves, the savagery of the bowler hat. "It was you... it was you who asked for the costume!"

"Wardrobe, you know this guy?" asked Reload, his hands tightening around his weapon.

"I designed his costume!" Wardrobe paled in horror at the terrible truth. "But I didn't know someone would use it for evil!"

"It has skulls on the socks!" Felix snarled, pointing a finger at Ryan's boots. "What did you expect?"

"That's right, Wardrobe," Ryan said, his voice as deep as the darkest abyss. "By creating this cashmere suit, you sowed the seeds of your own nemesis. A grim darkness born of your shining light."

"My... my nemesis?" Emotion broke through Wardrobe's face, as her wish for a flashy supervillain archenemy was granted. "I have a secret nemesis?"

“Yes, you do.” Ryan extended one hand at her, holding Eugène-Henry with the other. “Join me, Wardrobe. Become my archenemy, every day of the week. Together, nothing can stop our brand. We will build a multi-billion euro franchise, greater than even *Star Wars!* We will flood the market with merchandise, and we will rule the box-office! Only through *me*, can you achieve the popularity you crave!”

“Yes, yes! Oh Mr. President, I accept your offer!” Wardrobe surrendered to the lure of a long-term exclusive rivalry. “We’ll be fighting forever!”

“Good, how about we schedule our first fight tomorrow? Would tomorrow be alright?” Ryan took a few steps forward, not waiting for an answer. “I have a very busy agenda. Doomsday weapons won’t build themselves.”

Reload moved in the president’s path, weapon raised. “You’re not going anywhere, you maniac.”

“Is it me, or do you really think you can actually stop *us*?” Ryan channeled his inner villain, while Sarin dangled the A-bomb threateningly. “Don’t force me to assert my authority.”

“Be wary, Reload, he can stop time for an unknown duration,” Atom Cat warned his fellow hero. “He’s also probably a Genius of some kind from the bomb, but we don’t know his specialty yet.”

“A Genius?” Ryan blinked behind his mask. “Wait, you think I’m a Psycho with two powers?”

Atom Kitten snorted. “Dude, you hold an entire city hostage with a nuclear device and a band of mutants. Either you’re a Psycho, or you’re just psycho.”

"Your reputation for mental instability makes a lot more sense now," Reload added.

Frank took a step, ignoring the laser rifles pointed at him.
"Mr. President, do you want me to clear the area?"

"They're going to do that on their own, or I'm pressing the button—" Sarin froze, as the weapon suddenly vanished from her hand. "Huh?"

"I've got it!" Wardrobe rejoiced, having quickly changed her costume. Her clothes had transformed into that of a French gentleman with a monocle, a long cloak, and a top hat from which she had drawn the A-bomb.

Arsène Lupin?

Ryan immediately protested, "Someone is getting choked for th—"

Reload immediately leaped at the courier with his laser blade raised. However, Frank swiftly grabbed his leg in midair with one hand, and splattered him on the ground like a club. The poor Violet Genome immediately regenerated, and cut off his own leg before Frank could kill him again.

"Minions, dispose of these annoyances, without touching the truck!" Ryan ordered, as the Private Security opened fire. The courier froze time to sidestep the barrage, while Livia and Sarin took refuge behind Frank. The lasers failed to pierce the Doll's reinforced metal body, though they burnt off parts of the artificial skin. "But leave me the young kitty!"

"I don't have a cat theme!" Felix snarled, attempting to touch Ryan with his naked hand. The president gracefully sidestepped to dodge the blow, and then a second. Atom

Cat's hands furiously tried to reach for the courier's chest, but Ryan had time and experience on his side.

The Doll and Sarin had engaged the Private Security in a firefight, answering the lasers with rockets and shockwaves. The same mook that threatened Ryan's ultimate weapon hit Sarin's shoulder, forcing her to cover the spot with a hand to avoid leaking out gas.

Meanwhile, Livia positioned herself behind Frank as he attempted to catch Reload, using the iron giant as a shield against the Private Security's lasers. She seemed to be looking for *someone* she couldn't see. Wardrobe backed off, wisely trying to keep the A-bomb away from the battle, and Wyvern above smashed Mosquito against the warehouse's roof.

"Oh, well for a second, I thought I might need to use my hands," Ryan taunted Felix. "I guess my legs will be enough."

"I'll show you hands!" Atom Kitten all but leaped at his foe, but the courier simply dodged and tripped him. The young hero crashed head-first into the ground, much to his fury and humiliation.

"It is useless to resist," Ryan said, as he loomed threateningly over his former sidekick. Though he had no intention of harming his friend, someone else thought otherwise.

All windows in the area, including the light truck's, exploded at once.

Glass shards flew at Ryan, and he felt a slight shiver down his spi—

Ryan stood with his hat against his chest.

The firefight briefly died out, as everyone tried to gather their thoughts.

Livia had activated her power, and skipped time forward. The Augusti princess stood near the truck, with a visible and bloodied Shroud lying on the ground; the vehicle's container looked slightly damaged too. Livia had punched the invisible vigilante with *Fisty*, causing him to hit the container and lose focus.

As for the others, the Doll patched Sarin's wound, both of them hiding behind Frank. The colossus had finally caught Reload, and seemed ready to crush his back against his knee. Atom Kitten was struggling to get Eugène-Henry off his face, the cat clawing angrily at his cheeks. Ryan had probably thrown his pet at the hero in the skipped time, but he couldn't tell for sure.

Damn it, was that how it felt for others to fight Quicksave? That empty feeling of missing all the real action? No wonder the courier's foes hated him.

"Quicksave."

Ryan raised his eyes, and witnessed Wyvern flying over his head. Dragon Mom had regained her human form, while Mosquito was slowly deflating back to his original size, embedded in the warehouse's front wall.

"Surrender," Wyvern warned, her face straining with fury, "I won't hesitate to use lethal force."

"You know what's better than one A-bomb, Dragon Mom?"

Ryan plunged his hand into his bowler hat, and quickly brought out a tiny metal sphere before Wyvern could descend upon him.

“Another bomb!”

Wyvern froze in midair, even as all Private Security members within earshot aimed at Ryan. “Wardrobe, steal the b—”

“If you want me to juggle,” Ryan performed an illusion trick to swiftly bring a third bomb out of his jacket, making it look as if he had duplicated the sphere. “I’ve got a third!”

Thank Mechron for his matter replicator! It made it incredibly easy to manufacture nuclear devices.

Almost *too* easy.

And as Ryan had guessed, while Wardrobe immediately changed back her costume to Arsène Lupin’s, she didn’t attempt to steal both bombs from under his nose. Her power had limits. Still, one Private Security agent attempted to shoot the courier’s arm to make him drop one of his nuclear devices.

Ryan simply froze time, and reappeared a few feet away. “Nah, nah, nah,” he said, his fingers brushing his weapons’ buttons. “You try anything, I stop time, and we play *Dr. Strangelove*.”

Wyvern frowned, though she didn’t make a move. “You won’t dare.”

“I literally let my cat do it on live television.” Ryan pointed out, his thumbs brushing against the buttons. “Wanna bet?”

For a tense and agonizing minute, nobody dared to move. Well, with the exception of Eugène-Henry, who finished clawing Atom Cat's face to run back to his master. All eyes looked at Ryan, fearing he would follow through with his threat.

Wyvern's jaw clenched so hard the courier thought she might destroy her own teeth, and moved her hand to her ear. The Geniuses in Dynamis' HQ probably confirmed the bombs as genuine through an earplug, and Dragon Mom didn't dare to call out Ryan's bluff.

"As I thought," Ryan said, smugly rubbing his victory into his foes' face. "You see right here? That's the difference between us. One gets to be the goddamn USA, the other gets to be Afghanistan."

"Mr. President, didn't we sign treaties on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons?" Frank asked, still holding a helpless Reload within his hands. The Violet Genome attempted to stab the iron giant with his laser blade, but inflicted minor to no damage.

"Yes, but nobody respects them," Ryan replied, before glancing at his men. "Ladies and gentlemen, pack your things, we're going home. Frank, get Mosquito."

Frank immediately tossed Reload over his shoulder, his strength sending the poor Violet Genome flying above the warehouse, and then helped the wounded Mosquito hop back on the ground.

"Uh..." Mosquito complained as Frank helped carry him, blood gushing from his wounds. The bugman had regained his original size. "Damn, she hits hard... pain hurts so much..."

“You’re not going to get away with this,” Wyvern said, simmering with anger. While Wardrobe had turned into a nurse to help the wounded, Atom Cat glared at the Meta-Gang, claw marks all over his face. The disguised Livia did her best to avoid looking at him, perhaps out of shame.

“*Au contraire*, I think I will get away with it and the money,” Ryan said, as he opened the truck’s door for Livia. The Augusti princess grabbed Eugène-Henry and stepped inside the vehicle, imitated by Sarin. “Though hopefully, your boss won’t get away with stuffing a bodysnatcher into an overpriced product.”

“You think I believe any of this?” Dragon Mom tried to sound confident, Ryan could sense the doubt creeping in her voice. “That I *can* believe any of this?”

“Doll, darling,” Ryan asked Tea, as she helped the wounded Mosquito and Frank climb into the truck’s container. “Give our dragon friend the proof.”

“The blood?” Tea opened a hidden compartment inside her arm, much to everyone’s shock, and then tossed a small syringe at Wyvern. “Over here!”

The superhero caught the container with one hand, frowning upon seeing a small quantity of blood inside. “What is this?”

“A few drops of the Underdiver’s blood.” Though Dynamis already took samples and a DNA-scan, Ryan doubted the company shared them with its shining hero. Wyvern wouldn’t have signed with the megacorporation if she knew about its dirty secret. “Apply it to any Knockoff Elixir, and you’ll see the truth for yourself. I would suggest asking for Devilry’s help though. If that stuff touches you, you’re dead.”

Wyvern said nothing, even as Ryan prepared to climb into the truck last. The courier sent one last glance at the wounded Shroud on his way. “I’m surprised you decided to fight us,” he told the glass manipulator. “I mean, you went so far to hunt down all of Bloodstream’s clones. I thought you would go after Dynamis first.”

“We... failed.”

The courier frowned behind his mask. “Mmm?”

“We didn’t... stop it...” Shroud rasped, struggling for breath. Livia’s blow probably damaged a lung. “We just... delayed...”

“Delayed what? Bloodstream’s return?” Ryan asked with a frown, but the glass manipulator was in no shape to answer. The courier briefly wondered if they should bring the vigilante back to the bunker for medical attention, but it would only encourage Leo to attack them immediately. Dynamis would take care of him, if only because he tried to help them.

A few seconds later, Ryan sat inside the truck as the Doll drove it away, glancing through the broken windows. Nobody dared to stop them as they left *Star Studios*.

“So?” Ryan asked his troupe. “Who’s up for French?”

Livia let out a breath of relief, letting go of her stress. “That was amazing!” she said, her voice brimming with enthusiasm. “I couldn’t tell how the situation would turn out at any point! Is it always like this with you?”

“Unfortunately,” Sarin groaned, covering the bandaged gash in her hazmat suit.

“Sometimes, there’s fire,” Tea added.

“We should do it more often.” Livia rested her head against the seat, Eugène-Henry sleeping on her lap. Ryan could understand her reaction. Much like him, she had forgotten how much she liked surprises. “Amazing.”

When they reached the security checkpoint to enter Rust Town, the Doll abruptly stopped the vehicle and let out a scream of horror. “What’s happening?” Ryan instantly tensed and looked out the window, only to face a vision of horror.

The Private Security checkpoint had turned dead silent. Literally. Two dozen Dynamis guards had been hung over an open archway leading into Rust Town, the ropes made of their own intestines. The number ‘885’ had been written with blood on the floor beneath them in a macabre display.

“Holy...” Livia put her hands on her helmet upon seeing this ghastly spectacle, reflexively trying to cover her mouth in horror. Eugène-Henry, meanwhile, glanced at the bodies with lazy disdain. “How could I... how could I not see...”

“You couldn’t see *it*,” Ryan said, as he fearfully realized who had perpetrated this terrible deed.

“It?”

“The reason why this run is already doomed,” the courier replied, pointing his finger at the letters written on each corpse’s chest. Together, they formed a single, ominous sentence.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

Ryan looked into the rear-view mirror, and watched two pointed ears slowly rise behind him.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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83: R&D

It had been two loops since Ryan last met Vulcan in the flesh. The sight of her mech descending from above filled him with nostalgia, and longing.

Ryan stood in front of the bunker's entrance, as Vulcan landed her vehicle atop a pile of trash. She climbed out of her metal suit, stood atop it like a pintsized conqueror, and smirked. "I love what you've done with the place," she told Ryan, after giving a cursory glance at the Junkyard.

Mechron's mech guarded the entrance while surrounded by burning helicopters; all of them bearing Dynamis' logo. And yet, Ryan didn't pay much attention to them. He only had eyes for this fierce woman, who once saved him from Hannifat Lecter at this very spot. His heart had beat for her then, and it still did so today.

"What's wrong?" Vulcan asked, amused. "Have you fallen for me at first sight?"

"Even if I disappear..." she had said, all but pleading.
"Promise you won't forget me."

It hurt just like the first day.

"Something like that," the courier lied, before making a mock reverence to hide his saddened gaze. "Welcome to my humble abode, Miss Sharif. You didn't have any problem bypassing the blockade?"

“I designed Dynamis’ anti-aerial weapons.” Vulcan shrugged, as she climbed down from her mech to join him. “They’re far too slow for me. So are your defenses, for that matter.”

“Try me!” Vulcan’s head snapped at Mechron’s scorpion mech, as a cheerful voice came out of it. “Fastest toaster in the west!”

Vulcan studied the mech with renewed interest. “I thought Mechron made sure his slave AIs couldn’t talk back?”

“We uploaded a new personality matrix worthy of this mighty machine,” Ryan explained, tapping one of the mech’s legs. “One perfect for the job.”

“I’m a toaster, I burn stuff,” the mech replied. “I’m pretty one-dimensional in what I want.”

It was the best kind of minion. The one that loved its dirty work.

With the Land dealing with any intruders on the ground with quakes, and Toasty bombarding any flyer, the Private Security’s haphazardous attempts at raiding Rust Town had failed miserably. Eventually, they simply decided to besiege the district. A ring of tanks and soldiers prevented anyone from moving in or out, and warships blockaded the harbor; in theory, nothing short of a teleporter would allow the Meta-Gang to escape.

A pity Dynamis didn’t know about the bunker’s underwater access. Ryan had carefully edited it out of the plans he sent to Nora, in case she connected the dots. Dynamis would devote all its resources to besieging Rust Town, leaving their HQ vulnerable to a sneak attack.

The fear of Ryan's A-bombs would keep the megacorporation from attempting anything drastic, but only for a short while. Eventually, they would figure out a way to neutralize his weaponry, but by then it would be too late.

"Still, I'm surprised you showed up," Ryan admitted, as he invited Vulcan inside the bunker. "Associating with us won't be good for your reputation."

"A deal is a deal," the Genius replied with a smirk. "And a man humiliating that bitch Wyvern in front of the entire city is a man after my own heart."

"If I don't make it, go to Laura. Because she's so fucking perfect!"

And it took New Rome's destruction for them to bury the hatchet.

"Perhaps I can make the deal even sweeter?" Ryan raised his hat, and drew an A-bomb from it.

Vulcan raised an eyebrow at the courier, but accepted the gift gracefully. The happy face she made whenever he offered her this bomb delighted Ryan. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"Yes," the president replied, knowing she would love it. "Is it working?"

"I dunno," she answered with a laugh, playing with the beautiful metal ball. "Mine are bigger than yours."

"You haven't seen my full arsenal," Ryan replied, unable to resist. "I polish it every day."

Vulcan smirked coyly. "I only believe what I see."

Damn it.

Ryan could tell that if he put on the charm, Vulcan would fall for him again. They shared a natural, playful chemistry, the same love of big bombs and innuendos. Holding her in his arms and kissing her would feel like going home to his wife, after a long trip. It would feel just *right*.

“Don’t replace me with another Jasmine.”

And yet, Ryan had made a promise to Jasmine, *his* Jasmine, and would abide by her wish. Even if no one would hold the courier responsible if he broke his promise... he respected his old girlfriend enough not to betray her last request.

If only he had completed the brain-transfer machine before... before that cursed loop.

“Make sure this disaster never happens again, okay? Kill that fatass.”

At least he followed through with *that* promise.

Ryan led his ex-girlfriend down into the corridors overseeing the bunker’s hangars. Vulcan stopped at the repaired glass windows, observing the submarine and the tech gathered here. “A full Mechron base, right below our feet,” she whistled, as Ryan gave her a tour of the facility. “You really hit the jackpot.”

“We even have a matter replicator,” Ryan pitched her the benefits of her new workplace. “You just put in the design and the necessary material, and bam! Instant weapon!”

“And what weapon do you want from me exactly?” she asked, putting a hand on her waist. “Because I doubt you contacted me to build a teddy bear.”

"You underestimate their power. They lure you into a false sense of security, and then they hug you into submission."

"Is that your plan to take over the city? Trade the nuclear bombs for teddy bears?"

Ryan had to keep her away while she worked, or he wouldn't resist. The more Vulcan spoke, the more her wit pulled him in. "Well, if you want to know, we've figured out how Mechron enhanced his henchmen's powers."

Alchemo had finally overcome most of the mainframe's remaining firewalls, giving the group access to Mechron's key files. This immediately caught Vulcan's full interest. "Go on," she asked.

"I'll share the data, but long story short, Mechron found ways to streamline the Flux energy a Genome radiates with biomechanical implants. The underlying theory is the same as with your power armors."

Much like Dynamis', Mechron's Knockoffs were synthetic lifeforms mimicking the properties of genuine Elixirs. Though they weren't sentient unlike Darkling or genuine Elixirs, they could modify genes based on data gathered from true Genomes.

However, the mad Genius had gone a step farther than the Manadas. Though they lacked an innate connection to the color dimensions, his Knockoffs could create microscopic portals to them with sufficient mechanical support. By channeling the Flux energy it generated and using data gathered from an existing Genome, Mechron's machines could crudely imitate the template's power.

The telekinetic mech Ryan fought in the bunker was only one example. By the end of his life, Mechron had started

experimenting with biomechanical warbeasts capable of great destruction. His artificial Elixirs needed a lot more technical support to function than the originals... but they *worked*.

Ryan shuddered at what Mechron could have achieved, had the madman lived a few more years. If he had perfected his Elixirs and outfitted his robots with superpowers, he would have become unstoppable.

Still, these Knockoffs were pale imitations of true Elixirs, and far less efficient. So Mechrons' Als had gone further, which led to Darkling.

"You want me to create a suit of power armor," Vulcan guessed, grinning with excitement. "Something that can supercharge your power."

"Yes, with a cashmere poncho over it." By combining data from both sources and the bunker's advanced technology, Ryan knew his favored spitfire could create a magnum opus. The design would also incorporate Len's signal tech, hopefully allowing the courier to send multiple people back in time.

However, he would need Len's help for it, and his best friend still refused to leave her room.

"Up for it?" Ryan asked, once they reached the recreation area. Sarin, Acid Rain, Mosquito, and a few others had gathered in front of a TV post put on the bar counter, watching the news.

"Like the day I was born."

"Do or don't. There is no try."

Those had been Jasmine's last words, and they summed her up perfectly. She always gave it her all.

"Hey, Boss!" Sarin called him. "They're going to talk about us!"

"Finally!" Ryan rejoiced, as he and Vulcan approached the TV screen. Obviously, Hector Manada denied everything and tried a silent campaign, enforcing a newsban to cover up Ryan's revelations. But the damage had been done, and people talked.

It seemed that Dynamis had finally decided to address the elephant in the room through a press conference. Il Migliore's full line-up had gathered at the Optimates Tower's entrance, accompanied by Enrique 'Blackthorn' Manada and PR specialists. Of course, Wardrobe always dressed chic, a pillar of culture among fashion disasters. Felix's claw marks had healed, but he didn't bother to hide his frustration. As for Wyvern, her face was utterly blank and lifeless.

Ryan glanced at the news ticker, each information worse than the last. '*Unexplained explosions continue, children still missing after daycare attack; the Private Security refused to come—*'

The plushies kept causing more incidents across town. Tensions were at an all-time high, Dynamis was stretched thin, and people demanded answers.

Vulcan snickered, as Blackthorn invited Wyvern to take place on a stage and face an army of journalists. "More dog than dragon."

"She isn't corrupt," Ryan said, "just naive."

Vulcan frowned at him in response. “Who told you that crap?”

Jasmine.

Which only highlighted how much she had changed as a person by the end. Jasmine had been willing to give up her grudge, but Vulcan wouldn’t move on by herself. Not without help.

Ryan listened silently as Wyvern addressed the crowd and all of New Rome. She of course condemned the Meta-Gang’s ‘terrorist threat’, promised retribution she couldn’t deliver, said everything was under control, blahblahblah...

“Many of you have wondered if the images shown on this so-called Mr. President’s video were genuine,” Wyvern said, her expression stoic and professional. *“Or if his accusations about the dangers of Knockoff Elixirs were founded.”*

The courier braced himself for impact.

“*They are.*”

The audience exploded into gasps, shock spread across the Il Migliore team, and the PR assistants looked at Wyvern as if she had lost her mind. Clearly, her outburst was entirely unscripted. Even Vulcan opened her mouth in surprise, astonished that her former ally would dare defy her employers.

Enrique Manada remained as still as a statue, and made no move to interrupt the superhero’s revelations. Perhaps he had wanted to say such things for a long time, but never had the courage to.

Felix's reaction wasn't so restrained though. The young kitten simply walked away from the press conference, and from Dynamis.

"I have checked," Wyvern continued, her face twisting in anger and bitterness. "I cannot stay silent about this, nor remain with an organization capable of something so terrible. As such... I am permanently stepping down from my position as Il Migliore's leader, though I will continue to cooperate with them against the Met—"

The declaration was met with an explosion of questions from the reporters, and a wide grin from Vulcan.

More modest, Ryan simply joined his hands.

"All according to keikaku."

After Alchemo fully took over the bunker, he had set the robots to maintenance duties and tasked them to repair the place. The Genome research lab where Ryan had fought Mechron's spider mech was no different. Though the machines hadn't yet filled the ceiling hole created by Darkling, they cleaned up the floor and repaired broken vats.

When he entered the room, Ryan found Livia sitting on the same kind of robotic chair which Adam used to restrain him. The Augusti princess had removed her helmet, and grinded her teeth together as a mechanical arm gathered a few drops of blood from her left arm. Braindead had connected to a large computer system linked to the chair, observing the data on a screen.

"You're alright, princess?" Ryan asked Livia, worried for her well-being. He could tell from experience that Alchemo had

no problem roughing up his patients.

"I hope I will not regret it," Livia said, covering her naked arm with her sleeve once the machine was done. "This information could cause great harm in the wrong hands."

Ryan could see her point. Augustus had become the warlord of Italy by virtue of having two powerful abilities with no side-effects. A cure for the Psycho syndrome would potentially allow anyone to do the same, causing an arms' race. "Even you must be curious about your special status," the courier pointed out.

"A bit," she admitted with a smile. "My father said we had been chosen by fate, but... I've always been skeptical."

"Well, well, well," Alchemo said, as results appeared on the screen. "How interesting."

"Done bloodsucking young women?" Ryan asked, as he offered Livia his arm. The precog responded with a charmed smile, as she accepted his help with aristocratic grace. She didn't let it go even once she had risen up from her seat.
"People will talk."

"As if I cared what the meat said! Now stop barking, and look. We will make history today."

The courier and Livia obliged, looking at the screen. A woman's bio-scan appeared, representing the skeleton and major organs; spots of orange and violet colors flared all over the body, like oil and water pushing against one another.

"This shows Helen's results?" Ryan asked, Acid Rain having served as the first test subject.

"Indeed," Alchemo confirmed. "Each of her Elixirs rewrote around fifty percent of her DNA, and they conflict. Sometimes the Orange Elixir affects fifty-one percent of her body, sometimes forty-nine... The exact percentages vary each day, creating mutations, tumors, and other health problems."

The Genius uploaded a second picture, which Ryan assumed represented Livia's bio-signs. The Augusti princess was almost entirely blue in color, with a slight spot of violet near the ears and brain. Unlike the previous scan, the colored areas didn't move at all.

"Now, our friend here is very different," the Genius continued his explanation. "Most of her genetic code has been affected by the Blue Elixir, to the point she might appear as a mono-color Genome at first glance."

"I took the Blue Elixir first," Livia said.

Alchemo nodded, before pointing a syringe-finger at the purple spot. "However, around two point five percent of her DNA has been rewritten by the second, Violet Elixir. Both substances are remarkably stable, and do not overwrite each other's information."

So Tyrano's theory was correct, at least partly. Livia's powers coexisted without conflicting or fusing. "The million dollar question being *why* this happened," Ryan said. "And why only two point five percent?"

"Don't you see the obvious?" Alchemo asked with smug confidence, happy to see the solution which had evaded the courier for centuries.

"No, but I'm sure you will enlighten me, oh great keeper of knowledge."

Braindead didn't even answer the taunt, too high on his superior position as a teacher. "The original Elixirs were meant to bond with humans. With Homo Sapiens. So far, all attempts to have Elixirs bond to animals have failed; even with chimpanzees, who share almost ninety-nine percent of our genome."

"Even Mechron only succeeded by creating a workaround," Ryan muttered. "Using technology to mimic a true Genome's powers."

"But what if... what if they had been on the right track?" Braindead mused. "Just not close enough?"

Ryan thought furiously about what he meant for a second, before the solution became obvious to him. "The Neanderthals?"

"Neanderthals?" Livia asked in confusion.

"The current Homo Sapiens species interbred with Neanderthals before their extinction, with the Eurasian population inheriting around two percent of their genes from them," Ryan explained. "Neanderthals were our closest relatives."

Livia's eyes widened in genuine surprise. "Enough to confuse the Elixirs?"

"I believe so," Alchemo nodded. "My theory is that your Elixirs mistakenly believe that they bonded to two different individuals, instead of one. This caused them to... share your body, for a lack of better term."

The Augusti princess frowned in skepticism, immediately seeing the problem. "But if your theory is correct, then people with two powers should be far more common. As you

said, this affects the entire Eurasian population. Millions of people."

"You probably need a very specific ratio or combination of Neanderthal genes to fool the Elixirs," Alchemo defended his theory, though he sounded less certain and couldn't convince Livia. "Or it could be caused by a syndrome like chimerism, where one organism has cells from more than one genotype. Only a few hundred cases were ever recorded."

"If it is so rare, why do my father and I share it? Is it inheritable?" Livia asked, causing the Genius to fall silent as he tried to find an answer. "Probably not, from your reaction."

Ryan considered the matter, trying to find a logical explanation and assemble all pieces of the puzzle. His thoughts turned to Darkling, and his discussions with that sentient Elixir.

"They were *taught*," Ryan muttered.

"I'm sorry?" Livia asked.

"Someone told me Elixirs were taught to bond with humans, probably by the Alchemist." If Darkling's tale was true, then it had been pulled from its home dimension by Mechron's AI, but refused to behave afterward. "Which implied the bonding process isn't natural for them."

"Them?" His first lady looked more confused by the second. "I'm... I'm sorry, do you mean Elixirs are intelligent?"

"Yes, but not like us." Even Darkling, who understood humans enough to talk to them, found their reality maddening. "They are alien lifeforms that don't even use

DNA; foreigners who have been given a crash course on our language. They know the words, but not the music.”

“So...” Livia frowned. “What you mean to say, is that Elixirs have only a superficial understanding of... *us*? About how we are made?”

“I can’t prove it, but it’s a plausible explanation,” Ryan said. He would need to confirm it with Darkling. According to his pet shoggoth, Elixirs were meant to connect lower lifeforms to the Ultimate Ones, eventually allowing them to ascend. But as the courier’s own experience showed, the communication wasn’t perfect. The difference in mindset was too large. “Due to something in your genetic code, whether Neanderthal DNA, a unique quirk, or something else, your Elixirs believed they bonded to two different people sharing a body.”

“But it’s a fragile equilibrium,” she guessed. “If I take one more, the original Elixirs realize their mistake and start conflicting.”

“And Mongrel’s power grants him a limited control over how Elixirs behave,” Ryan added, glancing at Alchemo. “If we can reproduce his ability and combine it with gene therapy...”

“We could create a serum that would force the original two Elixirs to *realign*, and mimic the conditions that led to our test subject’s unique equilibrium,” Alchemo replied with a nod. Livia frowned at the test subject part, but didn’t comment. “Or alternatively, remove the extra Elixir and turn the target into a normal, monocolored genome.”

“But to create something this complex...” Livia reread her biosigns, before turning at Alchemo. “How long would it take you to create such a cure?”

Braindead let out what could pass for a sigh. “It may take months for Mechron’s AI to mimic Mongrel’s power, let alone design a cure from it. These machines are powerful, but the subject is eminently complex. My own Genius specialty does not overlap with this case study either.”

“We’ll need Dr. Tyrano,” Ryan muttered to himself. As the only Genius specialized in gene therapy, he could probably design a cure for Psychos if presented with the necessary data and resources.

Livia bristled, while Alchemo snickered in disdain. “Dynamis’ dinosaur maker?” the Genius asked. “Do you think he will help?”

“Not unless I convince him that my evil plan involves turning everyone into dinosaurs.”

“Just kidnap him then. You already escalated to terrorism, what’s one more crime?”

“He rarely leaves Dynamis’ HQ, and never without a heavy escort,” Livia said. “And if anything happens to him, Dynamis goes all in. He’s the cornerstone of their entire Knockoff operation, so they will try to get him back at all costs.”

“And if he dies?” Ryan asked with a frown. “Why didn’t your father try to have him assassinated?”

“Because then Fallout gets involved,” Livia replied ominously. The way she said it, she had foreseen it. “I think you can imagine how it will end.”

Yes, he could.

Would he react the same if he lost the *other* pillar of Knockoff production? Ryan intended to attack Lab Sixty-Six as soon as Vulcan finished her armor, and after opening Darkling's portal home. He couldn't afford to wait too long for someone like Fallout or Hargraves to force a way inside the bunker.

"Would Dr. Tyrano help make a cure at all?" Livia asked. "He turned a Psycho into a drink. This does not speak well of his moral fiber."

Ryan still remembered how that scalie had tried to gut the Panda open to see how his ability worked. Without anesthesia. "He cares only about his research, and dinosaurs," the courier said. "Not for lab safety."

Unfortunately, Ryan doubted he could convince Dr. Tyrano to cooperate during this loop. He needed more information on the man. Yet, they would need Mongrel, Livia, the bunker, and additional data to create the cure. The courier only obtained access to these resources due to very specific circumstances impossible to replicate in the next.

"Livia, darling, do you have anything planned for tonight?"

She slowly nodded, albeit reluctantly. "My father asked for a meeting, probably about how to deal with you. I will have to return to him soon."

Ryan could read between the lines. They needed to have a talk with Len, and prepare for the future. They needed to discuss how to end this doomed loop, and how to proceed afterward.

The Augusti princess turned towards the room's door. "You can come in," she said. "This does not have to end in violence."

The metal door opened, and someone stopped listening through it.

“Better luck next time, eh?” Sarin pointed her gauntlet at Ryan, her fingers vibrating with power. “Not gonna work for me.”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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84: Left Behind

None dared to move, as Sarin pointed her gauntlets at the group. Energy built up within her hands, ready to unleash mighty shockwaves.

Truth be told, Ryan didn't fear his rebellious VP. He could easily stop time and defeat her. However, they were in an enclosed space with Knockoffs kept in vats nearby; if she unleashed a shockwave and splattered the courier with the substance, even by accident...

"So, it's treason then?" Ryan joked. "You know you will get impeached for this defiance, right?"

"You're the traitor!" Sarin threatened him with her gauntlet. "You promised me to find a cure! I've believed you, killed for you, and now... and now you can't follow through with it, you're going to turn back!"

"Sarin, darling, there are others in the ro—"

"I won't let you time-travel again," Sarin snarled, uncaring. "Not until you cure me first. Even if it takes you months, I won't let you go back until it's *done*."

Ryan tensed, and glanced at the other people in the room. Livia remained unperturbed, probably using her power on Sarin to find a way out. And Alchemo...

He wasn't surprised.

“You knew,” Ryan said. “You bastard, you listened at the door when I told you not to.”

Every time the courier found the strength to trust that brain-in-a-jar, he found a new and interesting way to betray his confidence.

“I did no such thing,” Alchemo replied, though he sounded apologetic. “But when you wanted me to upload that girl’s memory map...”

“You checked her memories,” Ryan realized, infuriated. The Genius could harvest and read memories from others. “Like Psyshock.”

“I had to, to make sure there was no sabotage left,” Alchemo defended himself. “I am not the wronged party here, meatbag. Why didn’t you tell us, you selfish brat? After everything my daughter and I did for you?”

“Because I told you once!” Ryan snarled, raising a finger at Alchemo. “And you betrayed my trust! You went mad and tried to extract my brain, to prevent me from reloading!”

The Genius stumbled back as if he had been slapped.

“Tea had to finish me off mid-procedure, to spare me from decades of imprisonment,” Ryan continued. “You couldn’t live with the knowledge that you would forget everything.”

“Because you’re killing us, asshole!” Sarin snarled. “You’re playing with our lives!”

“That is not how it works, Sarin,” Livia spoke up, completely calm. “This is your psychosis talking, not you. I understand you must feel desperate—”

"You can't understand me, jackass. You can't even understand what it is to be *me*." Sarin clenched her fists. "Six months."

The Psycho let out these words like bullets, like a heavy secret she finally found the courage to get off her chest.

"The first time... the first time I gained my powers, the wind dispersed me," she admitted. "I... I didn't know how my power worked very well, so it took me months to pull myself together. Months to find a container I didn't rust on contact. So no, you don't understand what it is to be me. To feel nothing, to see people have sex and eat food and sleep and just *watch!*"

By now she was screaming.

"You can't understand being separated from the world outside by this cloth prison. You can't understand being afraid of any blade around you, in case one breaches the one thing keeping you in one piece! I've spent *years* like this!"

"And you spent *those* years hanging out with Adam and letting him sow misery wherever he went," Ryan replied, his tone icy. "I've watched you stand by his side after he burnt all of New Rome to cinders. Did you stand by his side when he force-fed Helen an Elixir? Would you have let him turn me into a Psycho, if I couldn't turn back time?"

"I..." To her credit, Hazmat Girl faltered a little at his words, but not enough to take responsibility. "I had no choice! Nobody else would help, and when I was in, he wouldn't let me go!"

Ryan didn't buy that excuse. "You *always* have a choice, even if some will cost you more than others." He knew that

from experience. “You just weren’t brave enough to take a stand. And unlike Frank, Mongrel, or Acid Rain, you can’t claim insanity. You’re entirely lucid.”

The courier felt some sympathy for her situation, and he owed her one for helping him so far, but it didn’t even *begin* to make up for her actions. He would cure her, but he wouldn’t forget.

“Sarin, we are working on a solution,” Livia promised, her tone soft and diplomatic. “We have gone further than what Adam the Ogre ever promised you. But we need more time.”

“It’s always more time,” she said, skeptical. “Adam said that too. *Next time’s the charm.*”

“I promised that I would cure you, and I will,” Ryan swore. “But you have seen the corpses outside, the people Ghoul killed before I could stop him. This timeline is spiraling towards greater destruction.”

“But *we’re* alive!” Sarin protested. “Helen, Mongrel, Frank... you can cure us, if you keep going. But you’re going to run! You gave us all hope, and you’re to throw us all away! Who gives you the right to let us all die so you can get a new chance, huh?”

“Who gave it to *you*?” Ryan argued. “I have some compassion for your airheadedness, but don’t push me. I didn’t ask for this power, but I made the best of it. I can achieve an outcome where everyone is happy, you included.”

“Not me. Another me. If you follow through with your promise and don’t forget us. You hold all the freaking cards!”

"If that's what you fear, we could copy your memories," Livia suggested, hopeful. "I can store as many brainmaps as needed."

"I have air for a head," Sarin pointed out. "What brain can you copy? If you die now, I die too!"

"Then why are you threatening me?" Ryan pointed out. "What do you think it will achieve?"

The Psycho froze in place.

"You haven't thought that far," Livia said. "Because you are not thinking straight, Sarin. Lower your gauntlets, and let us talk it out."

The Psycho didn't listen. "I'm sick of words," she said, pointing both her gauntlets at Ryan. "You're all talk and no action, like Adam. Cure me now, or I'll kill you."

"I will come back," the courier replied. The words sounded bitter in his mouth.

"But you won't bring anyone else back. No more transfers. Your amphibian girlfriend, she's not going back either. If I die, she dies too."

Ryan tensed up, but Livia reacted quicker. "All you will do is ruin your chances of ever being cured," she said. "Because you won't stop him, and he will remember. Has he abused your trust so far?"

"Trust? That's what I should do, *trust?*" Sarin trembled.

"Why?"

Ryan broke his silence. "Because that's all you have left!"

The Psycho opened fire.

A blast of compressed air hit the wall behind Ryan, passing within an inch of his head and forcing a hole into the thick steel. He didn't flinch, nor did he move.

"Fuck!"

Sarin collapsed to her knees, hitting the ground twice with her fists. She had raised her white flag. "I... I just don't want to die... I want to *live*..."

"Sarin, you will live," Ryan said, his tone softening a little. "I swear, by the end of it, you will have a happy ending."

"My name is not Sarin, you jerk..." she hissed, her voice full of bitterness. "Don't you get it? I don't *want* to be Sarin! I don't want to be *that*! I can't stand it, and I want my life back!"

Ryan hesitated for a moment, before kneeling next to her and putting a hand on her shoulder. He felt nothing inside the hazmat suit, except compressed air. "I swear I will cure you all," he said. "But you're not the only person on my Christmas list. Your turn *will* come, even if I have to repeat the same month for years, but you shall wait for it."

She didn't push him away, which he took for a good sign.

Alchemo, who had watched things unfold without a word, finally found his tongue again. Or vocal device, in his case. "Meatbag, is that... is that why you left us without a word?" he asked. "Because of what I did?"

Ryan shrugged. "I couldn't stand the sight of you anymore after that. And once this loop is done, I hope I won't see you

again. I'll consider your favor settled, and you won't hear from me."

The Genius looked down at the cold hard floor, and then up.
"No, Ryan."

"I'm sorry?"

"No," Alchemeo repeated, ignoring the courier's glare. "That was another me having a moment of weakness. I am not the person he was. We were one once, but we developed differently."

"You are who you are on your worst day," Ryan replied. "It revealed what you are, deep inside."

"I am who I am on my best days too, meatbag. And every day of my life." The cyborg shook his head. "I am a cynical old man who had to make a robot daughter, because he drove everyone else away. There, I said it. I was angry when you left, and it hurt the Doll. But... It made me question myself. Made me try to do better."

"Better for *you*," the courier accused him.

"No," the Genius replied calmly. "Not just for me. For the Doll too. She wanted to help others, so I did. I can help you, and that gaseous girl. Maybe she doesn't have a brain, but she can form memories. I can figure it out, make a copy of her mind. Do the same for me, and others."

"I don't trust you," Ryan replied. "And the more people who know about my power, the greater the danger."

"Yet you expect us to trust you unconditionally!" Alchemeo snarled back.

“Ryan,” Livia said, putting a hand on the courier’s shoulder. “You didn’t trust me either once.”

“Trust is earned,” Ryan countered.

“Then let me copy the Doll’s memories and take them with you,” Alchemo said. “You may not like me, meatbag, but she loved you... much to my annoyance. If we never meet again, my daughter will never find closure. You’ll just leave a gaping hole.”

“Whether you like it or not, you have people who care for and rely on you, Ryan,” Livia said, glancing at a despairing Sarin. “You don’t have to leave them all behind. I can understand the risks, but... is it worth driving into the sunset without looking back, again and again?”

Right in the gut.

Ryan looked at Sarin, and his mind wandered back in time. Back when he drove away from Monaco after freeing its prisoners. How he left behind people with whom he had shared a lifetime, never to take it back. He remembered Spain, France, Italy, all the places he visited, all the communities he helped but never stayed with.

The courier could do the same with Rome, achieving his Perfect Run with Len and leaving the place afterward. No one would know but Livia. He could begin again, as he had always done. He had fun hanging out with Felix, the Panda, Wardrobe, Vulcan, and many others, but his eternal life would go on without them.

But now... now Ryan could bring others with him. He could make bonds transcending time. Make connections that wouldn’t break, that could go wrong, that he couldn’t take back. And it terrified him.

However... Ryan remembered his time with Jasmine, and how he had made the decision to trust and tell her everything. He had taken a gamble then, because he realized something important. He couldn't do the same thing over and over again and expect different results. If Ryan wanted a change in his life, it had to begin with him. Even if it meant taking a risk.

The courier sighed. "I won't take everyone. Too many people know already."

He didn't want a repeat of his capture by Adam and Psyshock.

"I will record the memories of the people you vet first," Livia reassured him. "My father wants me back, but I have the feeling now is the best time to make back-ups of everyone. We are approaching a point of no return soon."

Yes. Once Dynamis and the Carnival mobilized, things would become extraordinarily more difficult.

But it would feel nice to have other people having his back.

Alchemeo took Sarin with him, to try and figure out how to record her memories. Ryan didn't know if it was possible, even if he hoped for it.

This situation, no, this entire loop, was a giant leap into the unknown.

"It could have gone better," the courier said, as he faced the door to Shortie's room along with Livia.

"Believe me, Ryan, it went far better than it could have. Though I couldn't predict your interactions with her, I've

seen Sarin opening fire on me and Alchemo. Someone would have died.” Livia joined her hands together. “I do not understand why you didn’t jump at the opportunity to carry more people with you.”

“You can’t fathom the number of people I left behind. What’s one or two more?” Ryan looked away. “Why did you insist we bring them?”

“Because you are a good man, Ryan.”

The courier glanced at the mafia princess, and she smiled at him. A warm, lovely grin.

“Others with your power would not have gone as far as you did to make people’s lives better,” Livia said, her smile turning sadder. “And... I can tell it brings you great unhappiness. Every relationship you had was not a source of joy, but an open wound, a burden. Even now, you fear making connections you can’t take back. You’re not afraid of death, but you’re afraid of other people.”

Ryan remembered his philosophical discussions with Simon, back when they were trapped in Monaco. “Sartre said that hell is other people.”

“He was wrong, I think. Hell is loneliness.” Livia shook her head. “I think only the two of us can understand that well.”

Ryan glanced at the door. “Len is facing her own special kind of hell right now,” he admitted. “And I don’t know how to bring her out of it.”

His precognitive friend remained silent for a few seconds, looking for the right words. “When I was young, my father used to take my mother and me to Sicily,” she said, her tone somber. “He would drive through the hillsides and

valleys on the island, and for hours we did nothing but watch the scenery. These... these were simple pleasures, but we were happy."

Ryan listened in silence.

"Every time I see what my father has become..." Livia marked a short pause. "Or what he has always been, I remember these moments. I always wish we could go back to them. I think your friend feels the same."

"But there are some things you can't go back to, even with all the powers in the world," Ryan said. "I checked."

"No," Livia admitted with a sigh. "But you can try to make new, happier memories. With the right people."

The courier looked at this young woman wise beyond her years, and at the sadness in her gaze. "So can you, Livia."

She didn't seem convinced. "You have a second chance at happiness with people who love and trust you. In my case..."

"You *have* people who love and trust you," Ryan reassured her. "That's why you're even here. Didn't we have fun together?"

Her cheeks turned a little pinkish. "Yes, we did."

"Then let's make new happy memories of our own," the courier said, smiling behind his mask. "Thank you, Livia. For everything."

She chuckled. "You told my previous self that she wasn't alone, and I will repeat these words to you. You are not alone, Ryan. Not anymore."

Neither was she.

Ryan knocked on the door, and it opened by itself. He walked inside while Livia remained behind, her expression undecipherable.

He found Len sitting on a bed, her knees pulled towards her chest, and her hands around her legs. Her water rifle remained within arm's reach, as if she might need it anytime. Perhaps Shortie expected Bloodstream to barge into the room anytime, as he did back in her childhood. The sight broke Ryan's heart.

Len had never moved on.

"Shortie," he said while sitting at her side. She didn't move, even as he put an arm around her shoulder. "It's almost time. I'm about to open the gate for Darkling to return home, and then..."

"I don't know what I will do when we meet him," she admitted, her voice muffled by her knees.

"Me neither," Ryan admitted, his gaze distant. "But you were right. It's the only way to get closure."

"Do you think there's... that there's a chance to cure him? Make him human again?"

"I don't know." Tyrano might have modified him to make the Knockoff Elixirs. "Maybe he's already dead, and they're harvesting the corpse."

Len didn't answer a word at that, perhaps having already rehearsed the possibility in her mind. The slime in the experimental chamber hadn't said a word, nor shown any sign of sentience. Perhaps Dynamis didn't even keep

Bloodstream in custody, but created something else with whatever DNA the Psycho had left behind.

They wouldn't know until they had broken into Lab Sixty-Six, and Len couldn't do that while sitting on a bed all day. She grabbed her water rifle, her expression turning determined.

"Let's go," Len said.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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lennon, K-Thomas, Lone Immortus, James Otto, Kvk, Fahad Takked, Aric Meyer, Ken Ip, Icqewby, Mark Ally, andrew barnes, Daniel Hepburn, Wilhelm bengtsson, Jebril Alan Calingasan, AsianEyezQ, Gio, Barry Pritchard, Kai Uehara, Platinum Star, Zebidizy, Sterban Friz, K, Bob Smith, James J, Venturas, Ho Jak, Noah, Jon Morehouse, Will H, Tae, Jonathan Gooch, X4D8, Ursae, Markeebean Bowes, Ganskvis, Destruct180, Thomas dupre, curtis muelen, Sandworm, Jonathan Hemlin, nathaniel everett, Isaac Boyles, Dirkk Diggler, Fat Frog, Blorcyn, Connor Beeson, unsaintlyangel, Courier, David Cullen, SugarRoll, Xegzy, Alexander Goldfarb, Luca Burak, campbell tyson, Dustin Wyke, Patrick Erdmann, Jannik, Alex Anderson, UnluckyDeath, Domini, Jeremy Engelberg, andy Kierindoongo, Ab9999, Eugene, Chick Pea, Somerito, Mathew Moran, Vole, Daniel Sammy, Rageflare, Sterban Friz, grinning panda, Zadaine, DHNightshadow, Jeppe Lund, Conor King, Misterschman, kyle hirshson, Robert Garrett, Patrick C, daz, Sebastian Larsen, Domenic Stritzl, Apostolos Piperis, Tim C, Brendan Roberts, Ethan, Gary, Hanad Badar, Wancek, Argivian, Karolingia, Tyler, Trucinox, Malthe Mørk Mejlby, Sahil, Gavin Turlock, Box Slayer, Jacob, Connor Isenman, Zelosh, Andrew, Jake Warren, Warior1411, Håvard Betten, Impetusin, Joel Sasmad, Luke Boughan, Anton Selling, Kageryu, DiNunzio, LT, Joseph Catanzaro, William Hoyt, dangerous mob, Abdiaziz Ali, Zipper Houston, Cypernetic, Rhapsody, Peter Kim, Daniel Taller, Jacob Lawlor, Carter Hadley, Glen Anderson, Pierre Come, William Beyer, Michael Karr, Sebastian Lachs, Oiva Metsola, Ben Dawson, Sindre Tjetland, Israel, Luis Wattrodt, Валера Коровелков, Justin Kwang, Liam Farrell, Max Bardsley, Fushi, Redneck Gandalf, Slipperyfish, BoB, IAN A WILSON, JmB, Andrew Warfield, Eitan Davidson,

**Philip Kessler, Andres Montemayor, Blxckninja,
Thomas Wolf, DinnerTime, James Nagy, John Test,
Tristan A, dave hutch, Mr. Finch, martin, Lennert Bex,
Bradman, Casey Gillespie, DenverDrew, Alex
Anderson, Dali Donovich, Tristan Praedo,
Sharkmanwolf, HeavenDragon, Esdraelon, Dominic
Johnson, Andrew Liess, Liarke Lane, Arroww,
crownfall, Samuel Kirkpatrick, William Ellin, Dave_S,
Greenboy676, Krzysztof Wierczyński, Cal Fiala, Ryan
Brudnicki, King Lokajad, Eric Jaynes, Mhark Dichos,
Mortal Complex, Username, Jonathan Hemlin, Reid,
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Abhichon chandrasen, Nock, Nikhil B, Connor**

Alexander, NightWhisper, Samuel Smith, Aldhere, Jacob, Sam McNamara, Jarrod Broome, Rolf Bork, Callum Brocklehurst, Samuel Borges, Joe, Dardy Noongar, Joe Giannuzzi, Jonathan Kutz, Stuart Dye, DerWipe, Grosbilljunior, martin, GenericKane, Sharath, Augustus, Joseph, Abhichon chandrasen, MaikD, Matt Labrum, Robert, s476, Eneri, TKLD, Daniel Hughesdon, Jordan, Oakenbear, Vega, K-Thomas, Eric Vistnes, Jose, Davvy chapie, Joey Nguyen, Skovboa, maniac_ian, Sebin Paul, Liz Griggs, BluEarth, MaliMi, Marcus Österberg, Orm, DaQualyn Singleton, Rheklr, evilperson41, Jake V, Lloyd kostuik, Corwin Brewer, Loïc Fernandes, Eric jian, Gianni Ghiribelli, John Smith, Willshaper, Tibstrike, Ploxzer, Alexander Dupree, Josh Delgado42, Domenic Stritzl, Not N. Octopus, Hayden Butz, Hazza Vanderbyl, Hoobie Gomez, charlyfu, Cliint, Chris, Paul Rettig, Luke, Jacob Goodwin, Kristian Oinonen, Bennet Larson, Mikołaj Wiszniewski, Bobby Jones, Phillip Ingram, Ariel Reyz, altus, lione pouet, Nicolas Marty, Bobo Bo, Darti, ScottDR, Kyle Wong, Henry Chow, Thundabear95, Aqua, evaOne, Philip Lee, Ivan Delgado, Geffery Dopp, Christian Alex, Hauke, Kaleb Uden, Dax, GraySquirrelEatToast, jacob johannes, House of Pantheon, FiveHands, Melanie, Caldrick, T3ctonic, Kezrin, Michael Frankford, Brody Brown, Actaeix, Desert Wreck, dave hutch, Zachary Venne, AlthePal, MaliMi, Arthur3s, Brent, Slimereaper, Sub Electricall, Warren Zielke, The Knight Commissar, Dorian Lee, Svend, Ryan Size, BB King, Markus, Borisalv, HollowIce, Long Le, Blah64, Hamis, Tip Top, Mojanks, Adrian Engel, Brenden, Josh Huynh, Psy, Mohammed Hajjaj, Massgamer, afgasd adgasd, Harrison Russel, Yeno Memevig, Finn Ryan, Nicholas Jensen, T T, Manu, Deinos, maltmana, Alyaseen, Dylan, Svarog, Nick Smith, Conner M Tatum,

ParoxysmDK, James Deziel, Amaury, michele calderoni, Matt, Kirvin, Jordan Litwin, Magnus Steffen Nørregaard, K-Thomas, Justin Jones, Colo T, Marcus Pehan, Cole Rosenhein, Enzo Morvan, Art238, Bon Bon, Richard Barboza, Alexander, Charlie Taylor, LS, bob Johnson, Doom, Jeff Gault, Tristan Praedo, George Ive, John, Landon Pearce, shawn, I don't want to say this but, Daniel Hernandez, John Bush, war doggle, WowExist, Edwin Jose, Andrew Wilson, Pooya Daravi, Suneral, Steven Lindsay, Thaco4, Tyler Chesney, NLRUmbra, Kyle J Smith, Rommelfanger Bob, Davvy chappie, Branden Bryan, Alex Nimmer, Jordan McDonald, Matthew Powell, Mihai Popescu, JJ B, Andrew Odom, Danielle Warvel, Colin, Ivan Kalinovic, AdAstridPerAspera, Reviv3pls, Dark Chaos, Saysca, Folk Chanin, Jdosnoen, Konrad2, Bunny Waffles, John Johnson, Colby, Pumpkin Mouse, Helsgarde, Harry Williams, Alex Canavan, Hobold the kobold, AQ, Adam Johnson, Daniel Aguirre, Zack Hoeken, Daniel Mackie, Chip Twothousandone, KatarnK, NOTOBOK, Razvan, Calvin, John, Jordan Chan, Heikki Aitakangas, OccultOwlbear, TheBreaker, Justi martinez, Thomas Rossiter, Jonathan Caselli, John, Richard Lee, Njordt, Joshua Thompson, PJ LeBlanc, Maxun, Demetre Zurebiani, Iron_Giant, Guilherme Silva, Slade Schlaudecker, The Arcane Emperor, Erik Sjöström, Vlad the mad lad, Michael Forrester, BadSnake971, ZRhulad, Ryan, Cole Mathews, Scott Bosse, Timo Reti, Dietz, Thomas Gamble, Nonnuvy Bizniz, Sean Basa, Tagmin, Julien Castellijos, Kasan, Zach Jamison, Zack, Ethan Bell, William Vickers, Njordt, Ilvesmäki, Alexander, Devarya Raman, Marcus Seigman, James Jackson, Preston M, Subliminary, TDMC, Jordan, Kite 7, Alfredo Spuri, Russel Todd, Demetre Zurebiani, Zach, Tate Browder, Brandon Stiles, Minow, Joachim Janssen,

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85: The Light Beyond

Once upon a time, Ryan and Jasmine had sat around a workshop and planned to make an armor capable of destroying Dynamis' HQ.

That promise was now fulfilled.

"You have two hidden switchblades below the arms and laser turrets in the gauntlets," Vulcan explained, as she helped Ryan put the power armor on. Darkling slithered in the background, waiting for the experiment to begin. "Since you intend to force your way inside the HQ, I added a nuclear-powered chest blaster."

"The Chernobyl?" Ryan asked with enthusiasm, as his Genius sidekick reinforced the armor's joints with a screwdriver.

"Yep. If the blast doesn't kill them, cancer will," Vulcan replied with a grin, as she grabbed the armor's helmet.
"What?"

He had heard it all before. "I want rocket launchers too."

"No," she said immediately.

"Aw, come on..."

"You sound like a child, and there isn't enough space to fit more weapons. Also, the blast might throw you backwards if you aren't anchored on the ground."

"I'll keep that in mind," Ryan replied, already imagining ways of abusing that feature. "Vulcan?"

"Yes, that's my name."

"Why the rabbit ears?" Ryan asked, pointed an armored finger at the helmet.

Using a design improved across multiple loops, Vulcan's power armor was a technological marvel. An exoskeleton of lightweight, flexible alloy, it espoused Ryan's form like a second skin. Its bright purple color made it impossible to ignore, just as the courier liked it. Its servos enhanced the wearer's strength, yet the armor remained light enough not to impair his mobility. A reinforced backpack contained a miniature version of the Chronoradio, artificial brain included, which should allow the courier to transfer a mind across time. Unfortunately, even while working with Alchemo, Shortie hadn't found a way to bring more than one person yet.

However, the armor's strangest part was undoubtedly the helmet. Two long antennae rose from it, which combined with the orange lenses, made the helmet look like a robotic rabbit's head. Ryan knew he had something of a hare theme going on, but this was too much. *Too much.*

"The antennae streamline your connection to the dimension which your power draws Violet Flux from," Vulcan said with a shrug, as she put the helmet on Ryan's head. "The armor's artificial brain will gather data to help you better understand your power."

Ryan glanced at the room around them, the bunker's miniature particle collider. A chilling frost filled this conical chamber, the walls covered in weblike, biomechanical strands. Silver fluid flowed through them, and they hummed

like a living entity's veins; only a single blast door allowed someone to enter this facility.

Mechron's technology had transcended flesh and metal to become something greater than both.

This was the place where the bunker's AI summoned Darkling once. Perhaps the Alchemist had one such room in Antarctica, and used it to bring the Elixirs to the realm of men. Ryan really needed to dedicate a loop to locate and check up on that snowy base.

He had the feeling he would find many answers there.

Data appeared on the helmet's lens after the courier put it on, the scene reminding him of that fateful loop where he accessed the Purple World. However, his current armor was a cut above the prototype. It included technology from various Geniuses, and components impossible to reproduce without Mechron's matter replicator.

Ryan would have to conquer the bunker again to make a new suit. Something easier to say than do.

"Now we have to find a name for it," the courier said. Ryan was sorely tempted to rename himself Plushie Master, but that might infuriate their long-eared overlords. "The Rabbinator?"

"That name sucks."

"White Rabbit?"

"It's not white, and you're terrible at names," Vulcan said, putting her hands on her waist as she found a name of her own. "How about... the *Saturn Armor*?"

“I thought the Augusti had exclusivity over Roman gods’ names?”

“I am an Olympian, you moron, and I say Saturn. Maybe you could even kick Augustus’ ass with it. Wouldn’t that be great?”

“You know Jupiter defeated Saturn, right?” Then again, Ryan was all about repeating lost battles until he won them. “How about Chronos instead?”

“This armor is my baby, so I name it. I name it Saturn.” She gave him a tap on the back of his head. “So, you’ll try the particle accelerator, and afterward it’s raiding time?”

“Yeah.” Livia had returned to her father, partly to make sure he wouldn’t get involved, and mostly so she would record the brain maps in a safe place. Ryan couldn’t afford to put her on the frontlines, since he needed her alive to transfer her mind across time.

Len took care of the children, using bathyspheres to send them away before things turned very messy. Alchemo had made a copy of his daughter’s mind, though he didn’t tell her why, and currently struggled to do the same with Sarin. The Genius theorized her memories were encoded in her molecular structure rather than neurons, and so made a record of it; Ryan needed to figure out a specialized solution for Sarin’s unique biology.

“You want to come?” Ryan asked Vulcan, almost eager.

“You bet I will,” she said with a grin. “Even if the bitch left them, I’ve got a bone to pick with the corpos.”

“It is time...” Darkling’s eerie voice caused Vulcan’s head to snap in his direction. “Open... the gate...”

"Damn it, I'm never getting used to it," the Genius said, examining the Black Elixir. "I would love to study you in-depth."

"I have been... studied... far longer than you can imagine..." the shoggoth replied, a hint of frustration in its voice. If it remembered all of Ryan's loops, then he probably spent years trapped in a bottle. Perhaps even decades. "I have waited... long enough."

"Well, I'll keep the data then," Vulcan said with a shrug, before exiting the room through the blast door and leaving the shoggoth alone with the courier.

"Are you... ready?" the Black Elixir asked Ryan.

"Sure, but I don't see why you need me in the room," the courier said. "The portal worked fine without me when Mechron's machines trapped you in our dimension."

"I will need... your help... to stabilize..." The alien entity seemed to struggle to find the right words in the human language. "You are connected... to the Purple World... the crossroad of all space and time... even other worlds..."

Ryan looked at his armored hands. "All of space and time, huh?"

"Distance... past, and future... are illusions. All is connected."

So cryptically helpful. Vulcan's voice echoed in the particle accelerator. "*Ready to break the laws of physics?*" she asked.

"Let's make them cry," Ryan replied.

Vulcan started the particle accelerator, the silver fluid pulsating with electricity. The walls rotated around Ryan and Darkling, faster and faster, until they started to blur. Gravity became lighter, the courier's feet slowly getting off the ground.

Colored lightning coursed through the silver fluid, and surged all across the room. Bolts bounced off Ryan's armor, or hit Darkling's viscous surface. The electricity changed coloration in a strange pattern, from red to orange, from yellow to green, from blue to violet.

Flux.

The lightning became blinding white for a brief instant, and then turned black as the darkest night. Instead of surging in all directions, the bolts concentrated on a single point at the center of the room, building up into a sphere. A dark spot no bigger than a thumb, a black hole in the very fabric of reality.

"Too small..." Darkling's many eyes focusing on the sphere with hope and dread. "Open it..."

"How do I do that?" Ryan asked, having a hard time hearing the giant slime over the sound of thunder.

"You are the key... open the gate."

Ryan glanced at the sphere, and in a moment of scientific curiosity, took it in his palms. His fingers trembled as he did so, an invisible force coursing through his flesh and bones.

When his armored hands touched the sphere, his whole body shuddered, the Elixir in his veins reacting to the eldritch power. His thumbs dug into the black hole, its

surface shifting like water. Ryan felt an intense, primordial cold inside this miniature portal.

The courier activated his power, and time slowed down to a crawl. His armor kept providing data even as the universe turned purple and violet particles floated all around him. Black lightning coursed through the particle accelerator even in the frozen time, colliding with the Violet Flux particles.

The universe's fabric tore itself apart under the strain of Ryan's power, and his hold on the portal became firmer. The courier extended his arms, and the gate widened. The sphere slowly grew from a tennis ball's size, to that of a soccer one.

Ryan noticed a figure appearing at the edge of his vision, Violet Flux taking the shape of a humanoid specter racing at him. Though the phantom seemed to run towards the courier, it advanced slowly, only a few centimeters per second. The closer it became, the sharper its features; the courier noticed a magician's hat, the shape of a jacket.

This is me, Ryan realized. His other self in the Purple World, converging towards his timeline. Always trying to catch up to the present. The armor enhanced his power enough that he could observe how it worked in detail.

If the phantom caught up to Ryan, he would create a new save point.

"The moment is now..." Darkling said, its voice brimming with an all-too-human emotion: hope. "Do it... do it now."

And with a final push, Ryan opened the gate to the Black World.

The portal transformed into a disk two meters in diameter, a rift in spacetime itself. Colored streams of light formed a halo at its edge, like a black hole's event horizon; a gate to a world of infinite darkness.

Ryan gazed into this abyss for seconds that seemed to stretch on forever. The portal's energies interfered with his power, preventing his other self from catching up. Time itself grew unstable, and it frightened the courier. The Black World existed beyond time itself, beyond reason.

And yet... it drew him in like a moth to a flame.

Ryan remembered how Geist and Bacchus both got a glimpse of higher dimensions, and yearned to contact them again; just as Mechron had grown obsessed with creating a portal towards his power's source, according to the bunker's files. The courier never understood why, until now.

A divine power dwelt within each colored dimension, and beckoned humans to come closer.

"Follow me."

Ryan glanced at Darkling, who impatiently slithered towards the portal. The time anomaly didn't affect it in the slightest.
"Where?"

"To the other side." The sentient Elixir's form shifted, its liquid floating in midair while leaving a pile of corroded human bones behind. "The Black Ultimate One will free your spirit... from this flesh-shaped shell. Your mind shall no longer be bound... by your gravity and molecules. I will show you places... places you can't even imagine. You will become free... from causality's torments."

Ryan glanced at the purple phantom, getting closer by the second. "I will leave everyone behind if I do that."

"But inside the Black World... nothing is forbidden. You could see her again."

Jasmine?

A person who could have existed yet never did. An impossibility that defied all laws of time and space. A woman who could only exist in an impossible place.

"No," Ryan told himself. He had hope for the first time in centuries, and he needed to save New Rome from annihilation. He had made too many promises he couldn't break. "No, I can't..."

Her voice came out of the portal.

"I was a hero once."

Ryan's head snapped back at the abyss, and the impenetrable darkness beyond it. It spoke with another voice, the echo of someone long gone.

"God put us on Earth for a reason," a man beckoned from the other side. *"One day, you will realize the boulder isn't your enemy. It's your friend."*

"Simon?" Ryan asked, remembering a fateful conversation centuries past...

No, it wasn't Simon. It was just an echo stirred up by the Black World, a lure to draw him in.

And yet... and yet, this dimension existed beyond time and space. Could something other than an echo remain on the

other side? A remnant of canceled iterations?

"All that you have erased..." Darkling whispered. "You can make it exist again... a paradox."

"Can't you bring me in for the ride too?" Felix's voice.

"When you turn back time, Ryan, I'll forget that. I'll be angry and bitter at her, all over again. Her death will mean nothing."

Ryan could bring them all back, if he crossed the threshold. Maybe find a Len with whom things went right, or some of the countless men and women he left in his dust. People he had loved and hated, known and remembered. Friends and loved ones who only existed in his memories now.

The abyss tempted the courier so sweetly. Something on the other side called him, begged him to leave that painful reality behind for a better one. One where he wouldn't suffer anymore, and where his curse could finally end.

But...

The courier's eyes wandered to the phantom of his past, catching up to him. He thought of all the promises he made, all the people who trusted him. There were fewer than the billions he erased, but they were alive. He couldn't abandon them, even for a chance at happiness.

Both the black and the purple pulled him in a different direction, and Ryan couldn't decide.

So the abyss spoke again, sinking its claws into the courier's mind.

"Even if I disappear... promise you won't forget me."

The courier followed Darkling into the Black World.

The warmth of Earth's dimension vanished, replaced with an absolute, chilling cold. Yet it felt strangely comforting.

The Black World was darker than the darkest abyss, and yet Ryan could see things moving inside. Living equations that had gained a life of their own; an ouroboros devouring its own tail, never running out of mass; stillborn realities neither time nor depth held sway.

This eldritch realm had a pulsating heart, a great darkness of unfathomable size. A black hole that made the one at the center of the Milky Way look like a speck of dust. An entity whose mere attention could erase Ryan from existence, if it didn't consciously hold back.

The Black Ultimate One.

It had sent the voices to communicate with Ryan, the way a human might attempt to mimic an ant's language. The entity had heard the courier's wish, and would grant it in its own way.

Darkling's form changed, from that of a slime to... something else. Something that gave Ryan a headache when he looked at it. A sphere with triangular ends and recursive eyes, prismatic wings, and impossible geometries. An entity that couldn't exist in Earth's reality, and could now regain its true form.

This place changed Ryan too. His hands seemed to flicker in and out of existence, turning into eldritch darkness one moment, and back to normal the next.

The courier was a creature of physical laws, of molecules and organs. This place had no logic, no rules to constrain

him. The Saturn armor maintained his form for now, a shell protecting his essence, but the blackness would consume it. Ryan would lose his physical form, forget the very concept of a shape and ascend into something more than human.

Something free.

“Don’t go, Ryan.”

The voice was the courier’s own.

Ryan looked behind him, the portal nothing more than a lone star surrounded by the dark void of space. A figure of violet light had stopped running, and instead waited on the other side like an abandoned child.

“I cannot follow beyond this gate,” the purple phantom pleaded with Ryan’s own voice. “If you close the door... we will part ways forever.”

“You are my Elixir,” Ryan realized, his voice echoing all around him. “My save point.”

“I am your other half. The power slumbering within you.” The phantom extended a hand at Ryan, but couldn’t cross the portal. “If you ascend, you will no longer be human. You will become a denizen of this black realm, and you won’t return.”

“I don’t *want* to come back.” Ryan marked a short pause, a layer of ice growing on his armor from the cold. Darkling awaited at his side, silent as a tombstone. “I have come back too many times already.”

“I know,” the phantom said, apologetic. “And I am sorry for it. When we bonded, I looked deep inside of you. I tried to understand what you wanted, to fulfill your greatest wish.”

“Then why did you give me this power? Why do you keep reviving me, even when I die of *old age*?”

“Because I thought this power would make you happy, Ryan. That is what all Elixirs want for their humans. To help. Even if sometimes, we are not very good at it. You are so different from us...”

“If you want me to be happy, then stop bringing me back again and again!” Ryan snarled, unloading centuries of bitter despair. “Just let me rest!”

The phantom marked a pause, its voice brimming with genuine sadness. “I cannot, Ryan. I cannot stop you from returning. I cannot undo the wish you made when we bonded, nor change its parameters.”

“Then you know why I must go.” Ryan’s breath turned to ice, the darkness draining him of his warmth. The Black Ultimate One beckoned him to close the portal, and leave Earth forever. “It just... it just hurts. Even now... even now, I will leave people behind. Even with that technology and all this help... I will snuff countless lives out.”

Even with his godlike power, Ryan couldn’t save everyone.

“Death... death does not exist in the Purple World, which is why it fascinates the rabbit. It is innocent like a child, as I was once.” The phantom kept its hand extended, still hopeful its partner would come back to it. Back to the pain of immortality. “Humans die, yet they move on, even without your power. You wanted to return to the past, to change the present. This was the wish you made.”

The portal seemed to waver, the connection weakening.

“But you can move on now,” the specter argued. “You can stop looking to the past, and towards the future. Make new memories, and happier moments. You can grow old, have children. Find peace.”

Ryan sighed. “I feel old already.”

“But you won’t grow old *alone* anymore,” the Elixir argued. “You have never been alone, Ryan. I have always been with you, though you could not hear me. Every time you stumbled, I helped lift you up. When you entered the Purple World, it is I who begged the Ultimate One to help you. Because I care for you.”

Care.

Others cared for him. Len had fought at his side countless times, even after all Ryan cost her. Livia placed her trust in him, just as he took a gamble on her. He had befriended Felix, Fortuna, Jamie, and so many others. Sarin and other madmen had placed their hopes in *him*, of all people.

If Ryan left Earth behind, he condemned it. He would leave it to the Plushie, to Bloodstream, and Augustus to ravage. He would abandon Len to suffer, Livia to remain with her father, Felix to face his doom, and New Rome to burn.

But if he returned...

“I will never see them again if I go back,” Ryan said with a heavy heart. “All the people I left behind. If I can recreate their essence in this place, perhaps I can bring them through the portal...”

“If you use the Black to bring the dead back, they will suffer. Like your friend, they will be paradoxes in a universe unsuited for them. An existence of pure agony.” The specter

shook its head, the portal slowly shrinking. “Let the dead rest, Ryan. Your place is with the living.”

Ryan glanced at Darkling, and at the colossal black hole. None moved to restrain the courier, and no past echo tempted him further.

The decision was his own.

He...

...

He couldn't stay.

His Elixir was right, he didn't belong with the dead. His place was with Len, Livia, and all the people who placed their trust in him. Even if it hurt... even if it hurt, Ryan had to let the past go.

“I'm sorry, Darkling,” Ryan said, as he turned to the friendly shoggoth. “I can't stay here.”

“I understand,” the entity replied, its voice bizarre and yet comprehensible.

“You're not mad?”

“Black is paradox... freedom from all laws... the ability to say no to everything. Even to itself.” The eldritch horror marked a short pause. “When you are satisfied with what you achieved, and wish to end it all... I will wait for you here.”

“Thanks,” Ryan said, nodding at the creature. “Farewell, Darkling.”

“Goodbye... my friend.”

Ryan took a step, and although there was no ground to walk on, he crossed the distance with the portal in an instant. The Black World itself bent to his will, granting him his wish.

The courier crossed the gate before it closed, returning to the particle accelerator. "Welcome home," his other self said.

The courier canceled his power before he and his other self could touch, before a new save point could form. Time resumed at once, and the portal collapsed into nothingness. The violet particles vanished, and the courier stood alone in the particle accelerator; the only witness of that strange contact with the beyond.

"*Did it work?*" Vulcan's voice echoed in the room.

In response, Ryan activated his power and froze time. The world turned purple, and the violet specter appeared again at the edge of his vision.

"Can you speak?" the courier asked.

No answer. The specter kept moving in his doppelganger's direction, but made no sound. Perhaps direct communication had only been possible due to the Black World's interference. Ryan extended an armored hand at his double as if to reach for it, and immediately froze.

Black particles floated out of his body, alongside the violet ones.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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86: The End Times

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Hi guys,

Due to stress-related health problems, I'll be **slowing down Perfect Run updates** from now on (I posted a longer post on Patreon detailling everything [here](#)). In particular, **there won't be a chapter on Thursday anymore**. That should help me breath and recover.

Peace,

Voidy.

"I don't know," Alchemo said.

Ryan Romano slouched on his chair, the Saturn Armor's sheer weight making it creak. Vulcan sat at his side, checking a portable computer with a frown on her face. "Well, can you give me more details, oh great keeper of knowledge?"

The cabin's metal walls thrummed like a great beast's bowels, as Alchemo transferred data to the Saturn Armor's computer. Ryan watched a copy of his bioscan appear on his helmet's lens, his organs and bones as violet as a plum.

He looked in perfect health, even after engaging in a worrying amount of euphoric substances.

"As far as the scanners are concerned, you are an average monocolored Violet Genome, with no genetic anomalies whatsoever," Alchemo said. "You can only blame yourself for your eccentricity."

So Ryan wasn't a Psycho, or at least not a conventional one. The courier considered it good news. "Then how do you explain the chic jet black particles surrounding my body in the frozen time?"

"I know that I do not know," Alchemo replied with a sarcastic tone.

"Don't bring Socrates into this."

"Whenever I develop a theory on powers and Elixirs, meatbag, you invalidate it!" The Genius complained. "I give up!"

"The armor's scanners record these Black Flux particles, but I don't know what to make of the readings," Vulcan admitted, a cute frown of frustration on her face. "They keep changing."

"So these particles follow quantum superposition?" Ryan asked. "The results change depending on the observation method?"

"No, the data keeps changing *after* being recorded."

Vulcan turned her laptop in Ryan's direction, allowing him to see the screen. Lines of codes and words shifted before his eyes, from binaries to trinaries, from numbers to letters and stranger symbols.

"This substance actively refuses to be categorized, and passively alters reality when I insist." Vulcan ground her

teeth in annoyance. “Either that, or you gained a second power that falsifies my data.”

“A Blue power then,” Alchemo said, jumping to the easy conclusion.

“I’m not yet colorblind, Braindead,” Ryan said. “I can tell black from blue.”

“None of this makes sense,” the cyborg complained, having grown angrier by the minute since they left the bunker. Perhaps the stress was getting to him? Ryan knew from experience that the Genius didn’t have a great mental fortitude. “A Paradox dimension? An energy that actively violates common sense? How do you want me to find logic in a situation that lacks any?”

“If the rest of our theory about Elixirs is correct, then this means you developed a link to this Black World. Perhaps even a secondary power.” Vulcan raised an eyebrow at Ryan. “What are you waiting for? Try it out.”

Ryan froze time, black and violet particles floating around him while his other self appeared in a corner. The poor ghost only advanced a few centimeters per second, desperately catching up to the courier.

Ryan glanced at his hands, and the black spots swirling around them, before raising them at Alchemo.

“UNLIMITED POWAH!” The time-traveler shouted while wagging his fingers like a maniac. “POWAH!”

And...

Nothing happened. No black lightning, no blast of antimatter. Not even the thrill of unlimited cosmic power

coursing through his veins.

"Nope, nothing I can figure out," Ryan said as time resumed. Damn it, why didn't the dark side come with a manual?

"Either I don't have a second power, or I need to figure out what it does before I can use it."

"Disappointing," Vulcan said, though she sounded more playful than angry. "Do you still produce particles without the armor?"

"No more than I generate visible Violet Flux without your wonderful suit." Ryan only produced Black Flux with the Saturn Armor on. "Neither did my main power mutate, as far as I can tell."

His time-stop worked perfectly fine, and his 'violet phantom' hadn't changed either. Thus, his save point shouldn't have moved forward in time, though Ryan could only check by resetting. He was in no hurry to try that out yet.

For all he knew, everything would return to normal on the next save, though his gut told him otherwise. The Ultimate Darkling could apparently violate causality, so Ryan's condition had a chance to stick.

"Then this Black Flux works on another level than our physical reality," Vulcan theorized.

"Don't tell me you believe in souls?" Alchemeo grunted. "I thought you were a rational person."

"A Genome like Geist has no DNA for his Elixir to hang onto, and yet persists as a freaking ghost," Vulcan pointed out. "A similar thing happened with Ghoul as far as I know. A pity your slime friend killed him on its way out, Ryan. It could have helped us figure it out."

Ghoul's remains hadn't risen up after Darkling threw them up, proving that even immortals could die. Ryan couldn't help but wonder how Black Flux would react to an inviolable object like Lightning Butt.

The courier needed information that even Mechron's databases couldn't provide. Knowledge from the same place where he might find a cure for the Psycho syndrome.

Ryan would take a winter vacation next time around.

Alas, they had other matters to deal with right now, as Shortie reminded him when she opened the cabin's door in full power armor. "We're surfacing, Riri," she said, her voice firm and without any trace of hesitation. "It's time."

"Finally," Vulcan said, as she closed her laptop. "Time to put on my supersuit."

"Your immense culture is by far your greatest quality," Ryan congratulated the short Genius, who responded with a smirk. "So, you're coming with us?"

To his surprise, she shook her head in response. "I'm afraid that's where we part ways. Boss' orders. I'll scramble Dynamis' communications on my way out, which should help a little."

Ryan didn't hide his disappointment. "Don't let the patriarchy tell you what to do, come fight the system with us!"

"Yeah, well, I like you, but not enough to disobey Augustus for your sake. You're a Saturday morning cartoon comedian, but that mofo is more lethal than Ebola."

“What’s happening?” Len asked, concerned. “Is it about the Carnival?”

She worried the last loop’s event might repeat itself.

Unfortunately, this loop’s apocalypse would be *much* worse.

“Nah, you heard about that rabbit cryptid thing on the news?” Vulcan asked, everyone looking away. “Well, it’s apparently a self-replicating killer robot, and currently assaulting our HQ. Augustus asked everyone to mobilize, which means they’re replicating faster than he can kill them himself.”

The midget glanced at Ryan with a knowing look. “You wouldn’t have anything to do with *that*? ”

“Nah...” he lied. “I want to rule the world, not destroy it.”

She whispered into his robotic antennae, as if they were ears. “I’m a Genius, but I’m also a genius. So don’t fuck with me.”

Two loops too late for that. “You should be fine, don’t worry.”

With her height, the plushies would probably mistake her for a child.

“Yeah, make sure to skip town afterward. I would be loath for us to end up on opposing sides.” Vulcan rose from her seat with a grin, the laptop under her arm. “I had fun.”

“Same,” the courier replied.

“Underdiver?” Vulcan glanced at Len, much to the shy Genius’ surprise. “Don’t hang out too much with him. You’ve

got a great future ahead of you, but I'm pretty sure he's going to live fast and die young."

"I'll... keep that in mind," Len replied sheepishly, Vulcan leaving the room afterward with a shrug.

Alchemo waited for Ryan's ex-girlfriend to vanish, before turning at the man himself. "So... what will it be?"

"You and Tea will stay behind on the submarine, so we can evacuate in short order," Ryan explained. If all went well, they could raid Lab Sixty-Six within a short timeframe and flee before Dynamis could mobilize. "You keep sending the brain maps to Livia in our absence."

"I already sent the ones you wanted, alongside a copy of Sarin's molecular structure," the Genius said, having failed to find a better solution. "Am I forgetting one?"

Yes, he did.

"Braindead, you're an asshole." Ryan's bluntness caused the cyborg to flinch. "However... I've befriended assholes before, and someone taught me to let go of the past. To move on."

The courier struggled to find the right words, while Len watched on without any of her own.

"What you've done, what the other you did... It hurt. It hurt more than you can imagine. But as you said it yourself, you're no longer that person. The Alchemo that betrayed me is dead, while you are alive. So, while it feels wrong, I..." Ryan let out a long, long sigh. "I will give you a second chance. Send your own brain map to Livia."

The cyborg marked a short pause, his lack of facial expressions making his thought process unclear. "Thank you, Ryan."

"You won't get a third chance," the courier warned. "So don't waste it."

"I won't," the Genius promised, before excusing himself with a short nod.

"Is it wise to bring so many people with us, Riri?" Len asked with concern once Braindead had left the cabin.

"No. But I would rather extend a hand and be disappointed, than never do so and stay alone forevermore. Livia has a point, fear and paranoia lead nowhere." Len looked at her best friend without uttering a word, her face hidden behind her helmet. "What?"

"Nothing," she lied, though Ryan didn't press the issue. "Are you ready?"

"Are you?" Ryan asked the hard question.

"No," she admitted. "No, I'm not. But I... I can't delay anymore. There is no other choice."

"Well, let me put on an accessory and I'm ready to go..." Ryan searched the cabin for the last missing part of his outfit: a black cashmere poncho, which he immediately put on his armor. "How do I look?"

Len giggled, which the courier thought to be the most wonderful sound in the world. "You look cute."

"I would have preferred you to say *fearsome*, but cute is nice. Besides, with all the plushies running around, I'm sure

leporiphobia will become mainstream soon.”

Even Ryan had to look that word up.

“It’s nice to hear your bad jokes again, Riri,” Len said, as they walked out of the cabin and through the submarine’s narrow corridors. “You’ve been somber lately.”

“You noticed?”

“Yes. Usually... usually you joke all the time, but not so much anymore. Although...”

“Although?” he asked.

“Your smiles reach your eyes now.”

She knew him better than anyone else. “I do have an excellent sense of humor centuries ahead of its time. But... I guess I found it easier to laugh at pain rather than cry at it. My eternal life doesn’t feel painful anymore, especially with you at my side. I’m... there’s no word to express my relief.”

She understood though. She had seen him cry for the first time in centuries.

Ryan would have bet his hand that Len smiled warmly behind the helmet, and she raised her pinky. “Together till the end, Riri.”

“Till the end, Shortie,” Ryan pinky swore back. She had helped him *live* again, and he would return the favor.

The duo emerged from the Mechron submarine and walked on its metal husk, facing a burning New Rome.

Their vehicle had risen above the waters south of the blockaded harbor, the remaining Meta-Gangsters having

moved onto small boats. They could hear the noise of gunshots, lasers, and missiles all the way from Rust Town, as corpo troops assaulted the bunker.

Toasty and the bunker's robots had been deployed to occupy Dynamis' forces, while Ryan's group would 'sneak' into the HQ from behind. If all went optimally, everyone would live through the attack; the courier had even made a copy of Toasty's AI, to ensure its survival.

However, the sight of a flying sun shining in Rust Town's polluted skies complicated things.

Much like in the previous loop, the Carnival had chosen to collaborate with Dynamis. Considering how they dealt with Bloodstream, Ryan wondered if they had temporarily allied with the company to deal with the 'bigger threat,' or if something else was at work in the background.

To Ryan's surprise though, New Rome looked relatively unscathed. Sure there were fires here and there, and alarms resonated across the street to urge people to stay at home... but he had expected more collateral damage now that the plushie had escaped into the streets.

Could it... could it have become tamer with time?

Len quickly disabused Ryan of that notion, putting one hand on his arm and pointing the other at the horizon. "Riri, look."

Ryan glanced at Mount Augustus, the hill having turned white.

From afar, the discount Olympus looked similar to an erupting volcano. An endless tide of white fur overwhelmed the entire hill, like an enormous rat swarm converging towards the summit. Nobody could see the villa at the top

clearly, as crimson lightning bolts, water arms, lasers, and energy blasts shot in all directions. The ground battle was probably a vision of armageddon.

Ryan's feeble mind couldn't understand what dark thought pushed the plushie on this course of action. He *did* remember that the fiendish rabbit had vanished after hunting Acid Rain during the Augusti Loop, whom Augustus had slain. Perhaps the creature wanted to continue their previous confrontation. Perhaps it had grown bored of helpless targets, and wanted to hunt bigger game.

Or perhaps, it simply wanted to make a god *bleed*.

Thankfully, Ryan had the foresight to ask Livia to evacuate to a secure location, because there would be no turning back. The plushipocalypse had begun.

Or *Leporimachia*? They did climb the equivalent of Mount Olympus.

"Whoever wins, the city is BLEEPED," Ryan said. If Mob Zeus prevailed, he would learn of Hargraves' presence with his blood already up and probably go on a rampage. If the plushies won, they would ride down the hill on a tide of blood and overwhelm the city. "I know."

"This happened before?" Len asked, Ryan laughing and glancing away nervously. "It did."

"It's... you know, it's not really important..."

"Riri..."

"It'll be the twelfth time that I destroy the world," Ryan meekly confessed, Len tensing up in outrage. "But I swear there won't be a thirteenth!"

“Mr. President!” Frank shouted, saving Ryan from a highly embarrassing conversation. Only the giant hadn’t taken a small boat due to his enormous weight, his head instead peeking from above the water. “We are ready to storm Mexico at your command!”

“Speak for yourself,” Mosquito answered, juicing up on a bottle of artificial blood. “What are we even doing?”

The leader of the free world oversaw his troops on the small boats. Only a handful of his men had survived so far, though thankfully most of the heavy hitters had made it. However, with the exception of Agent Frank, who wouldn’t die until every enemy of the United States had perished, most of Ryan’s allies looked disgruntled.

“What we are doing, Mosquito, is to write history with blood!” Ryan said, raising his clenched fist to the skies.
“Today, New Rome. Tomorrow, the woooorld!”

“I don’t care about the world, I want the juice!” Rakshasa complained. The Land, that stone midget, let out a garbled sound. Somehow, the tigerman seemed to understand it perfectly. “Yeah, why did we abandon the Knockoff factory, after we suffered so much to get it?”

Ryan silently pointed a finger at Mount Augustus.

“Oh,” the tigerman said, having suffered the most from the plushies’ depredations. “Yes, that makes sense...”

“We have all the data needed to create a new factory, and enough stockpiled in the submarine to last months,” Ryan continued, trying to reassure his men.

“Then why don’t we leave immediately?” Acid Rain asked, biting her fingers. “I’m... I’m not sure picking another fight is

a good idea."

"We need Doctor Tyrano to develop a cure, and he's in the HQ," Ryan explained. "We get him, we torch Lab Sixty-Six, we leave."

Well, that was the best-case scenario. The worst one would involve a reload, but Ryan hoped he could 'borrow' Dr. Tyrano long enough to develop a cure for Psychos to use in the next loop. They could even relocate to Antarctica, escaping Dynamis and checking up on the Alchemist's base at once.

"Boss, I... I don't wanna get choked, but the corpos have the Living Sun with them," Mosquito pointed out, his voice meek and scared even after gaining in muscle mass. "He can move faster than sound, and... and he can pick fights with *Augustus*. I say we run while we can."

"Yes, there will be other opportunities," Mongrel said with a nod. "I want to get cured, boss, but... can't we wait for a better opportun—"

Sarin sent a minor shockwave towards the sky, startling everyone.

"Haven't you learned?" she said, as everyone focused on her person. "This guy... this guy is a gambler. The *cheating* kind. The kind that *always* wins."

Ryan's vice-president pointed at her superior with her finger, prepping him up.

"Adam spent *weeks* trying to crack that bunker open, and he did it in a fortnight!" she shouted, with a charisma the courier didn't expect from her. "Adam always promised us a cure and never delivered, but this guy? This guy is pointing

the way! Dynamis, Augustus, the goddamn Carnival? He ran circles around them all, humiliated them! Do you think this time will be any different?"

"Only President Ryan can save America!" Frank roared.

"Exactly!" Sarin said. "This guy brings a *nuclear bomb* to a gunfight, and wins his wars with a goddamn alien! This guy doesn't play by the rules! He fixes the game and gets away with it! Would you bet against a cheater? Well, I won't! He's going to rob the whole casino, and we'll only get a share if we follow! They say the house always wins? I say we *burn it!*"

Her bold speech silenced everyone for a moment, until Frank broke it by clapping his hands above the water. His applause was soon echoed by other Psychos, all doubts in the regime vanishing.

"Thank you, my dear," Ryan thanked his second-in-command. "Your faith in me shall be rewarded."

Sarin responded with what could pass for a shrug.
"Remember your promise, or I'll haunt you. I swear, I'll find a way to come back."

"I swear to repeat my term in office, as many times as it takes to fulfill my campaign promises," Ryan replied. "As long as people force me to keep power, I shall keep guiding you with my benevolent iron hand!"

The submarine's hull opened like a box, a metal platform rising from within. Vulcan's mech stood proudly at its center, with a worried Tea at her side.

"Shit, that's even worse than I thought," Vulcan said, upon noticing Mount Augustus.

The Doll, much more concerned, moved on to hug Len goodbye. "Take care," she whispered. "I'll pray for your success."

"If I don't come back... if I don't come back, take care of the children," Len whispered back, too low for the Meta to listen. Perhaps she thought there was a chance Ryan wouldn't reload, for whatever reason. "They... they need someone."

"I will," Tea said before breaking the embrace, and immediately moving on to hold Ryan himself. "I will be providing tech support from afar. Don't take too many risks, alright? Your life comes first."

"Should you ask me not to take any risks then?"

"We both know you can't help yourself," the gynoid replied wisely before breaking the embrace. "Don't let a building collapse on you again. I won't be there to dig you out this time."

"Nah, don't worry, we'll take the stairway."

The plan of attack was relatively simple. Mosquito would carry Ryan and Len to attack from above, while the minions attacked the building from below. Acid Rain would provide cover with her weather alteration, the Land would destroy most roads to delay enemy reinforcements, and Frank would simply force a path inside. Everyone else would provide support.

As for what would happen once Ryan's group reached Lab Sixty-Six... it would be mostly improvisation, but the President believed in himself.

"Please take care of my cat in my absence," the courier argued. "He's a very precious creature."

"There's something you should know," Vulcan warned, as she prepared to take flight and regroup with her gang. "My radars detected a spike of radiation west."

Fallout. Dynamis recalled Fallout.

It made sense considering Hector's fading star, but it would make the mission extraordinarily more difficult.

"How long until he gets here?" Ryan asked Vulcan.

"One, two hours," she replied. "Can't be sure."

"Let's make a new Chernobyl then," Ryan said, his men chuckling. Sarin's speech had infected them with what could pass for bravery.

The courier glanced at the Dynamis HQ on the horizon.
"Now!" He addressed his troops. "Come with me, and take this tower!"

A chorus of shouts and roars echoed his proclamation.

Time to bury those daddy issues.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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87: Medical Care

They crashed into Dynamis' HQ, like Fat Man into Nagasaki.

Vulcan had been kind enough to equip the Saturn Armor with a small jetpack, but Len's aquatic suit had no such boon. The beefed-up Mosquito instead carried her in his arms, as they crashed through Dynamis' windows too fast for the security drones outside to react.

The President would have *loved* to enter through the cashmere production facility on the twentieth floor, but that would have meant fighting his way through forty more. Instead, they entered through floor sixty, the last one without any reinforced windows.

"Don't worry, guys," Ryan said, as he, Len, and Mosquito faced an army of office workers behind cubic desks. Guards in power armor protected two elevators. "We've got a search warrant."

Automated cameras immediately focused on the trio, while acid rain clouds formed outside the building. Alarms resonated in the room, Dynamis workers hiding below their desks while the guards opened fire. Ryan almost dodged on reflex, before reminding himself that his armor should resist lasers.

So instead, the president smugly walked forward like a terminator, shrugging off the guards' attacks. Mosquito, less dramatic, grabbed the closest desk and threw it at the

security staff. The building shook, as the Land caused a miniature quake and the other Meta-Gang members assaulted the building from the reception hall.

However, Ryan caught a glimpse of a flyer rushing towards the building from the neighboring Optimates Tower. The red-skinned Devilry unleashed streams of flame from her feet like a rocket's reactor, a furious look on her face. Acid raindrops turned to steam upon touching her warm skin.

"Take cover!" Len shouted, using her Genius-made rifle to close the windows with a wall of water. Devilry vaporized it with a fireball, and prepared to incinerate the entire floor.

"Security!" Ryan shouted, as he disarmed the remaining guards with a combination of time-stops and armored fists to the face.

"On it!" Mosquito flew out of the window right as metal panels closed them off, pulverizing most of the ceiling as he did. His attempt to tackle Devilry failed miserably, the pyrokinetic moving out of his path and preparing to blast him off with a fireball.

However, Acid Rain suddenly teleported behind the flyer and quickly shot her feet before disappearing to safety. Devilry lost control of her flight for a second, allowing Mosquito to slam her against the building.

Ryan left his men to handle the superhero, while he quickly disarmed the remaining guards and let Len trap them inside water bubbles. By the time metal panels covered every window, the president tossed a desk over to reveal an office manager hiding beneath. A golden keycard dangled from his neck.

“I will be borrowing that.” Instead of taking it off the man, the courier simply grabbed the card and dragged the terrified wearer along towards the elevator. “Incognito, Doll?”

“*On it!*” His gynoid friend answered, data showing up on the courier’s lenses as he examined the keycard.

Earlier during the loop, Ryan sent the Psycho Incognito to infiltrate Dynamis’ HQ. His Blue ability forced others to perceive him as anyone else of his choice, though he couldn’t fool all their security systems. Still, combined with the president’s own hacking, Incognito had managed to slip inside the HQ and gained access to the building’s main servers.

Combined with Tea and Alchemo’s long-distance assistance from the submarine, the group quickly reprogrammed the building’s access authorizations.

“Alright, guys, all keycards should grant access to any floor now,” Ryan informed his team through his helmet’s intercom. “Sarin, my dear, how are things going on your end?”

“*We’ll catch up in a minute,*” she answered, shockwaves and explosions echoing from her side of the line. “*Shouldn’t take long.*”

“Wonderful,” Ryan replied, before applying the keycard against the elevator’s security system. The doors opened, and this time the president seized the keycard for himself and left the manager alone.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Ryan thanked the manager, as the elevator’s doors closed behind him and

Len. His Genius friend clicked on floor sixty-six, their lift moving up.

"You think they expected us?" Len asked, readying her water rifle.

"Yes, but all the heavy hitters moved to Rust Town," Ryan said, putting the card in one of his armor's hidden compartments. "Besides Devilry, they should only have the juniors on standby."

Though he did wonder how many heroes Dynamis had left to throw at the invaders. Wyvern's shocking departure had caused a wave of resignations among Il-Migliore, and even in the Private Security.

When the elevator's doors to Lab Sixty-Six opened, the President expected to face an entire battalion's worth of corporate stormtroopers. Victims against whom he could test the full power of his armor, in preparation for whatever horrors awaited inside Dr. Tyrano's lair.

Instead, Ryan found himself standing in a colossal beast's dread shadow. An ancient titan from the west and east, from the lost magical land of *Zhongguo*; a guardian protecting a reinforced blast door so heavy that even a giant couldn't lift it. The monster's head reached the metal ceiling, while his fur was as white as his victims' bones, and as pitch black as his soul.

"So," the giant bear said, his voice echoing with the power of the world's ancestors. "We meet at last, villain!"

The fools at Dynamis had summoned the Panda.

"I love your new armor!" And Wardrobe too, to Ryan's delight. "The ears are cute!"

Ryan and Len calmly stepped out of the elevator and into a hall of concrete separating the floor's entry points from a thick blast door. Cameras and two automated turrets dangled from the ceiling, watching the intruders. Three fearsome guardians stood between the forces of the United States, and their objective: the Panda, Ryan's most powerful rogue; Wardrobe, wearing a black and white Brioni tuxedo; and Reload, wielding a laser blade and eager for payback.

Ryan recognized Wardrobe's outfit, gasping in shock and delight. "I thought James Bond was copyrighted worldwide?"

"Me too," she said. "But not in Canada!"

Those hockey-loving traitors! "Well, now I know which country we're invading next week."

"Step aside," Len said with her weapon raised, not in the mood for jokes. "You're fighting on the wrong side."

"The wrong side?" Reload snarled angrily. "You brought New Rome to its knees and threatened it with a nuclear bomb!"

"And your boss mass-marketed a Psycho in a bottle, who is waiting right beyond that blast door by the way," Ryan pointed out. While Reload didn't believe him, both Wardrobe and the Panda clearly winced. "It's the pot calling the kettle black!"

"As if I would believe that!" Reload snarled, weapon raised. "I don't know what evidence you fabricated to mislead Wyvern, but no way I'm trusting a deranged Psycho warlord!"

"The Panda is the only one who can stop you," the Panda said grimly. "Even if he must ally with a lesser evil to do so."

Wait, did he believe Ryan's words on TV? Did *Dynamis* believe him? Either that or they had to recruit anyone they could find. Still, the president didn't have the heart to correct the manbear.

"I'm sorry, but they arrested my girlfriend when they realized she took money from you, and I have to play nice to get her out," Wardrobe said, raising a Walther PPK at Ryan's armored head. "Nora is pissed you used her by the way. That was mean of you!"

Oh? Argh, Ryan didn't think of that. He had no intention of endangering the Architect in his schemes. "I shall buy her forgiveness... with AUSTRALIA!"

Wardrobe carefully considered the proposition. "I think she would prefer France, is France on the table?"

"For Nora, *everything* is on the table," Ryan reassured her.

"Sweet, you can tell her that when I bring you in!"

Reload let out a shout of rage, blade raised, as he charged at the President without any regard for diplomatic protocol. Ryan lazily glanced at him with utter disdain, while Len pressed her water rifle's trigger. A second later, the hero floated inside a bubble of pressurized water, his laser blade on the ground.

Wardrobe opened fire without skipping a beat, aiming for the Saturn Armor's lenses. Ryan quickly dodged, while Reload was trapped in a cycle of death by drowning, followed by rebirth.

"Mr. President..." The Panda tried to look brave and confident, but the poor manbear couldn't hide his fear. He

raised his paws and adopted a kung fu stance. “I... I’ll fight you, in Justice’s name!”

“I am Saturn now.” Ryan flexed his unlimited power, by raising an authoritarian fist raised to the heavens. “You expected to face a president, but instead, you’ve found a god!”

“God or not, you won’t get past me!” The Panda leaped at Ryan with all his might, while Wardrobe kept providing cover fire. “You won’t get past the Panda!”

Ryan raised his hands, roaring as he prepared to meet his destiny.

Pop, pop.

Ryan froze in place, as he faced two bubbles of pressurized water. Len had shot both heroes with her weapon.

The time-traveler had heard pandas were wonderful, elegant swimmers, but... not this one. His short legs wagged in the water bubble keeping him imprisoned, the bear unable to fight the intense pressure; Len had improved the design after Ryan informed her Psyshock could still move inside them. Wardrobe wasn’t doing any better, though she changed to a mermaid outfit to avoid passing out.

Ryan sighed, glaring at his partner. “Shortie...”

“What?” she asked, confused.

“Shortie, I love you, you know that,” Ryan said, pointing a finger at the three trapped heroes in the room, “but you can’t bubble all your problems away.”

"Riri, we are on a schedule," she replied, unapologetic. "My father... my father is beyond this door."

"Yes, I know, but... look, Shortie, it's like strolling through a garden without smelling the flowers. You're missing the important part."

Even the defensive turrets opening fire on them didn't improve Ryan's mood, the weapons failed to pierce the duo's armors. The president raised his arms at them to reveal Vulcan's hidden lasers, blasting the defenses to smithereens.

Splash!

Ryan turned around to see Wardrobe wearing a toga and a coral crown, a trident of light in her hand. The water that kept her contained swirled around her weapon like a liquid snake.

Poseidon's costume.

Before Wardrobe could point her weapon at her trapped allies' bubbles and free them, the courier quickly moved to disarm her with a kick. Her trident vanished into dust particles the second it left her hand, the water falling on the ground.

Yuki switched costumes to that of a ninja in order to leap away from the courier and dodge another bubble from Len. Ryan raised a hand to prevent his sidekick from interfering. "Open the door, Shortie," he said, eager for a duel. "I shall take good care of her."

"You underestimate my power!" Wardrobe replied, picking up Reload's laser blade and switching her costume for a fencer's one.

"Look, I swear we will free your girlfriend on our way out," Ryan said. "I'm a villain with class, I don't endanger my nemesis' family. Just don't hate me over that blunder."

"I don't!" Wardrobe replied while doing some footwork. "I believe you, and Enrique confirmed it! If they didn't have Nora, I would have walked out like Felix did!"

Wardrobe was only making a token effort at defending the place, to keep up appearances. No wonder she didn't bring out the apocalypse suit, or the Augustus costume.

In that case, he would make it a performance.

"So be it," Ryan replied while revealing hidden switchblades hidden in his armor's arms. Wardrobe's eyes widened at the sight, realizing she would get the duel of her dreams. "I shall show you the true nature of the Oval Office!"

The two duelists appraised each other for a solid minute, before charging at each other with roars. Len ignored them both, as she started cutting open the blast door with a stream of pressurized water.

A solid laser clashed against Mechron-made steel, neither able to penetrate the other. The duo danced to the tune of a song that only existed in their head, though Ryan hummed *Duel of the Fates* to himself. Wardrobe leaped, and sidestepped, and pierced forward. The president pushed, smashed, and forced her back.

The blades drew lines in the concrete walls, sending sparkles everywhere as they clashed. No word could describe the deadly duel they engaged in. Wardrobe channeled all sword masters who had ever lived, moving with the grace of water. Ryan fought with experience

accumulated over centuries, a perfect style honed through countless iterations. They were evenly matched.

But Sarin had been right about one thing.

Ryan cheated.

The president stopped time, and when it resumed, he pointed Wardrobe's own blade at her throat. The defeated hero took a step back in surprise, hitting the wall behind her.

"You are beaten, it is useless to resist me," Ryan declared, taking deep, powerful breaths. "Don't make me cut off your hand."

Wardrobe looked at him defiantly, rebel scum to the end.

"Do you expect me to die, Mr. President?"

"No, Miss Bond."

He retracted his blades, threw away his sword, grabbed Wardrobe by the waist, and pulled her closer.

"I expect you to marry me."

Wardrobe covered her mouth with her hands in shock at his proposal, while Len abruptly stopped her work to look over her shoulder. The president ignored his childhood friend and focused on his archenemy.

"Marry me, Wardrobe," Ryan said, losing himself in Yuki's beautiful eyes. "You're the perfect partner. The only one who *understands* who I am. Together... together we can rule the galaxy, as husband and wife!"

"I'm sorry," Wardrobe apologized, tears in her eyes and hands on her nemesis' cashmere poncho. "I know we have

that raw sexual chemistry going on, but I'm already taken!"

"I'm a Mormon," Ryan reassured her softly, "I can make bigamy work."

She gently touched his helmet's left side, shaking her own head in denial. "No harems on my watch, silly."

Ryan's heart broke in his chest, as his mad hopes of a hero-supervillain romance were utterly dashed. She was too loyal, too pure, to embrace the dark side.

"But we can totally stay good archnemeses, even if I will probably get fired soon," Wardrobe reassured him with a low voice so the cameras wouldn't hear, before shouting, "I will never join you! Never!"

"So be it, hero!" Ryan deftly hit her in the chest and neck to activate her pressure points. Wardrobe collapsed in his arms like a sponge, the supervillain carefully laying her against the nearest wall.

By now, Len had managed to carve a circle in the blast door, though the enormous gate of metal refused to fall. "What was... what was I looking at?" she asked her best friend.

Ryan sobbed. "A tragedy."

Damn it, why was she already taken? There was no justice in this world!

Instead of answering, Shortie shook her head. Ryan had the feeling she was sulking for some reason. "Help me kick down the door."

Ryan did so, but neither armored warriors were strong enough to open the hole through the thick metal. The

president hesitated to use his chest blaster to get around the problem, only to hear the elevators open behind him. He half-expected a battalion of Dynamis men to try to ambush them.

Instead, Sarin and Mongrel moved into the hall. Hazmat Girl barely took a glance at the room before figuring out the situation, raising her hands at the metal door. "Move out."

Ryan and Len hastily obeyed, right before Sarin blasted a hole into the next room.

The group finally took their first step into Lab Sixty-Six, an immaculate, sterilized white room fifty meters in length and twenty in width. The sound of metallic clinks echoed around them, as automated medical drones took care of thrumming machines and terminals.

A claustrophobic, medical assembly line stretched as far as they could see, and continued into the next room. Colored Knockoff Elixir bottles came out of a metal hole right next to a door equipped with a bioscanner. Robotic arms stamped the bottles with Dynamis' logo and moved them into various crates ready for delivery.

Ryan glanced around looking for guards or defenders, but didn't find any. It appeared Dynamis only trusted machines inside this facility, perhaps due to the danger of Elixir contamination or theft.

"Where are the others?" Len asked Sarin, as the group moved into the laboratory.

"Frank is climbing up the other shaft," Hazmat Girl replied with a scoff. "He was too big to fit inside the elevator. The others are holding the line downstairs."

"So this is the place, huh?" Mongrel asked, as he examined the next room. "Where's the Genius in charge?"

"Probably beyond this door," Ryan said, as they walked along the assembly line to reach its end. Unfortunately, his keycard didn't work on the door's bioscanner. As Nora warned him one loop ago, the laboratory used its own secure computer system. "President calling to VP, please blow that door open. I can smell reptilian immigrants behind it."

"Rya—Mr. President!" Acid Rain called through Ryan's intercom, though he could barely hear her with the interference. "He's here, on the roof! He's fighting Mosquito!"

Ryan tensed up in alarm. "Whom? Hargraves?"

He didn't have to wonder for long. The entrance hall's ceiling collapsed, someone having smashed their way through the floors above like a drill into the ground. The impact had blown dust into the laboratory, with Sarin, Len, and Mongrel all forming a defensive perimeter around their president.

The Saturn armor let out an alarm sound, as it detected an abnormal amount of radiation flowing into the room.

"You're going all-in, huh?" A towering shadow emerged from the smoke, tossing away Mosquito's charbroiled corpse while acid raindrops slipped inside the building. "Well, I'm calling your bet, muties."

Alphonse 'Fallout' Manada stepped past the blast door and into the laboratory, his hands shining with deadly radiation.

"Time to die."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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88: Atom Smasher

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Goodbye, struggler.



Kentaro Miura (July 11, 1966 – May 6, 2021).

Atom Smasher wasn't one for words, so he went straight for the kill.

His glowing hands unleashed a stream of red particles at the presidential guard. Sarin reacted quickly enough to retaliate with a shockwave, the blasts colliding in the middle of the

room. The resulting explosion shattered all the Knockoff bottles on the production line.

Ryan froze time, Black and Violet Flux floating out of his armor, as he dragged his allies away from an Elixir shower. Even if one half of his team wore armor and the other regularly dosed on the juice, any drop seeping through a crack would ruin everything.

The courier always knew a fight with Fallout was a possibility, so he prepared accordingly. His and Len's suits had been reinforced against heat and radiation, enough that they could survive sustained exposure; the Saturn armor could probably survive a close encounter with Leo Hargraves. And as he guessed, Sarin's shockwaves could match the nuclear cyborg's weaker particle beams, probably since they both drew energy from the Red Dimension.

However, Fallout had shown in Malta that his power could rival an A-bomb. While he shouldn't go all-out in his main laboratory, Ryan had no idea how far his abilities and durability extended. Neither did he find blueprints of the cyborg's armor in Dynamis' database, nor a way to hack it.

But Ryan loved challenges, and he had a few tricks up his sleeve.

When time resumed, the production line was drenched in multicolored fluids. The robotic arms preparing the bottles had short-circuited, though the power armors in the room kept working.

"We should have killed you both years ago." Alphonse Manada aimed his right arm's energy minigun at Len and Ryan. "Completed the family set. I had the gut feeling you would prove troublesome."

"You already killed us once," Shortie replied, raising her water rifle. "This... this is payback."

Len and Sarin attacked Fallout before he could open fire, the former with a stream of pressurized water, the other with a shockwave. Alphonse raised his left hand and expanded a shield of crimson particles outward from it, protecting himself. He then opened fire with his minigun, unleashing a volley of plasma shots.

What the weapon lacked in accuracy, it more than made up in firepower. The projectiles tore through walls and machines like butter, forcing everyone to dodge. Mongrel and Shortie managed to duck out of the way, but Ryan had to freeze time to spare Sarin five holes in her suit. "You know, if I keep saving you, people will start talking," Ryan told his damsel in distress once time resumed.

"Don't focus on me, take down that jackass!" his VP snarled back. "I don't need help!"

Mongrel used an aerokinetic blast to propel himself towards the ceiling, and then threw a fireball past Fallout's particle shield from his vantage point. The flames heated up the metal armor, but failed to inflict any damage while Alphonse slowly stepped forward. The reinforced walls were starting to look like cheese.

"Minions, keep him busy," Ryan ordered his troops, while he dashed forward. Shockwaves, flames, and pressurized water forced Fallout to raise his shield, leaving his back exposed.

The courier stopped time and a purple phantom raced after him. Ryan crossed dozens of meters in a dash, dodging plasma bolts frozen in midair as he tried to figure out a plan. One of his devices could probably take down the nuclear

disaster, but the cyborg's power armor might have a countermeasure. The group needed to soften Fallout up first.

Ten seconds...

The courier bent a corner around the room, the ghost of the future past gaining ground on him. But it was nowhere close to catching up.

Fifteen seconds...

Ryan positioned himself behind Fallout, his feet anchored in the ground.

Twenty seconds...

The ghost almost reached Ryan before the courier unpause time. He activated his armor's chest blaster, unleashing a searing white burst of energy from it.

As Vulcan warned, the recoil almost threw Ryan on his back. The intense heat created a bubble of compressed air around the cannon that pushed him backward, but the armor's servos held. His cashmere poncho, however, turned to dust; another victim of this bloody, senseless war!

The blast hit Alphonse Manada in the back and propelled him forward like a cannonball, the impact tearing the minigun from his arm. Ryan's teammates dodged out of the way as he crashed into the reinforced door. Already weakened by the minigun fire, most of the wall collapsed and Fallout continued his flight into the next room.

Ryan let out a cough, his chest burning. It came from the heart, as they said.

"Nice shot," Sarin mused. "Is that what a drone strike looks like?"

"Sometimes, a leader must get his hands dirty," Ryan replied.

"He's not dead yet," Len warned as she stepped into the next room, right before letting out a horrified wail. The rest of the group quickly followed, and froze.

The next room contained an entire factory so large, the ceiling probably took space from the floor above. A maze of machinery and tangled pipes formed the next part of the assembly lines, bordered by a catwalk wide enough to let a battalion walk in formation; Ryan guessed that this allowed groups of soldiers to take positions in case of an emergency. Strange devices covered in bulbs and flashing lights thrummed as they vomited Knockoff Elixirs. The usual mad scientist lair, in short.

The sight that awaited them made even Ryan, who had grown jaded to everything, pause for a moment.

A dozen naked humans floated in glass containers above the production line, like lightbulbs atop metal altars. Tubes injected thick red blood into their back intravenously, and others pumped out Elixir-colored liquids into the machinery. Ryan's eyes stopped at the closest prisoner to the entrance, a muscled woman with black hair and white dragon scales growing on her neck.

Wyvern.

Ryan also noticed a carbon copy of Devilry, and a feathered man which he identified as Windsweep, the Tempest Knockoff's template. Others the courier didn't recognize, but

one pod contained a half-formed embryo of a panda-human hybrid.

Clones.

They were modified clones of the Knockoff's templates, transformed into living organ processors. Bloodstream's fluids passed into them, absorbing their genetic material before being processed into Knockoffs.

"Shit..." Sarin said, unable to take her eyes off the clones.

Mongrel had a similar reaction. "I've been drinking *people*?"

Len's hands trembled on her water rifle, her gaze following the blood. The pipes funneling it into the clones traveled through the walls, and towards another room behind a reinforced door.

The scaly Doctor Tyrano worked behind a large control panel near the cloning pods, his reptilian claws typing on a special keyboard adapted to his saurian biology. He briefly looked up his screen at the people invading his laboratory, but his reptilian expression was one of supreme disinterest.

"I'm *busy*," Dr. Tyrano said while returning to his computer. He even ignored Fallout, who had landed on the catwalk and quickly risen to his feet. "Take it outside and come back later. I'm on the verge of a breakthrough!"

"You cloned the Panda!" Ryan raised an accusing finger at the scientist. "You maniac!"

"Blame the kids' division!" he replied while continuing to type. "They're obsessed with furry mammals!"

"You... you twisted..." Len snarled at Alphonse Manada. Crimson particles flowed out of the cyborg's back, right where Ryan hit him before. "All of that... all of that pain, for a fistful of euros?"

"It's all for the dream." Alphonse shrugged off fireballs thrown by Mongrel, his metal shoulders opening to reveal rocket launchers. "All for the dream."

Fallout fired a dozen rockets, clearly no longer caring about collateral damage. Ryan attempted to stop time, but immediately canceled the effect when his past self appeared in very close proximity. The armor extended his time stop, but also his cooldown period.

The president activated the suit's laser weapons while shielding Len with his body, Sarin assisting him in blowing up the projectiles before they could reach them. While they avoided a direct hit, stray shrapnel ripped holes in Sarin's suit and Mongrel's chest.

Explosions shook the lab as Alphonse's projectiles hit the ceiling, the assembly line, and the cloning pods. One rocket incinerated the Panda's misshapen duplicate, while another damaged the pipes and caused blood to drip onto the catwalk. Though Len's armor was undamaged, she looked at the red fluid with fear and disgust.

"Stop, Mr. Vice-President!" Tyrano shouted at Alphonse, diving beneath his control panel to avoid a rocket. "You'll destroy the laboratory!"

"I'll stop when they're *dead!*" Atom Smasher snarled back and kept firing. The entire floor trembled as rockets hit the ceiling and blew holes in the catwalk. The wounded Mongrel had to dive to the side to avoid another projectile, while

Ryan took another to the chest; thankfully, the Saturn armor shrugged it off.

This made Ryan worry. The Architect designed Lab Sixty-Six to make sure the laboratory would survive even the building's collapse, but she didn't mention anything about internal structural damage.

When Fallout thankfully ran out of projectiles, he raised his shining hands in Len's direction to blast her.

Having reached his cooldown period's end, Ryan froze time and quickly punched Fallout in the glass dome protecting his head. Empowered by his armor's enhanced strength, the blow cracked the reinforced glass, making the Dynamis cyborg stumble back. His particle beams instead hit the ceiling, melting the steel.

"This glass dome isn't protecting *me* from *you*."

Red particles so similar to Ryan's own flew out of the crack in Fallout's helmet. The crimson, shining skull behind it seemed to scowl and breath nuclear fire. The air around him shimmered with heat.

"I am the hand that splits the atom, the light that slays life." His fists burnt with a crimson glow, a promise of death and cancer. "All that I touch withers, and *dies*."

"Didn't anyone tell you?" Ryan raised his fists, revealing the blades hidden in his forearms. "I'm immortal."

Alphonse attempted to grab the courier's head with his glowing hand, and he was surprisingly faster than he looked. Ryan deftly dodged and responded with a punch of his own, but to his surprise, Fallout managed to deflect the blow and counter with another.

"You know Krav Maga?" Ryan asked in disbelief, but the armored cyborg responded with a particle beam to the face. The courier lowered himself to dodge the attack. "Minion!"

"On it!" Powering through his injuries, Mongrel launched an aerokinetic blast of air at Fallout's left knee, making the heavy colossus stumble. Ryan exploited the opening to ram his fist and blade through the cyborg's helmet.

Though the glass dome shattered into tiny pieces, releasing red particles into the air, Ryan's retractable blade also shattered upon hitting Fallout's skull. Perhaps the courier's previous clash with Wardrobe had weakened it.

Fallout exploited Ryan's brief surprise to viciously headbutt him, his skull unleashing an energy pulse on impact. The courier's vision flashed red for a moment as the shock sent him flying backward, but the Saturn armor resisted.

Ryan gathered his thoughts as he lay on the floor, his vision blurring due to what felt like a concussion. Alphonse Manada loomed over him while what remained of his glass helmet melted. A crimson nuclear fire erupted from inside the cyborg's suit, making Fallout's skull look like the *Terminator* emerging from the flames.

His hand reached for Ryan's head, but a stream of pressurized water hit him from the side. The liquid heated up into steam at his contact, but offered the courier a brief respite.

"Riri, back off!" Len had moved behind Tyrano's control panel, while Mongrel flanked Fallout with air blasts. Sarin herself still struggled to cover the holes in her suit. Her gas leaked out, rusting the machinery and even the floor.

Ignoring the minions' attempts to distract him, Fallout raised his armored foot above Ryan's head, and attempted to smash it beneath his heel. Of course, Ryan had patented this authoritative move, and took outrage.

The courier froze time, violently kicked Alphonse in the chest to make him stumble, and rolled away to safety. Unfortunately, even the time-stop didn't shield the courier from Fallout's radioactive presence, as the constant warning messages on his armor's lenses attested. Just approaching that Chernobyl advertisement might kill a normal human in seconds, and a Genome in minutes. They needed to take him down now.

However, the courier noticed something interesting as he rose back to his feet. The Black Flux he produced devoured Fallout's crimson variant, like black holes eating light.

Questions for later.

Deciding to use his trump card, Ryan opened a small compartment in the armor's backpack, a black sphere no bigger than a tennis ball coming out. The courier tossed it at Fallout, the projectile hitting him when time resumed.

The black sphere expanded the moment it hit the titan's skull, transforming into biomechanical goo.

"What's this?" Fallout snarled angrily, as the substance spread on his skin and armor. Though Ryan worried otherwise, the cyborg's mechanical suit had no contingency to resist the hostile takeover. The goo repurposed its steel to make more of itself, restraining the Red Genome.

"Nanomachines, son!" Ryan gloated. Mechron had used them to extract material in radioactive, high-temperature areas, but the courier repurposed them as a capture device.

After all, as a president, he had to fight against nuclear proliferation.

Within seconds, Fallout found himself encased in a black goo coffin; unable to move, unable to fire a beam. Dr. Tyrano dared to peek over his computer while Ryan's group relaxed a little. Perhaps the device would prove just as effective against Augustus.

Then the Saturn armor sent an alarm message, as it noticed an abnormal heat increase.

"Override safeties," Fallout snarled, his body producing more and more light. Though the goo attempted to fully cover him, light rays came out of small cracks, the air growing oppressive. "Override!"

Ryan's suit sent alarm messages, as the heat around Fallout increased. "No, no!" he panicked, the nanomachines corroded by the sheer amount of Red Flux coming from the trapped Genome. "You will blow up the place if you continue!"

"But you will be **dead!**" Fallout answered angrily.

"Cool him off!" Ryan ordered his troops. "Cool him off!"

Len bathed Fallout with water, and Mongrel with pressurized air, but neither helped much. The lab's fire sprinklers activated, but the liquid turned to steam before it even reached the cyborg.

Half a dozen cracks rapidly formed in the nanomachine coffin, particle beams leaking out. One hit Ryan in the chest with such intensity he could feel the heat through the armor, and another...

Another split Mongrel clean in half at what seemed like lightspeed.

Realizing the danger, Ryan froze time. He quickly dashed towards the agonizing Sarin, grabbed her by the parts of her suit without holes, and dived behind the assembly line for cover.

The nanomachines gave out when time resumed, melting into a charbroiled shell. More stray particle beams came out of Fallout's body, shattering the prison from within, cutting lines in the ceiling and the catwalk. Metal plates fell from above, the whole place collapsing. "Sir, calm down!" Ryan heard Dr. Tyrano shouting from his hiding spot. "You'll kill us all!"

Perhaps the risk of harming his lead scientist calmed Fallout, for he stopped sending particle beams in all directions. Ryan peeked at the maddened Genome from his hiding spot.

Alphonse Manada had shed the nanomachines, his armor, and his humanity. He had turned into a blackened skeleton surrounded by incandescent flames and Red Flux particles. He had become a raging nuclear hazard, the ground melting beneath his feet.

"Come out, Quicksave!" Fallout's voice now boomed like the heart of a burning star, as he looked for the president.
"Come out and fight!"

He was like Hargraves, and just as durable.

The realization sent a shiver down Ryan's spine, as he realized he had drastically underestimated Dynamis' ace-in-the-hole; Fallout could have vaporized the group alongside the entire building, if he didn't risk destroying his own HQ.

The courier should have asked Mechron's AIs to develop a superweapon to take that living A-bomb down.

"Anything else that can kill him?" Sarin whispered at Ryan's side, leaking out so much that her suit had flattened at the fingers. The courier had to stay a few meters away to prevent her from corroding his armor.

"None that won't risk killing everyone here," Ryan admitted, only to hear footsteps echo from the previous room.
Unless...

"Mr. President?"

Who needed a secret weapon, when they had a secret agent?

Frank had managed to climb up the elevator shaft and walked into the laboratory, his body absorbing machinery pieces on contact. The giant glanced at Alphonse Manada's otherworldly redness, and immediately put the two and two together.

"A Soviet Mexican!" Frank let out a roar of pure patriotism. "I knew it was all connected!"

He had uncovered the true conspiracy behind everything.

Alphonse blasted Frank with streams of red particles, melting the metallic giant's outer layers. The nuclear Genome didn't even need to use his hands anymore; his chest, his mouth, his entire body emitted energy in any direction he wished.

Yet as a true American badass, Frank powered through the radiation and tackled Alphonse like a football player. Both colossi crashed into the wreckage of the Wyvern clone's

pod, trading blows powerful enough to shake the room. For a moment, Ryan hoped that his bodyguard might turn the tide.

But for all his might, Frank's metal hands softened whenever they hit Fallout. The heat was too intense, and the Red Genome's unique biology granted him heightened resilience. Much like Mr. Sunshine, Alphonse Manada had become something more than human; a living nuclear core.

And the factory's ceiling kept raining metal panels.

"Stand still!" Ryan told Sarin, as he gestured at Len from across the room to stay hidden. "We've got to run before the ceiling collapse on ou—"

"Don't waste time with us," Hazmat Girl replied with a grunt. Frank let out a pained growl, as Fallout grabbed his metal head and started to melt it. "You go. You and your girlfriend."

"What?"

"The cure!" Sarin shouted from behind the assembly line and blasted Fallout off Frank with a shockwave. The radioactive Genome bled light and the sustained blast made him stumble, but it didn't throw him off balance. "You need the data inside this place? Then take it while we keep him busy!"

"That's suicide!" Ryan protested, assisting her by firing his chest laser at Fallout. The Red Genome formed a shield of crimson particles around himself, while Frank regained his footing. "You'll get buried alive, if he doesn't kill you first!"

"Now that Mongrel is dead..." Hazmat Girl briefly glanced at her ally's corpse, and the possibilities his Elixir represented.

"Now that he's gone, none of this matters anymore. If that cancer advertisement kills you... if he kills you all of this was for nothing."

She had accepted this loop was a lost cause.

"Your life matters!" Ryan protested, but almost stumbled as the ground trembled. The constant explosions had fragilized the factory's foundations. "Sarin, don't—"

"That's not my name, jackass!" she snarled. "Why won't you leave?"

"Because I'm not Adam!" Though the Meta were assholes... though he made use of them for his own objectives, Ryan couldn't let them sacrifice themselves for him. "I promised I would help, and I still can!"

As long as they lived, they could find a way. Whether in Antarctica or somewhere else.

Sarin looked at Ryan in surprise, unable to say a word for a few seconds. But in the end, she had made her decision.
"Then remember your vow next time around."

Ryan's heart skipped a beat, his fists clenching. "What's your name?" he asked. "Your real name?"

She looked at Fallout. "Bianca."

She dashed at him like a suicide bomber, while Ryan looked away as another friend went on to die for him.

No matter how many loops, that part never got any easier.

"Next time, I'll save you," he swore to himself, before freezing time. Regrouping with Len, the courier immediately

grabbed Dr. Tyrano and slammed him against his control panel when time resumed. The dinosaur looked at him in alarm, his breath short from the heat. “Open the door to the next room. Open it now.”

“Why wou—” Dr. Tyrano didn’t protest long, as Len put her water rifle against his chin. “Uh, you make a convincing argument.”

Ryan froze time again, carrying both Len and Tyrano across the room. He sent a glance at his allies, his heart freezing in his chest. Alphonse punched a hole inside a half-melted Frank’s chest, and a cloud of gas escaped from an empty hazmat suit. The ceiling below the shining Fallout had started to rust.

“Why?” Len asked when time resumed, the trio had reached the blast door to the next room. Her helmet turned to glance at the damaged pipes, and the blood flowing out of them. “Why did you turn my father... why did you make all these horrors?”

“What, the Knockoffs? This is but the first step of my plan!” Dr. Tyranno admitted while putting his hand on the door’s bioscanner, unlocking it. “I am refining the substance so that it can not only change the host’s species, but its entire biological class! From mammal, to reptile!”

Ryan instantly put the two and two together. “You can’t possibly mean—”

“Yes!” The Genius turned to look at them with maddened glee, as the door opened. “Soon, I will create a Knockoff Elixir that can permanently turn any human, INTO A DINOSAUR!”

Ryan looked at the deluded, scaled furry.

In hindsight, he should have expected such a motive.

"Consensually," Dr. Tyrano added, almost as an afterthought. "Becoming a superior reptile should be a fundamental mammalian right."

The courier wanted to hate him, but he loved dinosaurs too.

A loud crack echoed across the facility, as the ceiling finally collapsed. Ryan barely had the time to force Len and Tyrano inside a steel corridor, before tons of steel and concrete collapsed inside the Knockoff factory. Alphonse, Frank, and Sarin vanished from the courier's sight as they were buried alive. Dust and smoke flowed inside the corridor, while debris closed the exit.

Ryan and Len exchanged a silent glance, none of them uttering a word.

The others had earned their minute of silence.

Ryan, Len, and Scalie reached the heart of the facility after a short walk, a large, dimly lit atrium of thick steel and concrete. An enormous mechanical aquarium stood at its center, linked to complex medical devices, pipes, tubes, and a computer system.

As for the fish swimming inside...

It was a true shoggoth, an eldritch blob more deformed than Darkling had ever been. A dark red, protoplasmic slime as large as a house; a shapeless, twisted amoeba with temporary eyes forming on its putrid surface. If that thing had once been human, one couldn't tell so at first glance.

And yet...

And yet in spite of everything, Ryan recognized *him*.

It was *him*, in all his bloody, mutated glory. His long-dead nightmare had risen from the ashes. Len dropped her water rifle at the floor, rushing to touch the glass with her hand. The blob's eyes looked at his daughter, both reunited at last.

In the end, blood called to blood.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

I would like to take a short moment to pay respect to Kentaro Miura, the author of *Berserk*.

Kentaro Miura has recently passed away after a long struggle with heart problems, with his death having been announced on Thursday. Miura's work has had a tremendous impact on modern fantasy works, including inspiring things like *Dark Souls*, *Attack on Titan*... and some parts of my own stories too (especially *Never Die Twice*). I have tremendous respect for the author, and *Berserk* will remain one of my favorite works of fiction alongside the likes of *Death Note* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*. I heavily recommend everyone to check it out.

Rest in peace, struggler.

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Wierczyński, Cal Fiala, Ryan Brudnicki, King Lokajad, Eric Jaynes, Mortal Complex, Username, Jonathan Hemlin, Reid, Sasa Mrdalj-Radulovic, Jarrod Young, Sir Sloth, T0tal_cha0s, John McCarter, Lee Moffat, GuGuy, Anton Lupalov, Racyn, Nikon, Tem M, Milo Goodell, glare31337, Ken Williams, Won Jun Chun, Josh Enterman, Ronan, Magical_Duck, mior mk, Sam Vinh, Sree Kommalapati, Pride, BananaInMyPants, Виктор Фон Стыценкофф, Andrew Banal, TacoWasTaken, Kevin Green, Lu, jimi robert-jones, Andreas Finn, Apostolos Piperis, Timothy Felker, v, William Fullerton, Won Jun Choi, Torphin, Jam, Jimbo, S T, JustAUser, Roka, Dale Tucker, Denis Gelrud, Zmelk, S.R. Williams, KilledbyBooks, Alex Kentwell, Julius Dubasas, sri kalyan mulukutla, Kaleb Uden, Travs Vasquez, Fatih Altunbasak, Alex Anderson, Deltoren, gamerthemage, Relai, kNevik, mikespelun, abele a, Toucan, PJ Thum, DemonKingBaka, Caucasian Malaysian, Willshaper, Johannes karlsson, Anthony L, Joshua Donahue, Blaek East, Aleksander Żołdkiewicz, Laurence Caraccio, Jacob Ellis, Blaek East, Deepsealife, Kristian Huse, Bob Mijano, Saaski, David Hansson, mikeju, Sam Miller, Joe Giannuzzi, Phantom, lockx, Ben Lenk-Ostendorf, Thomas Have, Matt Hauer, Joe, Dargon, David Burchfield, Julien Fellegara, thkiw, redslash5, FiveHands, B. Gazzola, Abhichon chandrasen, Nock, Nikhil B, Connor Alexander, NightWhisper, Samuel Smith, Aldhere, Jacob, Sam McNamara, Jarrod Broome, Rolf Bork, Callum Brocklehurst, Samuel Borges, Joe, Dardy Noongar, Joe Giannuzzi, Jonathan Kutz, Stuart Dye, DerWipe, Grosbilljunior, martin, GenericKane, Sharath, Augustus, Joseph, Abhichon chandrasen, MaikD, Matt Labrum, Robert, s476, Eneri, TKLD, Daniel Hughesdon, Jordan, Vega, K-Thomas, Eric Vistnes, Jose, Davvy chapie, Joey Nguyen, Skovboa,

maniac_ian, Sebin Paul, Liz Griggs, BluEarth, MaliMi, Marcus Österberg, Orm, DaQualyn Singleton, Rheklr, evilperson41, Jake V, Lloyd kostuik, Corwin Brewer, Loïc Fernandes, Eric jian, Gianni Ghiribelli, John Smith, Willshaper, Tibstrike, Ploxzer, Alexander Dupree, Josh Delgado42, Domenic Stritzl, Not N. Octopus, Hayden Butz, Hazza Vanderbyl, Hoobie Gomez, charlyfu, Cliint, Paul Rettig, Luke, Jacob Goodwin, Kristian Oinonen, Bennet Larson, Mikołaj Wiszniewski, Bobby Jones, Phillip Ingram, Ariel Reyz, altus, lione pouet, Nicolas Marty, Bobo Bo, ScottDR, Kyle Wong, Henry Chow, Thundabear95, Aqua, eva0ne, Philip Lee, Ivan Delgado, Geffery Dopp, Christian Alex, Hauke, Kaleb Uden, Dax, GraySquirrelEatToast, jacob johannes, House of Pantheon, FiveHands, Melanie, Caldrick, T3ctonic, Kezrin, Michael Frankford, Brody Brown, Actaeix, Desert Wreck, dave hutch, Zachary Venne, AlthePal, MaliMi, Arthur3s, Brent, Slimereaper, Sub Electricall, Warren Zielke, The Knight Commissar, Dorian Lee, Svend, Ryan Size, BB King, Markus, Borisalv, HollowIce, Long Le, Blah64, Hamis, Tip Top, Mojanks, Adrian Engel, Brenden, Josh Huynh, Psy, Mohammed Hajjaj, Massgamer, afgasd adgasd, Harrison Russel, Yeno Memevig, Finn Ryan, Nicholas Jensen, T T, Manu, Deinos, maltmana, Alyaseen, Dylan, Svarog, Nick Smith, Conner M Tatum, ParoxysmDK, James Deziel, Amaury, michele calderoni, Matt, Kirvin, Jordan Litwin, Magnus Steffen Nørregaard, K-Thomas, Justin Jones, Colo T, Marcus Pehan, Cole Rosenhein, Enzo Morvan, Art238, Bon Bon, Richard Barboza, Alexander, Charlie Taylor, LS, bob Johnson, Doom, Jeff Gault, Tristan Praedo, George Ive, John, Landon Pearce, shawn, I don't want to say this but, Daniel Hernandez, John Bush, war doggle, WowIExist, Edwin Jose, Andrew Wilson, Pooya Daravi, Funeral, Steven

Lindsay, Thaco4, Tyler Chesney, NLRUmbra, Kyle J Smith, Rommelfanger Bob, Davvy chappie, Branden Bryan, Alex Nimmer, Jordan McDonald, Matthew Powell, JJ B, Andrew Odom, Danielle Warvel, Colin, Ivan Kalinovic, AdAstridPerAspera, Reviv3pls, Dark Chaos, Saysca, Folk Chanin, Jdosnoen, Konrad2, Bunny Waffles, John Johnson, Colby, Pumpkin Mouse, Helsgarde, Harry Williams, Alex Canavan, Hobold the kobold, AQ, Adam Johnson, Daniel Aguirre, Zack Hoeken, Daniel Mackie, Chip Twothousandone, KatarnK, NOTOBOK, Razvan, Calvin, John, Jordan Chan, Heikki Aitakangas, OccultOwlbear, TheBreaker, Justi martinez, Thomas Rossiter, Jonathan Caselli, John, Richard Lee, Njordt, Joshua Thompson, PJ LeBlanc, Demetre Zurebiani, Iron_Giant, Guilherme Silva, Slade Schlaudecker, The Arcane Emperor, Erik Sjöström, Vlad the mad lad, Michael Forrester, BadSnake971, ZRhulad, Ryan, Cole Mathews, Scott Bosse, Timo Reti, Dietz, Thomas Gamble, Nonnuvya Bizniz, Sean Basa, Tagmin, Julien Castellijos, Kasan, Zach Jamison, Zack, Ethan Bell, William Vickers, Njordt, Ilvesmäki, Alexander, Devarya Raman, Marcus Seigman, James Jackson, Preston M, Subliminary, TDMC, Jordan, Kite 7, Alfredo Spuri, Russel Todd, Demetre Zurebiani, Zach, Tate Browder, Brandon Stiles, Minow, Joachim Janssen, Michael S., edmuck, Jade Green, Victor Newman, Malphas, Kyle Reid, aezeirth ferova, Hulg Gohen, matticide FOWD, Jackietron201, Dark Chaos, Michael Yamashita, Hntpo, Andraste Chevalier, Julien Castillejos, William Johnson, John Evans, Kyoma, Liark Lane, Joey Nguyen, mcanamara ?, HarbingTarbl, Spartanstoryteller, Thordur hrafn, David Ge, IronJim, Demetre Zurebiani, hippityhoppity, Dertyer, Guy Incognito, Paul Hughes, TaoBio, Soufyan Zerrad, mars kiyu, Iudi, Meredith Leu, Gaëtan Hillion, Bernice0311,

Galandry, Eirik, Andrey Kutsey, Scipio, Andrew Rutherford Butler, Aeon, brett thomas, Yiğit Köymen, Thiago Ruiz, Imran, Dark Chaos, Tijay Arnie, Comedy Knight, Qwer, Gerrant, Ciara Banks, William Swearingin, Anomily, William Brayer, Armo, Aehs, sedael, Darien Benner, Ligma, Michael Buchler, Daniel Spencer Vargas, Gabriel Aptekar, BedlamBlade, Walter, Joko, Goggy123, Erostan, Clemens Hochstädter, Noah Rimmer Skov, Jacob Barger, Sam Paley, Ariel reyz, Juppaware, House of Pantheon, Aymeric Penven, Harold Sandahl IV, Francis Chartier, Kody Ihnat, Rein Warner, mikael persson, morganmoll, Reviv3pls, Warper 6, Andrew Holland, Jdosnoen, Xerias, manspider0002, Zachary D Nickell, Maalsc, TTG, Oliverthms, Richard Wall, Siphor, Dark Chaos, Jeremy Humphrey, Nikhil Majumdar, Leaored, Cipkenop, Chistopher Waits, Jefferymoonworm, Robert Blank, Ervin Ughy, Phoebe Vale, Shaoraka, Zachary Smith, PonyReader, agoniste, Max Hu, Brycen Legler, KeyMan BrB, Jonathan Spaulding, Ausner Gentil, Kazzy, Erriballon, Larry Smith, Sanjay, Oliver Gray, Adrian Barter, Alex Rhone, Karthic, Tailor Tylbury, Bob le Poisson Rouge, Colin Ford, Ashley Cameron, Bogdanov Dmitriy, Ivan Elyshev, Anthony, Particlepigeon, Ryan Trueman, Kalle, Roden, Andrew Stinson, Thomas Tessier, M Clason, Alex Lindsay, Sadinar, Daniel Everest, Exiled Knight, LinenZero, Tomas Puskas, Kyle Reese, RandomGift, Corgi McStumperson, Peter Christensen-Calvin, James Teeple, Dom Ceremonia, Mikkel Kolding Christensen, Sands, BlackFire13th, Kevin Ramos, Charles handgis, damien, Jeb, Jeb, Sebin Paul, Andrew Kahn, 白酒鬼, Trevor Sales, Calvin Miner, Rory, PbookR, Glader, John Carroll, Quentin, Andrew Parsadayan, Igor Mikulik, RepossessedSoul, James Walsh, Athra, Chris M, Jim of

**Trades, Koen Hertenberg, Alex Pruitt, Saul Kurzman,
Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc Claude Louis
Durand, Drekin.**

89: Past Fragment: Bloodstream's Last Stand

- 2016, Italy.

“Our target,” Leonard Hargraves faced his team in his human form, “is Freddie Sabino, alias Bloodstream.”

Pictures of the man that the Psycho used to be appeared on the screen, right next to the bloody abomination he had turned into. Short black hair, a tired face aged by stress, brown eyes... an unremarkable man for a terrible destiny.

“Born 1980 in Otranto, Italy, to a fisherman and a housewife, Freddie Sabino married young, dropped out of college when his girlfriend expected a child, and then joined the Otranto Polizia Municipale; the only job he ever had. His wife abandoned him for another man before Last Easter, leaving him to raise two young children alone. A daughter, Len—perhaps a shorthand for Lenora—and a son, Cesare.”

In short, there was nothing special about the man. If the apocalypse hadn’t happened, Freddie Sabino might have lived a normal life. Put money on the side, watched his kids go to college, perhaps marry again.

“Though the Alchemist sent Wonderboxes to families or isolated individuals, a few Elixirs ended up in the hands of law enforcement on Last Easter’s eve; usually because they were mistaken for drug batches or letter bombs. When the

apocalypse began and Genomes rampaged in Otranto, Freddie Sabino stole two Elixirs from his police station and fled the city.”

They would never know to whom these Elixirs had been sent, before the police confiscated them. Perhaps if they had reached their intended owners, a great many tragedies could have been averted.

“We know Sabino was active as a Psycho as early as 2009.” Leo showed his team a phone picture of a bloody monster boarding a rusted car, alongside two children no older than twelve. “Reports indicated he has traveled with his children since the late 2000s, though his son was only confirmed as alive in 2012.”

Someone among the audience raised a gloved hand. Leo responded with a nod. “Yes?”

“Do the children have powers too?” Mr. Wave asked. The oddest member of the group, he was a creature of living wavelengths, and rarely took things seriously. “Mr. Wave is not going all out on kids, even if they’re Genomes.”

“The kids are powerless,” said Mathias Martel. The sixteen-year-old teen had insisted on joining the Carnival after his mother’s dementia, determined to complete her work. He had proved invaluable as an information gatherer, though not as much as Pythia.

Ace nodded with a dark look on her face. “He would have killed them if they were Genomes.”

“Nothing indicates that they are complicit in their father’s crimes,” Leo continued. “According to Pythia’s psyche report, Bloodstream remains violently protective of his children even in his current state. However, he also keeps

them dependent on him through social isolation, gaslighting, and physical abuse.”

Leo had seen many similar cases in London; far too many. These fathers convinced their children the world was out to get them, and that they could only rely on their kin.

“We must ensure the children’s safety, especially that of Len Sabino, but I will come back to them in a few moments.” Leo continued his exposé on their target’s capabilities.

“Bloodstream is a Green/Blue type. His Green power grants him complete control over his blood. He can reshape it into weapons, create tentacles, restructure his body. His Blue power turns him into pure information. It might have allowed him to enter computer systems, had he remained a pure Blue.”

It would have made him easier to kill.

“But as it is often the case with Psychos, his two powers mutated to form a unique synergy. Bloodstream became his blood, literally. Each of his blood cells hosts his consciousness, allowing him to reform as long as one remains. Nothing short of disintegration will slay him.”

“We need your flames,” the Cossack guessed.

Leonard nodded. “Which leads us to his ghastliest ability; the reason why he has remained undefeated for so long and accumulated a four-digit body count. If Bloodstream’s blood cells enter another human’s circulatory system, then he can take it over. Like a virus, he will overwrite foreign cells’ information with his own. Your DNA, your mind, your memories... If Bloodstream touches you, you are worse than dead.”

Leonard marked a short pause for emphasis.

“You are him.”

“What do you think?” Shortie asked, as she wiped sweat off her forehead. Her clothes had turned black and dirty, but she looked at her work with pride.

Standing on the boathouse’s pier at her side, Ryan didn’t share her enthusiasm. “That it will be a miracle if we reach Spain, let alone the USA.”

The boathouse smelled of rust and decaying paint, its ceiling threatening to fall apart any moment. The ten meter-long vessel floated in a water pond with direct access to the Tyrrhenian Sea, a pineapple-shaped, clunky mass of metal. The machine’s shape and rusty brown color scheme reminded Ryan of the *Ictíneo II*, one of the world’s earliest submarines.

It didn’t inspire confidence.

Len pinched him in the arm in response. “The *Laika* will work fine,” she said. “We’ll reach America in twelve days according to the autopilot.”

Ryan squinted at her with skepticism. “The *Laika*?”

“Like the dog the Russians sent to space.”

And they wanted to go to the USA? She would never fit in. “You do know she died midway through the mission, right? You’ve condemned us all!”

Len tried to pinch him in the arm again, but Ryan saw it coming. He dodged her vicious attack, and responded by grabbing her by the waist and treacherously kissing her on

the neck. Her skin was soft to the touch, and she let out a cute gasp of surprise.

"Riri, not here," she whispered in protest, putting her hands on his own.

"Just a kiss," Ryan asked, begged, his lips moving to her cheeks. "Come on, we deserve it. We've been working on this thing nonstop for weeks."

"Riri, you're insane..." Len whispered, but she didn't fight him back either. Eventually, she gave in. "Okay, but five minutes tops."

They made out for fifteen, her hand in his hair, his own on her back. Len tasted of oil and saltwater, but Ryan didn't care. He wouldn't have stopped for anything in the world. But like all good things, it was over too soon.

"That was foolish," Len said while breaking the embrace, though her blushing cheeks disagreed.

If she had let him, Ryan wouldn't have stopped at mere kisses.

Their first night together had been a logistical nightmare. First, they had to find pre-war pills which hadn't expired, and unused condoms. Then they had to wait for her father to wander away, so he wouldn't catch them in the act. When the right moment came, Ryan and Len realized they had no idea how to proceed. Nobody taught them the finer details, so their kisses and touches had been horribly clumsy.

But they figured it out. For a moment, Ryan and Len had been alone in the world. Two halves made one.

Ryan wouldn't have stopped at one night, but her father never let them out of sight for long anymore. Not since the Carnival started hunting his clones. The two teens had to settle on furtive kisses and caresses, always fearing discovery.

The situation made Ryan die a little inside each day. Len's father was always there. Always between them. Always ruining their chance at happiness. Always causing them trouble.

And now, that insane maniac had decided the 'family' would leave Europe altogether and migrate to America. What logical process Bloodstream went through to reach this idea, Ryan would never understand. But he didn't leave his charges any choice.

Porto Venere had been a small coastal town before the apocalypse, a few colored houses built next to long piers. The locals had abandoned the place long before their group moved in. It was isolated enough that nobody would locate their hideout, but close enough to Genoa for supply runs.

Though Ryan himself was the only one who left the house nowadays. Shortie spent her time working on her submarine, while her father hid in their temporary home. The Carnival fell on them whenever Bloodstream went out in public, but Ryan could slip out unnoticed, if he took precautions.

"Can you bring back oranges and citruses, if you find any?" Len asked Ryan, as he prepared to leave the boathouse through a small door. "We risk scurvy with our current reserves."

"I'll do what I can," he said, before freezing at his hand reached the door lock. "Hey, Shortie..."

“Mmm...”

“You said everything on the sub is automated? No manual controls?”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh. “I can do a lot with my power, but scavenged boats aren’t the best source of materials available. I had to sacrifice some features to make the whole thing work.”

“What if we have a problem on the way?”

“Well, the sub will automatically redirect to the nearest shore. Hopefully, Dad will protect us in the meantime.”

Ryan looked over his shoulders, their eyes meeting. “It’s your dad I worry about.”

Len bit her lower lips, and crossed her arms. “Riri, I... my position hasn’t changed.”

Ryan had tried to convince her to run away with him a dozen times already. To leave her father stranded on the shore while they fled across the sea. Bloodstream might have an uncanny ability to locate his daughter whenever she wandered off, but he couldn’t swim across the Atlantic either.

But Shortie wouldn’t listen. Ryan could argue and scream all he wanted, yet she remained stubborn as a mule. “They’ll keep coming after him,” he warned her. “As long as he lives, they will never let us go.”

“They won’t pursue us across the sea,” she replied stubbornly.

"I heard their leader, the Living Sun, can fly at supersonic speeds and even in space," Ryan countered. "It will take us days to cross the ocean, and hours for him."

"But they didn't find us yet." They had hidden well, true.
"They can't find us, Riri."

She meant it as a statement, but it sounded like a fervent prayer instead.

Truthfully, Ryan wondered if it would be a bad thing if the Carnival cornered their 'guardian' and slew him for good. However, he was worried they wouldn't stop at Bloodstream alone, since people had seen the family travel together. Ryan and Len might be flagged as the Psycho's accomplices, and face the same punishment.

And yet, he couldn't help but dream of a sun falling down on Bloodstream at night.

Ryan opened the door with a sigh, and moved through the rest of the building. He guessed it had been a boat club once, where rich people could store their ships, watch soccer on TV, and relax in restaurants.

"Cesare!"

His shrilling voice chilled Ryan to the bone, making the boy freeze in place.

The young teen followed the voice to the house's dining room. Bloodstream slouched on a tattered sofa, right in front of the TV. This was the last clone, as far as Ryan could tell. The Carnival had hunted them so relentlessly, that the group had to flee civilization altogether.

"Come here," the Psycho said, gesturing at a spot to his left. Ryan reluctantly obeyed, his kind and well-adjusted stepfather pointing at the TV. "It's *Power Rangers*. You remember *Power Rangers*?"

The TV's screen had long turned into shattered glass, but Ryan indulged the delusional Psycho. "I remember, Dad."

"You were so obsessed with this series, that you always pestered me to buy you toys," Bloodstream said, shaking his head. "I... I wish I had the money to back then. I really wanted to make you happy, Cesare."

"It's okay, Dad," Ryan lied, going through the motions.

"No, it's not okay," he said, moving his head closer to his captive's ear. "Your sister is sick, Cesare. She's very sick."

A shiver went down Ryan's spine. "Len looks healthy to me," he protested.

But the Psycho didn't listen. "She's sick, Cesare. All of us who took this poison, we're all sick. The disease is in us. It drove the whole world mad. I think they put demons in these bottles. I know, because I dream of Hell."

"You... you dream of Hell?"

"A Green Hell. I wander its wriggling womb at night. The floor pulsates like your heart, the walls have mouths and eyes. And the air... I feel a thousand microscopic flies move into my lungs as I breathe. Even the water looks back and speaks to me. Hell is alive, Cesare. It's an infestation. Satan distributed these bottles to poison the whole human race with his brood."

Ryan said nothing, knowing better than to talk back to Bloodstream while he was raving nonsense.

"You know what cancer is, Cesare? Your grandma died from it. It's insidious, cancer. It grows inside of you, it intertwines with your organs like a tree's roots in fertile soil. You have to be careful about removing it, or you destroy the whole garden." Bloodstream patted his adoptive son's shoulder, as if congratulating him for winning a soccer game. "I'll find a way to operate on your sister one day. Make her healthy again. I'll figure something out, don't worry."

Ryan remained still, clenching his fists. As he knew... it was only a matter of time before he looked at his own daughter for sustenance. The Psycho hadn't fed in weeks, and his lucidity kept degrading.

"If you and your sister die, I don't... I don't know what I will do. I love you. I... love you both so much."

Bloodstream started sobbing, holding his head in his hands. Ryan didn't know how to react, so he said nothing.

"I'm sorry, Cesare," Bloodstream said, the fluid making up his body shifting like a raging sea. "I'm sorry... I couldn't... I just wanted to protect you both, and I... I ruined it all. Now Len is sick, and... and I'm sick too. I'm sick, Cesare."

"It's..." Ryan looked at this deluded, sobbing monster. He wanted to hate him, to strike him in return for the years of fear and abuse, but... but in that moment, he didn't fear Bloodstream anymore.

He pitied the man inside.

"You're all I've left," he whimpered. "Your mother is gone. Our house is gone. I just... I don't know what to do... that

place, it's calling me. One day... one day I won't come back, and... your sister..."

"I..." Ryan winced in a mix of pity and disgust, a warm feeling filling his innards. He carefully raised a hand, putting it on the bloody monster's shoulder. He was warm and slippery to the touch. "It's okay. I'll protect Len, I swear."

The physical contact seemed to soothe Freddie Sabino, his outer layers becoming as peaceful as a Japanese pond. "I'm sure your mom is waiting for us on the other side of the ocean," he said, with a shaking, hopeful voice. "She... she always wanted to go to L.A. She's waiting for us there, you'll see. We'll start over. Make everything right."

"Yeah," Ryan lied. He felt like reassuring a child with cancer, telling him he would go to Heaven. "It will be alright, Dad."

And for a brief moment, he believed it. Ryan lied to himself so well, that for a second, he thought Bloodstream could improve. That the man inside could reassert control; that Ryan could call himself Ryan, not Cesare; that he could marry Len, build a house near the sea, and raise children in peace. A simple dream, for a simple person.

The dream quickly turned into a nightmare.

Bloodstream looked at the broken TV, as if suddenly inspired. "If you die," he said, his voice no longer shaking. "If you and your sister die... I'll kill everyone."

Bloodstream said that so softly, Ryan found it almost soothing.

And then the young teen understood the words, and they chilled him to the bone.

"I'll kill everyone, and then I'll kill myself," Bloodstream continued, lost in his delirium. "A world where children can die... it's just not worth existing. We'll all be together on the other side. It can't be hell if we're all together, right?"

Bloodstream didn't say a word after that confession. He spent his time on the sofa, looking at the shattered screen with a frightening intensity. A psychotic shooter mentally preparing himself for the crime.

And Ryan went right back to hating him.

He was angry at himself too, for pitying that monster even for a second. For thinking that things could turn around, making him forget all the horrors Bloodstream inflicted on his family and countless others. If there had been a man inside that bloody head of his, the monster had devoured him years ago.

Ryan hesitated for ten minutes to leave the house, worrying that he might return to find Len dead at her father's hands. He always felt this way whenever he left these two alone. One day it would happen.

The fresh air outside didn't bring him any comfort, as he walked towards his bike with a bag on his back. A thought gnawed the teen's mind like a worm in an apple.

Len would never make it to America alive.

Ryan could feel it in his bones. The proximity, the isolation... her father would lose control. He would weep and regret, but he would do the terrible deed. If not during the trip itself, then on arrival.

He was a ticking time-bomb, and one day he would go off.

Bloodstream had to *die*. For Len's good, and everyone else's.

Ryan opened his bag, and examined the Violet Elixir he always kept inside. Thankfully, Bloodstream only detected Elixirs inside Genomes' blood; but that meant he would know the second his adoptive son used the potion on himself.

The liquid swirled inside the syringe as if alive, a promise of power and freedom. Perhaps it could give Ryan a power stronger than Bloodstream's? Unlikely, but... what else could he do?

A second sun flew across the skies, answering his prayers.

The Carnival's screen shifted to a graphic representation of the possession process. A drop of blood infected an adult man, spreading through his veins like an infection, devouring the organs from within.

The skin soon ruptured to let the lifeblood out, and Bloodstream was born again.

"He will infect your blood like a virus and restructure your body into a clone of himself. In fact, we believe he did it so often that his current body isn't the original one." A tense silence followed Leo's explanations, as his team digested the information. "All his copies share his powers and form a loose hive mind, like a larger body's cells."

"So if Mr. Wave kills half of them at once, the other half will fear him?" The boastful Genome slouched on his chair. "This is Mechron all over again."

"Not quite, but close," Leo confirmed. "To get rid of him, we must destroy all his copies and leave nothing behind. Not even a droplet. Each time we ambush a clone, I will incinerate it and Stitch will sterilize the area afterward. Fortunately, Bloodstream is a lone wolf Psycho. Unlike people like Adam the Ogre, he lacks a support network."

"He is a pack of his own," the Cossack said.

"Yes, and his clones never moved more than one mile from each other, perhaps to maintain their hive mind. If we isolate Bloodstream's doubles from bystanders, we can eliminate them one by one. Like a scalpel cutting out a tumor before it can proliferate."

"Do we know where they are?" Ace asked. "I didn't find any intel in Pythia's data."

Mathias nodded, having successfully followed their trail. "The family travels across Italy in an irregular pattern and never stays in the same place for long, but they were last sighted near the Alps."

"Once we engage, we must pursue Bloodstream relentlessly and keep him away from populated areas," Leonard said.

"Does his power have any limit?" Ace turned to face Stitch. "Did you finish examining the biological samples we could find?"

"I did," the plague doctor confirmed with a nod. "I was waiting for this meeting to fact check the intelligence our leader had gathered."

Leonard smiled. Though the Carnival was a tight-knit group, they operated in individual cells and only gathered in one place for debriefings or large operations. This structure

allowed each member a great deal of flexibility, and made the group highly resilient. Members might die, but someone would always survive to revive the Carnival.

"First of all, he can only control his own blood," Leonard explained, showing pictures of Bloodstream bisecting an Augusti Genome with a crimson, crystallized axe. "He cannot telekinetically control your blood, unless he infects you first. Neither can he generate mass out of thin air, which is why he needs hosts to duplicate himself."

"No voodoo doll mumbo-jumbo then?" Mr. Wave asked. "Mr. Wave hates those."

"I had enough with Manic Plague," Ace agreed with a shrug.

"Next, he can only manage a few clones at a time, with a highest recorded peak of ten doubles. If they break that limit, the clones start absorbing each other to reduce their numbers, probably to reduce the risk of them developing individual thoughts. He can only affect humans, so—"

Stitch raised his hand.

"Yes, Stitch?"

"Sir, with all due respect," the doctor coughed. "You are wrong."

Len was selecting which books to bring with her to the sub, when the explosion resonated outside.

The whole boathouse trembled, a metal panel falling on the Laika and bouncing off its hull. The Genius stumbled and lost her grip on her books. Some safely fell on the pier, but

her copy of Lenin's *The State and Revolution* sank into the pond, to her horror.

"What's happening?!" Her father didn't answer. A smell of smoke and flames came from the sea, carried inside the boathouse by the wind. "Dad? Dad?"

Someone opened the boathouse's door with a backpack full of canned food.

"Riri?" He looked exhausted, as if he had run for miles. "Riri, what's happening?"

"We have to go," he said, catching his breath. "They're here. The Carnival."

Her worst fear had come to pass.

Another explosion echoed in the distance, like a bombardment. *It's his last body*, Len realized in panic. *If they kill him now...* "Dad—"

"Is delaying them," Ryan said, grabbing her books off the floor. "We have to go."

"Go? Go where?"

The Genius looked into her boyfriend's eyes, and she understood.

"No," Len said. "Maybe Dad will beat them."

Many tried to kill him, but he had never lost. Her father always came back, always beat the odds. He had fought the Augusti, raiders, and heroes, and he defeated them all. The Carnival would fail like the others.

"We have to run, Shortie. They're too numerous, your father can't beat them all." Ryan leapt on the sub, carefully moving towards the hatch. "Activate the sub, your dad will catch up to us in minutes."

Len wanted to protest further, but the sheer panic in his voice convinced her. She followed her boyfriend, opening the hatch and slipping together inside the sub.

It was a cramped place, with only three rooms: one at the back for the machinery, one for stockpiled supplies, and the living space. Len had sacrificed space for efficiency, keeping only a bunk bed next to a small porthole and the sub's control panel. It had taken them days to find a computer to scavenge for the screen and keyboard.

"How did they find us?" Len asked, typing on the computer while Ryan put her books and his food in the storage room.
"Did they follow you?"

"I wasn't careful."

Something in his unapologetic tone made her pause. She interrupted her work to look at him, and immediately saw the guilt in his gaze.

"You didn't care to hide," Len accused him. "You led them here."

He didn't even deny it.

He... no, he could... he couldn't have... "Riri..."

"Len, your father is sick," he said, his gaze firm. "He's sick in the head."

"I know," she hissed, grinding her teeth, "I know that, but—"

“But nothing,” Ryan interrupted her. “If we don’t flee, he’ll kill us. He’ll kill you.”

“He won’t,” she protested, though some part of her wasn’t so sure. “We... Riri, I had my Elixir for weeks, and he never...”

“Not yet,” Ryan said, a dark look on his face. “Not yet is not never, Shortie.”

“So you will let him die?” Len trembled with rage. “You will strand him on the shore, and let the Carnival slay him?”

“Len, I...” Ryan tried to find his words. “We don’t need him. I can make you happy, Len. We can start again, just the two of us.”

“How?” she asked, shaking her head. “We can’t defend ourselves.”

“You’re a Genius, and I have my Elixir. We can take care of ourselves.”

“This is madness!”

“This whole plan was madness from the start, but that’s the best we have.” His hands reached for her. “Len—”

“Don’t touch me!” Len hissed, her back against the porthole. Ryan froze, her rejection hurting him as much as it hurt her. “Why? Why?”

“For us!” he snapped. “For us!”

“For you!” Tears formed in her eyes. “You want me all for yourself.”

“I want you *alive!*”

His words made her flinch, as if he had slapped her.

She looked at Ryan's eyes, and saw the concern in them. She had been mistaken; he didn't do it for himself, but for her.

He loved her, as much as she loved him.

A part of her wanted to do as he said. To drop everything and take that submarine to the sea. To go on an adventure around the world, just the two of them.

But each time... each time she looked at the monster her father had become, she remembered the kind man he had once been. How he always smiled at her and her brother, her real brother. How he was always there after Mom left, always consoling Len when she cried in her bed. Sometimes, the man reassured himself, and in these brief moments, his daughter felt hope.

"Please, Ryan. I... as long as he's alive... as long as he's alive, there's a chance he can heal."

In spite of everything... In spite of everything, Len couldn't bring herself to hate her father.

"Not without him," Len said, avoiding his disappointed gaze.
"I'm sorry, Riri... not without him."

His intense, baleful stare made her shiver. His hands trembled, his teeth grinded together, his face twisted. Len saw the anger, the disappointment, the sadness, flash through his face.

And then came the resignation.

"Put on the autopilot," Ryan said, while moving towards the hatch. "If we're not back in twenty minutes, your father and I are dead."

"Riri, if I put the autopilot on, I can't disable it."

"If you stay, they might kill you," he said darkly, "They might kill us all, just to make sure Bloodstream is really gone."

It was always the same pattern. When people failed to kill Len's father, they came after Ryan and her. It was always their family against the world.

"Ryan," Len whispered, as he was halfway through the open hatch.

He stopped.

"Ryan, please come back."

He looked over his shoulder. "Live, Len," he said before exiting the sub.

Len activated the autopilot, put on the timer, and waited.

Leo frowned. "What do you mean, his power has no upper limits?"

"After analyzing the samples we gathered, I confirm that our target is not limited to human hosts. Anything with a circulatory system can do, including the entire animal kingdom." The doctor marked a short pause. "Nor does he seem biologically limited in the number of clones active at once. Both 'restrictions,' I'm afraid, are purely psychological."

A shiver went down Leonard's spine. He fought the urge to turn into a living sun again, to chase away the fear. If Stitch was correct, then...

"But why would he keep only a dozen doubles?" Mathias asked with skepticism. "Especially if they share a pseudo-hive mind? Why do they even attack each other? I could understand if each clone was independent, but..."

"Because he hates himself deep down," the Cossack guessed laconically. "What he has become."

A part of Freddie Sabino wished for death. His psychological traumas crippled his power, preventing him from making full use of his unlimited potential.

Ace exchanged a glance with Leonard, her face white as milk. She had understood the danger too. "Stitch, be honest," she asked the doctor. "If he goes all out, what will happen?"

"He will become a pandemic," Stitch confirmed. "Since he can infect others through blood projectiles, Sabino will devastate Italy within days unless quarantined. If he assimilates birds or fish, then the 'Bloodstream plague' could infect the entire Earth's biosphere within months. Only Genomes with abnormal bodies like Augustus will survive."

There it was. The extinction event Pythia warned them against.

Bloodstream wouldn't just destroy all life on Earth; he would become life itself.

A deathly silence followed, quickly broken by the unflappable Cossack. "The trigger is his daughter's death? Not the brother's?"

"Pythia couldn't explain it either," Leonard confirmed. Her data only held broadstrokes information. The future was ever-shifting, and other Genomes often interfered with her visions. "But if Len Sabino dies, her father will trigger an extinction event."

"We can assume our target will lose all psychological restraints and go on a rampage," Stitch explained.

"He will hate the world more than he hates himself," Ace whispered sadly.

Stitch nodded in agreement. "And according to Pythia's prophecy, Len Sabino will perish unless we intervene."

The Cossack crossed his arms. "He has to die. No matter the cost."

"No, not at any cost," Mr. Wave protested. "No touching the children."

"Besides sharing your moral concern, our only advantage over Bloodstream is that he doesn't understand the full extent of his abilities," Leo said. "We must slay all the clones in a short period, and move the children to safety. Ace, you will focus on evacuating the wounded to the infirmary. Stitch, Mathias, you stay in the reserve."

Mathias Martel immediately protested. "But—"

*"No buts, young man. Haven't you heard? Your range is too short, and if he hits you **once**, it's over."*

The battle was still ongoing when Ryan exited the boat club.

He didn't have to look long to locate the battlefield; he just had to follow the smoke rising in the skies.

His plan had been simple. Take no precautions during the supply run, make sure the Carnival's flyers noticed him, and let them follow him back to their hideout. Ryan worried they might have expected a trap if he approached them directly, but his scheme had worked like a charm.

At least, until now.

This plan was insane. Ryan knew it from the start. It was a hare-brained plot born out of frustration and desperation, one last attempt to get out of an impossible situation. But Len refused to budge, even after he forced her hand. And now, he had set the dominos, and couldn't undo their fall.

This could only end in tears.

Unless...

Ryan looked at his Elixir, at the strange power in a syringe. It had caused so much pain, and yet created so many wonders. Maybe Bloodstream had been right, and it was the Devil's work. Maybe it was a gift of the heavens.

But whether it came from above or below, that substance was Ryan's only hope.

He slammed the syringe into his arm, and prayed for a miracle.

The world turned purple, and Ryan ran.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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90: Past Fragment: The First Run

The world turned purple, as time slowed down to a crawl.

Raindrops froze in midair, never reaching the ground. A lightning bolt coursed through the skies, a scar of light in the heavens. Ryan didn't even hear the sound of his footsteps as he moved.

He had wished for more time, and the Elixir obliged. The boy knew it deep within his bones, an instinct as natural as breathing. Ryan Romano halted time itself with a thought, much like a player could pause a video game.

But not forever.

A flash of light overcame his vision, followed by the noise of explosions and cold rainwater falling on him. Time began again, and Ryan nearly tripped on a puddle of water. Damn, did he need to focus on his power to keep time frozen?

Whatever the case, Ryan kept following the noise. He caught sight of Leo the Living Sun floating above the sea, unleashing streams of fire at Porto Venere's Marina. The place used to be a touristic walkway, with multi-story colored houses facing piers meant for yachts. Years afterward, the paint had turned grey and lifeless, and the boats into scrapped husks. Ryan could hardly see the battle with the downpour.

He activated his power, and the world turned purple. This time, Ryan started to count in his head.

One.

Five.

Nine.

Te—

And time resumed.

Ryan could halt time for ten seconds or so. Afterward, his power failed him again. The boy attempted to stop the clock again each second, finally succeeding on the tenth try. He could pause the universe for ten seconds, but had a cooldown period of the same length.

A pretty straightforward power, all things considered. But would it make any difference? Bloodstream packed a mean punch, but he was fighting Leo the Living Sun. Ryan heard rumors that the guy fought *Augustus* and *lived*.

Ryan searched inside his pockets and brought out a small revolver he always carried on his person. He took a deep breath, cursed his luck, and approached the battlefield.

He was *fast*.

Leonard couldn't believe his luck, when he glimpsed at a boy matching the description of Bloodstream's son Cesare scavenging supplies while on a routine patrol. The Carnival had lost track of the Psycho days ago, even wondering if he managed to flee Italy. Leonard had called his allies, and immediately tracked down the boy to his father's hideout.

Leo went into battle with only the Cossack and Mr. Wave for backup. The former's white power armor would protect him from blood infection, while the latter had no circulatory system of any kind. Ace stayed on standby in a safe location, ready to teleport the wounded to Stitch's infirmary if needed. The Cossack had suggested burning the entire town to ensure Bloodstream perished, kids be damned, but his teammates put their veto to that course of action.

They would do this by the book.

Unfortunately, Bloodstream must have sensed the trio's approach and ambushed them near the town's ruined Marina. Leo bombarded the walkway with flames, while the Cossack did the same with a laser rifle. They only managed to set a deserted restaurant on fire, as Bloodstream dodged all their attacks. The bloody slime leaped from one spot to another like a flea.

"Meddlers, annoyers! Why does everyone insist on harassing me?!" Bloodstream shrieked. His voice struck Leonard as shrilling and high-pitched, like a young child throwing a tantrum. "Has every man on this God-forsaken planet gone mad?"

The pressurized blood making up Bloodstream's skin crystallized into spikes, which he launched in all directions. Leonard didn't bother to dodge, his solar body incinerating the projectiles before they could even reach him. Even the raindrops formed a cloud of steam around him, the skies darkening above their heads.

The Cossack flew away with his jetpack, but one spike hit his chest; the blood spear turned into a drill and attempted to dig a path to the human below the armor.

While Leo immediately stopped harassing Bloodstream to burn away his projectile before it could infect his teammate, the Psycho moved towards a half-rusted car near the walkway. His fingers turned into tentacles as they seized the vehicle.

“Ever since I took these potions, this world has been tormenting me!” Bloodstream lifted the car above his head and prepared to toss it at the Carnival’s flying members.
“Trying to take my children away from me!”

“And all your troubles didn’t prepare you for...” A new, costumed challenger appeared on the ground, a crimson blur. “Mr. Wave!”

The living wavelength ran towards Bloodstream, his body turning into a laser. Mr. Wave transformed into a mass of crimson light moving in a straight line that cut through anything in its path. The superhero’s laser form tore Bloodstream in half, the car falling on the bisected Psycho.

Mr. Wave returned to his humanoid form a few meters away, doing some footwork as if slowing down. While he could move at lightspeed in laser form, the superhero could only move in a straight line and needed to transform back to turn around. He had once confessed to Leonard that his greatest fear was to be ejected into space, unable to turn back.

“Ugh, Mr. Wave has bloodstains on his cashmere!” Mr. Wave complained while looking at his suit. Bloodstream’s two halves quickly fused back together, and he crawled out of beneath the car. “You have made a powerful enemy today, tomato juice!”

“Just die!” Bloodstream turned both his hands into sharp axes, extended his arms into five-meters long tentacles, and attempted to behead Mr. Wave with a scissor blade motion.

The superhero put his hands in his pockets and dodged the strike with a backstep.

“Lady Death once had a near-Mr. Wave experience,” the superhero replied, as Bloodstream frantically pursued him like an enraged bull after a matador. “Mr. Wave is too good for Heaven, and too scary for Hell!”

Leonard had to resist the urge to tell his teammate to stop with the boasts. Mr. Wave was good-natured and powerful, but also an unrepentant showoff.

Still, his taunts worked. Bloodstream focused entirely on Mr. Wave and ignored his allies, giving them some respite. Once the Psycho got too close for the superhero to dodge in his human form, Mr. Wave tore through his foe again in laser form. No damage lasted long, the maddened criminal pulling himself back together in seconds.

“You’re alright?” Leo asked the Cossack after burning the blood-drill to ashes.

“How much blood does he have?” the armored man grunted back, as he glanced at the walkway below them. Bloodstream’s spikes had turned back into liquid blood, slithering back to their owner.

“I can’t tell.” Bloodstream compressed the blood making up his body, so he might carry tons of organic mass in that slender frame of his. “I could incinerate him with one fireball, if we can immobilize him. I don’t want to go all out in case he keeps his children hidden nearby, I might wound them by accident.”

Easier said than done though. Leonard and the Cossack flew above the walkway, trying to keep up with their ally’s duel with Bloodstream. Upon realizing he couldn’t damage the

Psycho for long, Mr. Wave switched to a defensive strategy. One moment he stood in one place, challenging Bloodstream with hand gestures and lazy footwork; and when his foe threatened to slice him, the superhero took a step forward, turned into a laser, and reappeared a few meters away.

But though Bloodstream lacked finesse, Leo had a hard time tracking his movements. He was a red blur, a cheetah, his body twisting at impossible angles.

“Stop dodging!” Bloodstream leaped from a building’s wall to the walkway in an attempt to catch Mr. Wave from an unexpected angle, but the living wavelength saw it coming and dodge with a mere sidestep. He didn’t even need to transform.

“Mr. Wave doesn’t move at lightspeed. Light moves at Mr. Wave’s pace.”

“Sure,” the Cossack said, the back of his power armor opening to reveal missile launchers. A rain of rockets fell upon the walkway, alongside the rain and lightning. Concrete and stone exploded into a cloud of dust, obscuring Leonard’s sight.

Leo guessed his ally’s plan: to force Bloodstream’s parts to reform after blasting him to smithereens. Mr. Wave reappeared close to a ruined restaurant, wiping blood off his suit, but the enemy remained out of sight. The dust cloud spread over the Marina, obscuring both the boats and the pavement.

“Catch!” Bloodstream screamed from within the smoke.

A second later, a rusted boat flew across the skies in the flyers’ direction. Leonard and the Cossack blasted it apart

before it could hit them, parts falling into the sea. However, the Psycho leaped at them while they were distracted, emerging from the dust cloud with a maniacal laugh.

Bloodstream had stretched his right arm and twisted it on itself, building up strength like an elastic spring. He punched the Cossack in the chest before the armored warrior could retaliate, his empowered fist as powerful as a cannonball. The blow cracked the Cossack's chestplate, the armored warrior crashing on the walkway. Stone broke beneath him on impact.

"Cossack!" Leonard shouted, his teammate laying on the road, motionless. Worse, the hole in his armor left his chest exposed. "Ace! Evacuate!"

"Below the steel, the sweet blood!" Bloodstream cackled upon landing on the ground. He immediately moved on all fours like a hyena and rushed towards the Cossack.
"Sustenance, at long last!"

Mr. Wave took a step forward and transformed into a laser again, hitting the Psycho from behind before he could reach the Cossack. The impact shattered Bloodstream like glass, but no sooner had Mr. Wave regained his original form did the blood drops instantly fused back into a humanoid form.

With a small opening, Ace opened a portal behind the Cossack. The teleporter grabbed the armored warrior and started pulling him to safety through the gate.

"Incinerate him, Sunshine!" Mr. Wave shouted as he engaged Bloodstream in a duel again. He dodged a crystallized axe by sidestepping, transformed in a laser to stop blood bullets in midair before they could hit Ace, and tore through Bloodstream like paper. "Mr. Wave will provide!"

Indeed he did. When Bloodstream threatened to pull himself back, Mr. Wave returned to human form, rotated on himself, and gored through the Psycho again. The superhero kept repeating the process, preventing the criminal from fully regenerating.

Knowing Mr. Wave couldn't keep this up forever, Leonard gathered plasma in his hand, forming a shining fireball hot enough to vaporize every last drop of blood.

It was now or never.

Time resumed again, as Ryan powered through dust and smoke.

The Carnival and Bloodstream had transformed the walkway into swiss cheese, with craters all over the paved street. Len's loving father got the thrashing of his life from a crimson blur too fast for the eye to follow. Ryan barely caught a glimpse of the fighter responsible for one second as it turned around, a humanoid mass of red energy held together by a purple suit. Bloodstream exploded in a shower of blood, reformed, only to explode again as his foe ran into him.

A freckled woman dragged an armored figure through a circular rift in spacetime itself a few meters away, with Ryan noticing an immaculate clinic on the other side. Leo the Living Sun floated above the area, shaping a miniature star in the palm of his hands. He would incinerate the Psycho so utterly, that naught but ashes would remain.

None had noticed Ryan yet, the dust, smoke, and heavy rain hiding him. And for a second, he was tempted to sit back and do nothing. This might be his only chance to watch the loathsome, immortal Psycho perish for good.

But... but Len wouldn't leave without her father. She would never forgive Ryan if he left Bloodstream to die, and the Carnival... the teen couldn't rule out the possibility that they would go after Shortie and him next.

Damn it, what should he do?

"Stop!" Ryan shouted, firing a warning shot at the skies. He couldn't make a decision. "Stop fighting!"

The fireball in Leo's hands faltered, as he noticed Ryan. "Mr. Wave, the child!"

The wavelength Genome stopped hitting Bloodstream to look at Ryan, the energy making up his body assembling into a phantasmal face. The Psycho regenerated, while 'Mr. Wave' raised a hand at Ryan. "Kid, get back, it's dangerous —"

The horror was raw in his voice, and Ryan realized he made a terrible mistake. The Carnival never intended to harm him or Len. They were true heroes, coming to save them from a bloodthirsty monster.

But a moment of distraction was all it took for evil to prevail.

Bloodstream unleashed a volley of blood bullets at the portal, one of his projectiles hitting the woman's throat while she finished dragging the armored figure through. She barely had the time to gasp before her skin ruptured, crimson blood covering her skin.

Her voice turned into Bloodstream's midway through her final scream.

"Ace!" The Living Sun shouted while the portal closed, the fireball in his hands dissipating. "Mr. Wave, fall back!"

The other Genome stepped back in disbelief, sidestepping to dodge Bloodstream's sharpened claws. "Fall back?!"

"Mathias and the others are at the base!" The Living Sun shouted back in alarm, flying north at extreme speed. Mr. Wave's gaze moved from Bloodstream to Ryan, and he muttered something too low for the time-stopper to hear. The superhero transformed into a living laser, tearing through buildings in his teammate's direction.

"You're alright?" Ryan asked Bloodstream, though it disgusted him to even ask.

"Cesare, I told you to protect your sister!" Bloodstream snarled, apparently perfectly fine. Whatever damage he had suffered healed in an instant. "You must listen to your father!"

The teen sneered in bitterness, as he realized that he would never be free of this monster. This was the perfect chance to get rid of Bloodstream for good, perhaps the only chance, and he threw it all away.

But he loved Len more than he hated her father.

"We don't have time," Ryan replied, lowering his gun. "Len's submarine will leave soon. We have to go now."

Instead of answering, Bloodstream froze in place. He looked at his adoptive son with disturbing intensity, sending a shiver down Ryan's spine. "Dad?"

"Who are you?" Bloodstream asked with a shaken voice.

Ryan froze, as the Psycho didn't recognize him. Perhaps, the Elixir in the boy's blood had broken the man's delusion. Or perhaps it caused him to fall into another delirium.

“Dad, I—”

Bloodsteam’s hand grabbed Ryan’s throat, before he could finish his sentence. The Psycho’s grip was strong as steel, choking the life out of him.

“Where is Cesare?!” The Psycho’s maddened words became a distant echo, as air failed to reach Ryan’s brain. The bones in his neck cracked under the strain. His hand failed to hold his gun, the weapon falling on the pavement. “Where is my son?! What have you done to my son?!”

The boy attempted to freeze time and escape Bloodstream’s grip, but the delirious Psycho slammed his head against the pavement. A pain greater than anything Ryan ever felt coursed through his head, his vision blurring, brain matter flowing on the pavement. He couldn’t think, couldn’t—

“WHERE IS MY SON?!”

All went dark.

It was true what they said. Ryan saw his life flash before his eyes as he died. Events rolled back, from his death, to that messed up battle, to the moment when the teen foolishly emerged from the smoke.

And then it stopped.

Ryan blinked, as he stood in the middle of the walkway. The pain had vanished, and air filled his lungs once more. The rainwater fell on his warm skin, lightning thundered above his head, and his brain was back in his skull.

He... he was alive again.

Had Ryan seen a vision of the future? A warning of what would happen if he made the wrong choice? That sounded like too much of a Blue power to him, but it had felt so real. Ryan had died, and risen again.

His power could also create a checkpoint, like video games. It had granted him a new chance he couldn't waste.

Ryan glanced at Bloodstream, the maddened Psycho prepared to strike the freckled woman with a blood volley. But this time, without the boy to distract him, Mr. Wave hit Bloodstream before he could even twitch. The woman closed the portal after dragging the armored knight through, vanishing from sight unharmed.

Ryan glanced at the Living Sun, the fireball in his hands so bright it hurt to look at it. Bloodstream attempted to leap away to safety, but Mr. Wave turned into a laser and tore off his legs, making the madman collapse.

Ryan looked at his adoptive father, the phantom sensation of his warm hands closing on his throat flashing through his mind. And as it did, the boy remembered all the times the bloodthirsty monster hit him and Len in the past. How helpless the children had felt, always cowering at his approach. How the Psycho had lapsed back into his violent madness, each time Ryan thought he might improve.

You will never change, Ryan thought, his hand on his throat. He could almost feel Bloodstream's claws squeezing the life out of his lungs. *This is you. This is what you are, and her compassion is wasted on you.*

Ryan owed this monster nothing but scorn.

So he turned around, and abandoned Bloodstream to his fate.

He would tell Len he had been too late. She would despise him, but it was for the best. Ryan had seen the future first hand and come back from it. Her father was a hopeless case, and would never improve.

The Living Sun tossed his fireball at the walkway, the air shimmering with heat.

“Kid!” Ryan glanced behind him. Mr. Wave had noticed his presence, just as the fireball fell upon a roaring Bloodstream like God’s judgment. “Kid, get down!”

The fireball hit the walkway and expanded outward.

Ryan activated his power, running as fast he ever had before. The universe turned purple, freezing this moment in time.

An expanding wall of flames consuming the walkway, with Bloodstream burning to cinders at the center. A demon cleansed in hellfire.

The kind man in a suit, running after Ryan in a vain attempt to shield him from the fireball.

The Living Sun overseeing it all from above, surrounded by steamy rainwater.

Ryan’s legs moved as fast as they could, straining so much that the teen feared he would collapse midway. Seconds stretched on, but Len was so far away, and the fireball so close. The light would catch up to him the moment time resumed.

“Please!” Ryan begged, as he counted seconds from eight to nine. “More than ten! More than ten!”

But Ryan Romano didn't run fast enough.

The frozen time shattered like glass on the tenth second, and the world exploded into flames.

Ryan didn't know how long he stayed unconscious. When his feverish mind emerged from a coma to face a white wall, he thought he had perished for good and ascended to Heaven. Though Shortie didn't believe in such things, her boyfriend always kept an open mind. After all, nobody who died came back from the other side.

At least, nobody but Ryan himself.

"Oh, you're finally awake!" Ryan's eyes wandered to his right, watching the shining holographic face of Mr. Wave look at him. The superhero anxiously waited on a chair, legs crossed.

Ryan blinked a few times as he regained control of his mental faculties. A bed sheet covered his body, and it looked like he recovered inside a hospital room of some kind. The teen thought he would suffer from burns, but his skin seemed healthier than ever.

"I thought you—" The wavelength Genome paused, as if he had said something stupid. "Mr. Wave thought you might sleep forever."

"I... I thought so too." Ryan glanced at his hands. "I'm... I'm alive."

"Our medic does not inspire confidence at first glance, but he is good," Mr. Wave said. "His life is a perpetual struggle to keep Mr. Wave's suicidal comrades alive. Mr. Wave is too powerful to die, so he's fine."

"Is Bloodstream... is he gone?" Ryan asked.

The superhero joined his hands. "Your father..." His voice broke. "Your father died, little Cesare. Mr. Wave is sorry."

He wasn't my father, Ryan thought, *and my name is not Cesare.* "Good," he said coldly. "Good. It had to be done."

The superhero winced, but thankfully didn't ask for details. He must have imagined what horrors Ryan went through. "Mr. Wave has to ask, is there another clone running around? Because Mr. Wave doesn't like endless sequels."

Ryan shook his head. "You got the last one."

"Oh, good." He sounded relieved. "Mr. Wave will keep an eye open just in case your dad makes a comeback, but he hopes there won't be a reboot anytime soon."

"What about Len?" Ryan asked, unable to understand half of what the eccentric superhero said. "Where is she? Did she take the submarine?"

"Your sister? Mr. Wave wants to know too. We couldn't find her, no matter where we looked. Mr. Wave knows he scares the gods themselves, so it didn't surprise him."

A shiver went down Ryan's spine. "How long was I out?"

From Mr. Wave's embarrassed silence, he guessed for quite a long time. "I need to go," the teen said, rising from his bed only to almost trip. His legs felt heavy and sore, as if he just woke up from being hit by a truck.

Mr. Wave caught him before he could collapse. His body felt strange to the touch, solid yet slightly fluctuating when

someone touched him. Somehow, it reminded the teen of a trampoline.

"A true knight does not make a lady wait, but he must accept a mount's help sometimes!" Mr. Wave carried Ryan on his back. "Show the way, and Mr. Wave will light it up!"

They didn't even take the door. For some obscure reason, the eccentric superhero insisted on going through the window, saying it was the 'adventurer's gate.' Ryan wondered if he was sick in his head, but he didn't question a man willing to help.

Though he didn't turn into a laser while carrying the teen, perhaps because it would harm him, Mr. Wave moved incredibly fast and never slowed down. Though the hospital had been in Genoa, the duo rejoined Porto Venere within minutes. Leo Hargraves had torched the whole village, probably to make sure Bloodstream didn't leave a drop behind him.

When Ryan and Mr. Wave reached the boathouse's smoking ruins, they only found a pond of water.

Len was long gone.

Einstein famously said that the definition of insanity was to do the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results.

Perhaps he could turn back time too.

The teen had the gut feeling his checkpoint wasn't a one-time thing, but... well, after he failed to will himself back in time... Ryan only had one way to check. He was fine with whatever happened. In a single day, he had lost everything

that ever mattered to him. He just... didn't see how he should go on. He felt numb and lifeless inside. If there was a chance he could make it better... he had to try.

He had been proven correct. Death was the end for most, but not for him.

It did him little good.

His power always brought him right before the explosion. He tried everything. Protect his head. Protect his chest. Dive down. Try to freeze time. Death hurt, but not as much as the idea of losing Len.

The fireball always caught up to him.

Ryan couldn't outrun light. Couldn't activate his power in the split-second before it hit. Couldn't turn back the clock to earlier that day. However his power worked, it had chosen the *worst* moment to make a new checkpoint.

Ryan almost never died from the explosion itself though. Mr. Wave always managed to shield him from the flames with his body. For that, Ryan was grateful, because death *hurt*. But the blast always knocked the time traveler unconscious at best.

Sometimes, he woke up a few hours early or days later, depending on his injuries. But he was always too late. No matter how many times Ryan tried, he couldn't catch up to Len. The time-traveler was trapped in an endless cycle, never making progress.

As he witnessed a Mediterranean sunset for what seemed like the hundredth time, Ryan tried to understand. Did the auto-pilot carry Shortie away? Did she see the explosion and believe her family had perished in the blast?

Ryan asked the Carnival for help many times. Once, he told them Bloodstream kept a backup clone and they looked for three weeks to no avail. Ryan felt slightly bad about using them, especially since Mr. Wave always did his best to help him. The superhero blamed himself for Ryan's wounds, though the young man could tell from experience that the man had saved his life.

But no matter how much they searched, they couldn't find any sign of the submarine, and Ryan had no way of contacting Shortie.

In the last loop, he fled from the hospital and hid from his own rescuers until they gave up and moved on. The Carnival always insisted he join an adoptive family, but Ryan had his fill of them. He wanted Len, and no one else. His gratefulness for the Carnival turned to resentment; though he knew it was irrational, they had deprived him of Len.

Perhaps it was easier for Ryan to blame others rather than himself. In the end, the teen couldn't deny the fact he caused this disaster through his own poor choice. For no matter the path he took, it always ended the same way.

With Ryan Romano staring at the sunset, alone in the world.

"So?" Enrique Manada asked, facing a computer screen.

"The target's last clone has been destroyed, as far as we can tell," Dr. Nathaniel Stitch answered on the other end of the video call. *"We are still trying to track down Len Sabino to confirm it, but otherwise it appears the threat has been dealt with."*

"That's a relief," Enrique replied. Though his father only cared about the warehouses and Genome employees whom

Bloodstream had murdered, his son would have provided the Carnival with support on principle. The world was better with fewer Psychos in it. "We will keep an eye open, in case his daughter reappears."

"Mr. Hargraves sends you his regards, and thanks," the doctor said. *"We wouldn't have been able to continue the hunt without Dynamis' cooperation."*

"It's nothing." All they did was to provide the Carnival with reports of Bloodstream's movements through their own agents, and technical support in analyzing the blood samples. Enrique still shivered upon remembering Dr. Tyrano's report. "It is always a pleasure to collaborate with the Carnival. My father still won't budge on the question of Augustus, but I hope that one day, we can make common cause against him."

Perhaps one day Italy could rise again from its ashes, as a country bound by the rule of law rather than the strength of Genomes. That was Enrique's sincerest wish.

"Now we must destroy the remaining samples," Stitch said. *"Incinerate them utterly. If a single cell survives long enough to find a new host, the nightmare will start over again."*

"My brother is already taking care of ours. He burns as hot as your sun." Enrique prepared to end the call, having another reunion planned afterward. "We'll keep in touch."

The Carnival member nodded before his screen closed. Enrique called Alphonse next, facing a glowing skeleton in a black hazmat suit. Blackthorn pitied his brother, whose power was as dangerous to his enemies as his allies.

"I have good news, Al," Enrique said. "The Carnival successfully destroyed Freddie Sabino's last remaining clone and sanitized the area. We can consider the threat dealt with."

They wouldn't have to nuke Porto Venere, just to be sure.

"*Good,*" Al replied gruffly. "*Psychos are a plague upon this land.*"

"Have you disposed of the remaining samples?"

Alphonse marked a short pause before answering, "Yes."

Enrique joined his hands, sensing his brother's annoyance. "You didn't like it."

"A power that could reshape someone's entire genetic code in an instant... you must have seen the potential as much as I did. Even Father saw it. This power could have changed everything, not only for us, but all of mankind."

"Its user killed countless people, and would have probably slain more." If Bloodstream had been half as cunning as Adam the Ogre and used his powers well, he might have become just as dangerous as Augustus. "We have enough of one nigh-immortal psychopath on our hands, and I would rather avoid another. One cell is enough for him to return, brother."

"I know," he said with a grunt, still sore over it.

"Then you understand we made the right choice." If they wanted the world to rise from the apocalypse's ashes, they had to minimize risks for future generations. Their father only cared about money and reputation, but both Enrique and Al saw farther than he did. "You did good, Alphonse."

"All for the dream, brother," Fallout replied, before ending the call. *"All for the dream."*

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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Bob Mijano, Saaski, David Hansson, mikeju, Sam Miller, Joe Giannuzzi, Phantom, lockx, Ben Lenk-Ostendorf, Thomas Have, Matt Hauer, Joe, Dargon, David Burchfield, Julien Fellegara, thkiw, redslash5, FiveHands, B. Gazzola, Abhichon chandrasen, Nock, Nikhil B, Connor Alexander, NightWhisper, Samuel Smith, Aldhere, Jacob, Sam McNamara, Jarrod Broome, Rolf Bork, Callum Brocklehurst, Samuel Borges, Joe, Dardy Noongar, Joe Giannuzzi, Jonathan Kutz, Stuart Dye, DerWipe, Grosbilljunior, martin, GenericKane, Sharath, Augustus, Joseph, Abhichon chandrasen, MaikD, Matt Labrum, Robert, s476, Eneri, TKLD, Daniel Hughesdon, Jordan, Vega, K-Thomas, Eric Vistnes, Jose, Davvy chapie, Joey Nguyen, Skovboa, maniac ian, Sebin Paul, Liz Griggs, BluEarth, MaliMi, Marcus Österberg, Orm, DaQualyn Singleton, Rheklr, evilperson41, lloyd kostuik, Corwin Brewer, Loïc Fernandes, Eric jian, Gianni Ghiribelli, John Smith, Willshaper, Tibstrike, Ploxzer, Alexander Dupree, Josh Delgado42, Domenic Stritzl, Not N. Octopus, Hayden Butz, Hazza Vanderbyl, Hoobie Gomez, charlyfu, Cliint, Paul Rettig, Luke, Jacob Goodwin, Kristian Oinonen, Bennet Larson, Mikołaj Wiszniewski, Bobby Jones, Phillip Ingram, Ariel Reyz, altus, lione pouet, Nicolas Marty, Bobo Bo, ScottDR, Kyle Wong, Henry Chow, Thundabear95, Aqua, evaOne, Philip Lee, Ivan Delgado, Geffery Dopp, Christian Alex, Hauke, Kaleb Uden, Dax, GraySquirrelEatToast, jacob johannes, House of Pantheon, FiveHands, Melanie, Caldrick, T3ctonic, Kezrin, Michael Frankford, Brody Brown, Actaeix, Desert Wreck, dave hutch, Zachary Venne, AlthePal, MaliMi, Arthur3s, Brent, Slimereaper, Sub Electricall, Warren Zielke, The Knight Commissar, Dorian Lee, Svend, Ryan Size, BB King, Markus, HollowIce, Long Le, Blah64, Hamis, Tip Top, Adrian Engel, Brenden,

**Josh Huynh, Mohammed Hajjaj, Massgamer, afgasd
adgasd, Harrison Russel, Yeno Memevig, Finn Ryan,
Nicholas Jensen, T T, Manu, Deinos, maltmana,
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Rosenhein, Enzo Morvan, Art238, Bon Bon, Richard
Barboza, Alexander, Charlie Taylor, LS, bob Johnson,
Doom, Jeff Gault, Tristan Praedo, George Ive, John,
Landon Pearce, shawn, Daniel Hernandez, John Bush,
war doggle, WowlExist, Edwin Jose, Andrew Wilson,
Pooya Daravi, Suneral, Steven Lindsay, Thaco4, Tyler
Chesney, NLRUmbra, Kyle J Smith, Rommelfanger
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Jordan McDonald, Matthew Powell, JJ B, Andrew
Odom, Danielle Warvel, Colin, Ivan Kalinovic,
AdAstridPerAspera, Reviv3pls, Dark Chaos, Saysca,
Folk Chanin, Jdosnoen, Konrad2, Bunny Waffles, John
Johnson, Colby, Pumpkin Mouse, Helsgarde, Harry
Williams, Alex Canavan, Hobold the kobold, Adam
Johnson, Daniel Aguirre, Zack Hoeken, Daniel Mackie,
Chip Twothousandone, KatarnK, N0T0B0K, Razvan,
Calvin, John, Jordan Chan, Heikki Aitakangas,
OccultOwlbear, TheBreaker, Justi martinez, Thomas
Rossiter, Jonathan Caselli, John, Richard Lee, Njordt,
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Iron_Giant, Guilherme Silva, Slade Schlaudecker, The
Arcane Emperor, Erik Sjöström, Michael Forrester,
BadSnake971, ZRhulad, Ryan, Cole Mathews, Scott
Bosse, Timo Reti, Dietz, Thomas Gamble, Nonnuvya
Bizniz, Sean Basa, Tagmin, Julien Castellijos, Kasan,
Zach Jamison, Zack, Ethan Bell, William Vickers,
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Particlepigeon, Ryan Trueman, Kalle, Roden, Andrew Stinson, Thomas Tessier, M Clason, Alex Lindsay, Sadinar, Daniel Everest, Exiled Knight, LinenZero, Tomas Puskas, Kyle Reese, RandomGift, Corgi McStumperson, Peter Christensen-Calvin, James Teeple, Dom Ceremonia, Mikkel Kolding Christensen, Sands, BlackFire13th, Kevin Ramos, Charles handgis, damien, Jeb, Jeb, Sebin Paul, Andrew Kahn, 白酒鬼, Trevor Sales, Calvin Miner, Rory, PbookR, Glader, John Carroll, Quentin, Andrew Parsadayan, Igor Mikulik, RepossessedSoul, James Walsh, Athra, Chris M, Jim of Trades, Koen Hertenberg, Alex Pruitt, Saul Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.

91: Bloodline Empire

Len put her hand on the aquarium, and Bloodstream's putrid eyes looked at her. The sight filled Ryan with scorn and disgust.

"How?" the courier asked, his own breath shortening, a sharp pain around his neck. Even after all these years... even after all these years, he still remembered his adoptive father's hands tightening around his throat. It was true what they said. You never forgot your *first*. "How..."

"Uncontrolled Psycho mutations," Dr. Tyrano answered with a shrug, misunderstanding the question. "The vice-president refused to feed him Genomes, so his genetic code kept degrading into something utterly alien. The human part simply couldn't keep up with the powers after a while."

A thought crossed Ryan's mind: that *this* was the fate that awaited all Psychos, if they couldn't stave off the decay. The Elixirs reshaped their bodies into something inhuman. Something better suited to contain the unlimited energies of the colored dimensions.

Was Bloodstream even sentient anymore? Did an ember of humanity remain, or were only the Elixirs left? Did he recognize his daughter, or the smell of her blood?

"Is he..." Shortie's voice sounded so shaken, so weak, that Ryan could barely hear her words. "Is my father... is my father in there?"

"We chemically neutered the creature years ago, and he stopped all attempts at communication afterward," Dr. Tyrano replied with no tact whatsoever. He might have been a Genius, but social relationships clearly weren't his specialty.

"How could you... how could you do this?" Len hissed, looking at the mad scientist. "There... there was a man inside!"

"Not quite, management flagged him as a company asset," Tyrano said, completely missing the point.

Ryan moved towards the computer panel hooked to the aquarium, his Saturn armor easily hacking into the closed system. Data showed up on his lenses, from biological analyses, to reports of Knockoff testing. The courier quickly confirmed that Dynamis had Bloodstream in custody since 2016; Tyrano cloned him from samples taken after the Psycho raided a company warehouse.

Ryan also noticed a folder called '*Monster Girl Project*', which he refused to open. He had the feeling it would traumatize him for all loops to come.

Most importantly though, Ryan learned that Dr. Tyrano used an encrypted email system to discuss with others, mainly his lawyers. The courier memorized the access codes, so he could directly contact the deranged Genius in a future loop.

"Why... why did you want me?" Len asked, pointing her water rifle at Tyrano. The dino maniac raised his hands in surrender. "What was the point?"

"Because your father implanted a foreign agent inside your blood cells, and it causes the Knockoff to react violently on contact," Tyrano confessed. "Since the old agent inside your

blood precedes the chemical neutering, synthesis creates a new substance capable of resisting it. Our consumers inevitably... reverse."

A polite way to say they transformed into Bloodstream clones.

"I petitioned management to study you in-depth and reduce risks of reversion, but Mr. Enrique kept vetoing my proposal," the scientist complained. It made the courier respect Blackthorn a bit more than before.

"Here's the million-dollar question then," Ryan said, glancing at the bloody shoggoth floating in its aquarium. "How do we kill this thing?"

Len flinched. "Riri..."

"Len, your father is gone," Ryan argued, waving a gloved hand at the Psycho-in-a-can. "He's not even human anymore."

"You said... you said you could find a cure for Psychos!" she protested.

"I think we can cure humans of their mutations, not turn tomato juice into a Homo Sapien." Ryan watched, as Len's weapon shook from her trembling hands. "I'm reading the analysis reports right now, and he shares less than fifty percent of his DNA with humans now. *Bananas* are closer to us than he is."

Even with all the time in the world, which Ryan had, they would need a Genome with a miracle solution power. Besides, the courier had no intention of wasting so much time on helping that irredeemable monster. He had raided

this lab to confirm Bloodstream's survival, but the boogeyman that haunted his childhood appeared long gone.

Ryan would have given all his money to see Len's reaction beneath her helmet. She stood still for a moment, before lowering her head and weapon both. She didn't say a word, as she registered her friend's words. Perhaps she always knew it would end like this, remaining in denial until she had the facts laid before her eyes.

The father she loved died years ago.

"I don't suppose you have a cure for Knockoffs?" Ryan asked Tyrano.

"Of course we have a cure," the mad Genius protested, much to the courier's surprise. "Do you think we're criminally negligent?"

"You turned a monster into a drink!" Ryan replied bluntly.
"You're worse than Pepsi!"

"But the risks of reversion and health issues approach zero, as long as only one dose is used!"

"Which is exactly why I'm nationalizing this place and confiscating all its assets. Including you."

"You can't nationalize a perso—"

"I'm President of the United States of America, which is basically the world," Ryan interrupted him. "We're nationalizing you, and your cure. How does it work?"

The scientist opened his mouth to protest further, until Ryan pointed at his chest weapon. Ah, the perks of a monopoly on force...

"I developed an injection-based neutralizing agent, which attacks the Bloodstream cells and repairs the target's genetic code back to its pre-consumption state," Dr. Scalie admitted. "A stronger variant of the formula can be injected inside the aquarium in case of a containment breach. It destroys the Knockoffs entirely."

"But not Alchemist-made Elixirs?" Ryan asked for confirmation, the Genius shaking his head. It made sense. Bloodstream-based Knockoffs remained mutated Psycho cells in the end, while true Elixirs were alien entities beyond conventional biology. "If your cure only works through injections, then what happens if multiple Knockoff-users revert at the same time? Even if you destroy the original source, it won't erase the substance inside all your customers."

"The risk of a mass-reversion is nonexistent," Tyrano replied with a shrug, tempting fate.

These guys had no plan at all. Dynamis' criminal negligence defied comprehension. "Alright, in that case, you're surrendering that cure, and coming with us to Area 51."

The dinosaur squinted. "Area 51?"

"A Mechron base, if you want to be technical." Since Ryan knew the location of others, they could always retreat there to research a cure for the Psycho condition. He had made a promise to Sa—*Bianca*, and would keep it. "We can make safer Knockoffs than the bottled slimes you harvest here. Elixirs that follow health-safety protocols."

"A Mechron base?" The Genius' eyes lit up in interest. He couldn't resist the lure of a Mechron-made lab. "You know what? I am under contract not to work for the competition,

but if you abduct me I won't resist too much. I think kidnapping counts as *force majeure*?"

"In my case? It's an Act of God." Ryan defended religious tolerance, but only for his own cult. "Now, where is your Bloodstream vaccine? We're euthanizing him on our way out."

Len didn't even respond, much to Ryan's surprise. He had expected her to fight back his decision, but finding the truth had shaken her to the core.

Ryan downloaded the Bloodstream vaccine's data, to use in a future loop. Now, they had to figure out a way to leave the building with Tyrano, if possible. Since Ryan knew about the encrypted emails and confirmed Bloodstream's survival, he could always contact the scientist in the future and optimize the Lab Sixty-Six raid.

His armor's sensors suddenly noticed a sharp increase in temperature.

No... "Shortie, get down!" Ryan shouted, but his friend didn't listen. She gazed at the aquarium without a word, lost in her thoughts. "Shortie!"

One of the room's walls melted in a crimson flash.

The blast came from the previous room, clearing off the debris blocking the path outside. Ryan covered his helmet with his hand, as a cloud of dust filled the laboratory.

Alphonse Manada had returned, a living incarnation of nuclear flames. But he wasn't alone. A small troop of men in power armor followed him, led by none other than his brother Blackthorn. Vines and moss covered the Il Migliore manager's armor like a second protective layer, and he

alone carried no firearm. Still, he didn't look happy to be there, glancing at the aquarium with disgust.

"None of this would have happened, if you and father didn't lie to me back then," Enrique said, as his men raised their weapons at Len and Ryan. The courier prepared to fight his way out. "Wyvern was right. This can't go on anymore."

"It will all work out in the end, you'll see," his brother replied, lying to himself. "As for father... he will be out of the picture after this, one way or another."

Fallout raised his hand at Ryan and Len, but didn't open fire. The risk of breaching the aquarium was too great. "All your men are dead, and you are surrounded," he threatened.
"Give up."

"I don't think so," Ryan said, moving closer to Len while Tyrano hid behind his computer. "I've still got the A-bomb in my backpack. If you want a big ol' mushroom salad, you'll get it."

"I don't believe you," Alphonse replied, calling the bluff. "I don't understand what you intended to do here, mutie, but you failed."

"Shortie, cover me," Ryan said. He couldn't take Fallout head-on, but they could bypass him if they played their cards right.

But his friend didn't answer.

"Shortie?"

Len raised her water rifle at the aquarium, and opened fire.

A pressurized liquid stream hit the glass before Ryan could stop time. The Private Security had opened fire at Len while Enrique vainly raised a hand to tell them to stop; their lasers were frozen in midair, so the courier tackled Len to the ground out of their reach.

“Shortie, what the—” Ryan couldn’t finish his sentence, as he took a good look at her helmet.

He could only see thick black blood wriggling behind the visor.

Ryan glanced at the captive Bloodstream in horror, the monster’s putrid eyes staring at his daughter with sinister intensity. While the creature was no longer sentient, his proximity triggered the infection inside Shortie and allowed it to take her over.

Some of the lasers hit the Aquarium’s protective barrier as time resumed, and Alphonse charged forward with an angry roar. Len’s visor exploded, blood tendrils coming out of it and forcing Ryan to leap back. The courier could only watch as blood leaked from his friend’s scaphandre armor, the substance having consumed her from within. As for the aquarium...

The glass had cracked, and shed tears of blood.

Ryan barely had the time to take a few steps as Len’s tendrils joined with the slime trapped inside the aquarium. And Bloodstream *screamed*.

The aquarium violently detonated, as the imprisoned monster grew in size and strength. The monstrous ooze grew fanged maws hissing in a maddening cacophony, glistening blue eyes as wide as TV screens, and porous holes unleashing geysers of Green Flux particles. A strange,

alien moss formed on anything these particles touched, like an infection from another reality.

Ryan wished he could erase his memory at will, as he watched Len's armor absorbed into the ooze she once called a father. The ogre devoured his daughter.

Blackthorn extended his vines to bring Tyrano to safety, but too late. Red slime drowned the scientist, and Alphonse had to use an atomic blast to keep the monster at bay. The ooze took a stream of nuclear fire to the face, but instantly regenerated. Bloodstream's monstrous form kept expanding, filling the room with its vile flesh.

Now that it had consumed Len, the monster turned its attention to Ryan. Those glistening alien eyes showed neither intelligence nor a sign of recognition; only hunger. The mind had deteriorated beyond saving, and only the instinct to spread remained.

Bloodstream had become a *virus*.

Worse, some of the Private Security members started screaming, blood flowing out of their armor and shattering their visors. The Knockoffs in their circulatory system had started reverting, though Ryan didn't know how far the effect extended.

"What's his range?" Ryan muttered to himself, a disturbing thought crossing his mind.

Sprinklers rained a white substance in the room, probably Tyrano's vaccine. But the liquid failed to affect the empowered Bloodstream, the mutated horror turning into a bloody tidal wave.

Ryan froze time the second his cooldown period ended, and fled as fast as he could.

Alphonse Manada had formed an energy shield around his brother and himself, repelling both the tidal wave of blood and his own men. Ryan glanced at Tyrano, but the man had already drowned inside the eldritch red sea.

The courier fled through the hole in the wall, leaving the Manadas to fend off for themselves. Ryan couldn't take the risk of Bloodstream getting past his armor. If the monster somehow managed to take him over and corrupt his save point...

Ryan had to return to Livia to finish the memory transfer. "I gotta get back," he whispered to himself, as he reached what remained of the cloning factory. "Back to the past."

The roof had collapsed on the cloning factory, burying the room and Ryan's dead allies beneath tons of rubble: though Alphonse Manada had successfully melted a path. With the ceiling gone, acid raindrops were falling on the ground from a hole above. Ryan activated his jetpack, just as time resumed.

A flood of blood overflowed into the factory an instant later, spreading through the building. Ryan managed to escape the flood, flying in the skies above the Dynamis HQ. If Bloodstream could generate mass from nowhere, then it meant his mutations had empowered him beyond his original powers.

But Ryan didn't understand *how much*, until he took a good look at New Rome.

The city had turned red.

People mutated everywhere Ryan looked, blood bursting from their skin to transform them into Bloodstream clones. Every Knockoff Elixir across New Rome had reverted to its original nature. Genomes turned into monsters, attacking the uninfected like rabid dogs. On the ground, Ryan watched a single Bloodstream clone fire crystallized spikes at Private Security personnel. Everyone scratched by the projectiles joined the zombie horde.

Fires had spread everywhere, with even the acid downpour unable to drench them. Mount Augustus had turned into a fiery candle, the smoke coming from it obscuring the skies for miles, and Rust Town didn't look any better.

"His power has no range anymore," Ryan realized, his throat sore from the phantom pain of his first loop. "The whole world. He will spread to the whole world. He will become the world."

This...

This was a *nightmare*.

"Helen?" Ryan shouted. The acid downpour continued to fall somehow. "Helen, where are you?"

He caught sight of her on the ground. A bloody monster, switching places with raindrops as it fell down on the uninfected like a hawk on mice. Bloodstream could not only infect Genomes, but keep using their powers.

If he infected Ryan...

If he infected Ryan, Bloodstream would gain access to time travel.

"Tea? Alchemo? Braindead, are you there?" Ryan called the rest of his team in frantic panic, only to be met with radio silence. "Anyone?"

But nobody answered.

Ryan thought he would only care for Tea, but her father's silence... it made his heart ache for a moment.

Damn it, this was the third apocalypse taking place in New Rome since he started, and the worst by far!

"Livia?" Ryan called while changing the frequency. The building below him turned red, as the ever-growing Bloodstream shattered the window and flowed down the steel walls like a waterfall. A long tendril thirty meters in size attempted to capture the courier, who dodged and flew away south of the city. "Livia? Livia!"

If Bloodstream got to her before he did...

A soft, reassuring voice answered his plea, "*Ryan.*"

Ryan let out a breath of relief. "Livia, are you well?"

"Yes, I'm... I'm in a safe house in Sorrento." She marked a short pause, her breath hastening in panic. *"Ryan, what's going on? My visions... I can't believe what I'm seeing. It's raining blood outside."*

Thank God, his first lady had made it to the Cheyenne Mountains. "Barricade yourself and prepare for the memory transfer. I'm sending you the data I gathered. Record it and don't touch anyone but me. Not a drop of blood."

"It's Dynamis, isn't it?" she guessed, coughing. *"Is it... is it too late to do anything?"*

"It's too late this time," Ryan replied bluntly, his fists clenching in rage. "But not for the next."

He could have sworn she had nodded on the other end of the line. "*Don't die on the way*," Livia pleaded. "*I will be waiting for you.*"

Ryan cut communications, as he crossed paths with other flyers in the skies. Leo the Living Sun and Shroud oversaw the devastation in shaken silence; though the latter created a cloud of flying glass shards upon seeing the president approach.

"Truce!" Ryan shouted, crossing his arms. "Truce!"

"You caused this!" Shroud snarled. "This is all your fau—"

Leo Hargraves broke out of his trance and raised a hand to stop his comrade. He understood that at this point, they couldn't afford to fight. Not even a dashing supervillain. "Is your sister..." Sunshine asked Ryan, acidic rain turning to colored steam on contact. "Is she dead?"

Ryan looked away, his silence a confirmation in itself. "I'm..." Leo the Living Sun looked down in complete defeat. "I'm sorry, for her. And for you, Mathias. We failed your mother's last request."

"We couldn't stop it," Shroud muttered to himself, his voice breaking in sadness and despair.

"You knew this would happen?" Ryan asked, more disappointed with himself than anything

"It was foretold, so we... we tried to destroy Bloodstream, but..." Leonard struggled to find his words. "We failed."

"We only delayed the disaster," Mr. See-Through said, before glancing at his teammate. "Leo, you have to do it."

"If I unleash my full power, everyone in the city will burn," Leo warned. Ryan had never heard him sound so... so *defeated*. "Millions will perish."

"And if a single bird gets away, the whole world will follow." Shroud let out a sigh of resignation. "There is no other way."

"The whole world is affected," Ryan said. Even though he would reload soon, he didn't think Leonard deserved to have these deaths on his conscience in any timeline. "Dynamis has Genomes outside New Rome, and they probably turned. It's useless."

"But it will delay the virus' spread," Shroud insisted. "We can gain enough time to protect other comm—"

Thunder echoed above their heads.

Crimson lightning struck Shroud, cooking his flesh within his own glass armor. The bolt formed a hole in his chest, vaporizing organs and sending the vigilante falling down to a burning street below. Leo let out a shout of horror and surprise, while Ryan looked up at the bolt's source.

"Hargraves." Augustus descended from the clouds above, clad in crimson lightning like a shining angel cast down to earth. "I should have known you were involved."

Lightning Butt's clothes had been torn to shreds, but the man himself was unharmed. His right hand carried the upper half of a destroyed rabbit plushie, its white fur blackened by ashes.

The gods had won the Lepiromachia.

"You fool!" Leo snarled at his archenemy, his flames now blindingly bright. "The world is at stake here!"

"The only world I want to live in," Mob Zeus replied with his fist raised, "is one where your sun has set."

Moving as fast as Ryan on a good day, the warlord punched Leo in the chest, his fingers tearing through the flames to hit a burning core underneath. The blow sent the Living Sun crashing onto the ground, the impact vaporizing Bloodstream clones into ashes.

"You!" Ryan snarled in true fury, as Lightning Zeus charged lightning to smite his fallen foe. This maniacal man would put his personal vendetta above anything else! "You selfish discount ivory statue, I've had enough! You're going down *someday!*"

Mob Zeus looked at him with murder on his mind, and Ryan cursed his tongue.

The courier reflexively stopped time just as the discount Greek god unleashed an electrical storm in his direction. Though the Purple World overshadowed New Rome and trapped it between two seconds, neither Augustus nor his lightning slowed down. The invulnerable man completely shrugged the time-stop off.

But Vulcan made the best armor, and Ryan expected the unexpected.

Mob Zeus blinked as the courier's chest weapon absorbed the crimson bolt. The mechanism didn't have a limitless energy storage capacity, but it gave the time traveler enough time to strike back.

Though he knew it was useless, Ryan punched Augustus in the face with all his might.

And it felt *good*.

His armored fist hit the man's ivory cheek, violet and black particles swirling around his fingers. Ryan expected to hurt himself more than Discount Zeus, especially since it felt like hitting a wall of diamond; but to his surprise, the blow startled the tyrant. The punch didn't inflict any damage, and seemed no more effective than a light slap, but it shorted out the lightning halo for an instant.

For a brief moment, Ryan could see the old man beneath the godly facade, his eyes widening in shock while the courier's fist still touched his cheek. Lightning Butt's gaze turned from surprise to fury, and if the courier wasn't mistaken... a hint of fear.

"I *felt* that," Augustus said.

Time unfroze as Ryan registered these words, and Mob Zeus punched back.

He hit harder than Wyvern, Adam the Ogre, and anyone else Ryan ever fought before. His fist cracked the armor's chest protection, shattering the weapon beneath into scraps, and sent the courier flying backward. The time traveler hit a building, came out on the other side, and barely managed to regain control of his flight before he crashed on the ground.

The jetpack had survived the blow, but the armor had been breached. A single drop of blood could slip through. Even now he sensed an acid raindrop burn his skin below the steel.

So Ryan immediately focused on regaining altitude, and looked behind him.

Thankfully for the courier, Hargraves had engaged Augustus in melee, delaying him for now. Sunshine had become a blinding star blazing across the skies, his heat causing the atmosphere to simmer around him. However, Ryan could see the shadow of his invulnerable enemy trying to grab the living sun's core; perhaps that was Hargraves' sole weakness.

The living sun's fires burnt Augustus' clothes, but they couldn't melt his ivory body. Leo could delay his foe, but not defeat him. Eventually, the superhero would either retreat, or perish.

And then Augustus would go after Ryan.

The president redirected all remaining power to his jetpack, and left New Rome in the dust.

It took Ryan one hour to reach Livia's hideout.

New Rome had long vanished in a flash of crimson light by then, its buildings, its land, its people incinerated. Whether Alphonse Manada went nuclear or Sunshine turned into a supernova, Ryan would never know. Though he was miles away by then, the courier still felt the blast's shockwave.

It changed nothing.

As the courier flew over a forest, he watched the trees turning red, their leaves transforming into organs, their bark into crystallized blood. Even some birds had turned into abominations, pursuing Ryan to infect him; though they

were too slow to catch up, the sight filled the time traveler with horror.

This blue planet would soon turn red.

He found Livia waiting for him in Sorrento, south of New Rome. She stood on the roof of the same building where Ryan had been evacuated, back when the Meta blew up the city. The courier thought the Augusti princess was foolish to expose herself, before noticing the ring of ash surrounding the building. Dozens, if not hundreds of turrets formed an impregnable perimeter around the safehouse, vaporizing any Bloodstream clone approaching.

Thankfully, the security system recognized his armor and let him pass.

“Remind me to send chocolates to Vulcan after the reset,” Ryan said as he landed on the roof, covering his chest with one hand. Acid Rain’s raindrops had eaten at his chest, blood dripping from the cracks left by Augustus.

“Though not perfect, no one can deny her security systems are effective.” Livia’s eyes wandered to his wound with concern, and though he warned her not to touch blood of any kind... her fingers trailed against his chest of steel.
“Who did this to you?”

“Your dad,” Ryan replied, causing Livia to bite her lower lips. “Even with the world going down in flames, he still wanted revenge above all else.”

“I see,” she said, her eyebrows furrowing. “And Len? The others?”

“Just me.” Ryan let out a tired sigh. “Again.”

And over again.

“Just *us*.” Livia looked at him with pity and compassion. “This is what you were trying to stop? Or something else? I can’t imagine the burden on your shoulders. It must have been agonizing.”

“There is still time to change this terrible ending.”

Ryan had the data he needed for his perfect run now. All pieces of the New Rome puzzle.

He only needed to assemble them in the correct sequence.

“Yes. But next time...” Livia looked up at him with determination. “Next time, you won’t carry this cross alone, Ryan. I swear to you.”

No. Ryan would have other people to help carry his load. Livia, Len, Alchemo, and others. Their memories would endure this reset, and he would ferry their minds across space and time.

The time-traveler opened the Saturn armor’s backpack, bringing out a metal helmet. He carefully put it on Livia’s head, and hooked the device to his suit’s Chronoradio. “Will it hurt?” she asked.

“Only for me, but don’t worry. I’m immortal.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” she replied with a smile. “We’ll find a painless way next time. I won’t have you die for our mistakes.”

Ryan almost told her not to make promises she couldn’t keep, but though this loop ended bleakly, it also filled his heart with hope.

Next loop would be different than anything that came before. The courier had no idea if his power would even stay the same, now that the Black World's power coursed through his veins. This reset was a dive into the unknown.

But someone would wait for him on the other side.

"We'll see," Ryan said as he activated his power. He halted the march of time, his armor turning dark purple. A torrent of violet particles surrounded him and Livia like a flood, with the occasional black spot floating among them like oil in the water.

The courier noticed an ivory man flying in their direction, far too late to change anything.

As the transfer finished and this loop collapsed in an ocean of violet particles, Ryan thought back to his brief fight with Augustus. He had wondered what wish the Black Ultimate One granted him, but now he had his answer.

What did you call a power that could kill immortals?

A paradox.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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92: Best Laid Plans

In the end, all of Ryan's loops started the same way.

By ramming his car into Ghoul's back.

"You know, you have become a fixture in my life," Ryan said as he exited his Plymouth and walked into Renesco's bar. By now, this place had become a second home to the courier. He had grown almost paternally fond of the wall he kept crashing into. "I've had more dates with you than with *Jasmine*."

Ghoul wriggled on the ground, trying to rise up again using the bar counter. The barman Renesco hid behind it, unsure how to react to Ryan's unforgettable entrance. The courier happily waltzed through debris, wind entering the establishment through the hole in the wall.

"I thought my life was a black comedy, maybe a tragicomedy, but now I realize... it was a vampire romance all along." Ryan loomed over Ghoul, hands behind his back. The Psycho was halfway back on his feet, while the other patrons dared not interfere. "Do your bones shine in sunlight?"

"What the hell are you talki—" Ghoul screamed as Ryan introduced the undead's knee to his boot, the Psycho collapsing on the ground. "You bastard!"

"All of this to say that I'm not stalking you," the courier said, as he kicked his beloved again. "I mean, look at me. I'm handsome. Only ugly people stalk, that's well known. If I hurt you, it's out of love."

His love of hurting Ghoul.

Darkling had said that the Black Ultimate One would remove it from causality and all future resets, and Ryan had wondered if it also applied to its previous hosts. However, the bag of bones had returned without any memory of the previous loop.

Which meant that Big Fat Adam lived again, plotting mischief.

"I'm calling Security!" the barman Renesco complained behind the bar counter, while the wounded Ghoul tried to crawl away from Ryan. The undead looked at the courier as if he were insane, which wounded his soft, sensible heart.

Ryan didn't react well to rejection.

"I know your secret weakness, Ghoul," Ryan said, as he opened his car's backdoor. "A kryptonite you cannot hope to defend yourself against."

A dirty street dog leaped out of the Plymouth Fury, her sparkling eyes lacking anything resembling intelligence; she was the bastard daughter of a mastiff and a greyhound, and inherited the ugliest parts of both. Her tongue stuck out, fleas happily moving on from her blackening fur to greener pastures. This plebeian creature lacked Eugène-Henry's aristocratic flair but had a certain rustic charm, though her terrible stench made the bar's patrons recoil.

"Her name is Henriette. I found her eating trash on my way to the bar, and I bought her loyalty with a ham." Ryan always kept food in his car for situations like this. "Now, as a cat person, this may seem like a betrayal. And it is!"

Ryan petted his hellhound behind the ears, and she loved it very much. All dogs wanted affection. "I have no shame, no hesitation, no principles!"

"What do you want?" Ghoul asked, looking at Henriette with dread. The she-dog had noticed him, her eyes rising up as she gazed at his barebone legs with hunger.

The Psycho knew what was coming.

"Only your pain," Ryan replied, pointing a finger at his prey. "Go, girl!"

Henriette leaped on Ghoul, and he couldn't crawl away fast enough.

The dog brought her new master a beautiful femur a few seconds later, and she was very proud of it too.

Ghoul was only the first person on Ryan's Christmas list. After the tense ending of the previous loop, the courier needed a moment of respite and catharsis before getting down to business.

Ryan's next naughty child lived not so far from Jamie's own house. The courier knocked on the door of a single-story bungalow, so perfect in its mundanity. Only the condemned windows indicated something wrong with the tenant.

The door soon opened, revealing a lean, gaunt man with snow white skin and raven hair. This pallid scarecrow

remained in the darkness, fearing the sunlight that would certainly burn his unholy soul. Garish, colorful paint figments covered his dirty clothes. The black circles around his bloodshot, green eyes told Ryan he had just woken up.

Damn, not only was this man a hitman, but he was also a vampire!

“Richard Pinkman?” Ryan asked. “Night Terror?”

“Uh... yes?” The vampire squinted suspiciously at the courier. “Do we know each other?”

“I have something for you, though it’s a bit late.” Ryan wanted to make this delivery in the last loop, but never found the opportunity to do so. “The night is dark and full of terrors, huh?”

The man frowned, realizing that his visitor knew of his power and its limitations. The vampire’s hand moved to his back, perhaps looking for a gun; as if he could hurt the pure of heart. “What kind of delivery?”

Ryan punched him in the face so hard, that the man stumbled backward. His back hit *something* with a loud clatter, though the courier couldn’t see due to the darkness inside the house.

“Don’t make me live through my childhood traumas again,” Ryan warned the vicious telepath. The fact these nightmares became real afterward had left the courier bitter. “You can’t fathom how much money I spent on therapists.”

Night Terror didn’t answer, knocked out cold.

Ryan took a moment to check off his Christmas list, finding the next name to be Karen Ricci, alias the Vamp. After the vampire, the witch. Unfortunately, it was getting late, and the courier might not survive his plan for her. Luigi came afterward, but Ryan was too tired for a late-afternoon hockey match.

“Maybe later.”

A princess waited for him.

Ryan reached the Deadland motel by nightfall, parking his car near the entrance. Henriette sat at his side, the bastard dog whining at her new master with shameful eyes. Though he favored cats and rabbits above all else, Ryan had learned how to handle dogs across loops. He knew that look.

“You want a litter box?”

Henriette yapped in response, her tongue sticking out of her mouth. She made a face only a dog lover could appreciate.

“Ghoul,” Ryan said, looking at the rearview mirror.

The lonely skull on the backseat looked back at the courier with fear. For a moment, Ryan almost felt pity for the murderous bag of bones. But then, he remembered his previous loop, and how Ghoul had encouraged his boss to turn the time-traveler into a Psycho.

Ryan removed his mask and hat, his terrible smile causing the undead to whine in stark, raving terror.

“Open your mouth.”

Bone Daddy's screams of despair were music to Ryan's ears, though they ended too soon. The Psycho had lost his courage with his spine.

Ryan left Henriette to her new chew toy, and walked towards the motel. He noticed light coming from Livia's room, but no Killer Seven member was guarding the door. Odd.

Still, Ryan whistled as he opened the suite's door, finding his former first lady waiting for him. The table was set, with delightful cookies and steaming coffee waiting for consumption.

Livia stood on the other side, her back turned against Ryan. She wore an elegant blue leather coat and long velvet gloves, a true femme fatale straight out of a detective noir movie. Her platinum hair flowed down like a silver waterfall.

"Hello, princess," Ryan said as he closed the door behind him. "How was your first time-travel trip?"

Livia turned around, her blue eyes observing him with cold amusement. Her face reminded Ryan of her aunt Pluto's lovely deadliness. "Pretty good," she said, her tone dangerous. "Though it will be the last."

Ryan frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I am so sorry Ryan, but now that I remember everything, you have outlived your usefulness. I have all the intel I need to take over this city, and the only obstacle remaining..." She marked a short pause. "Is you."

...

Shit.

Shit!

"I thought we were friends!" Ryan complained, his hand moving to his coat to draw a knife.

"And you believed me?" The courier froze, as Livia's hands moved to her chair. Somehow, her every movement seemed effortlessly threatening. "Cancel is waiting outside, and her power is already at work. It's over."

Oh gods, this was Alchemo's betrayal all over again! Ryan reflexively activated his power, and the world turned purple as he prepared to strike Livia.

Wait, how could his time-stop still work if Cancel was around the door?

Ryan looked at the frozen Livia, and noticed the smile she desperately tried to suppress.

No way.

She wouldn't dare. She wouldn't *dare*.

Ryan quickly opened the door when time resumed, and found no killer outside.

She dared.

"You... you evil mastermind!" Ryan said while closing the gate behind him, the hidden knife back inside his trenchcoat. "You pranked me!"

Livia responded with a warm, delightful laughter. "I'm sorry," she apologized, a sheepish grin on her face. "I know this is silly, but I always wanted to make a speech like this. I knew nobody else would take it seriously."

Her last loop as Ryan's sidekick had corrupted Livia.

He had created a *monster*.

"I apologize if I scared you. I didn't know how you would react, which is why I did it." Livia shyly joined her hands. "Can you forgive me, Ryan?"

"I could never blame someone with such an impeccable fashion sense," Ryan said, sitting around the table. "But don't try it again, princess, I could have killed you. I'm really sensitive about these things."

Her joy instantly turned to horror. "Truly?" Livia asked while she sat as well. "What happened?"

"A few people went mad after I informed them of the truth," Ryan admitted, warming his hands by touching his coffee cup. "Some tried to restrain me so I wouldn't reload. Others went farther."

"I..." And now Livia regretted her joke. Her hands moved to touch his own, and they felt warmer than the cup. "I'm sorry, Ryan. I didn't wish to open up old wounds."

"Nah, it's alright. If anything, you're helping them to heal." At long last, Ryan had an ally that would help up across future loops. With Livia's help, he could make his allies remember him. His friendships would survive the test of time. "I already retaliated anyway."

"What do you mean?" Livia frowned, as she suddenly realized the cookies had vanished. "Did you eat them in the frozen time?"

Ryan smiled.

"That was childish," Livia said as she returned the smile, her hands moving back to her own coffee cup. "So, Ryan. How do we win?"

We. The word warmed Ryan's heart like a campfire on a cold night.

Ryan shared with Livia the previous loop's end. How he and Len confirmed that Dynamis kept a mutated Bloodstream prisoner inside their lab fortress, and how Len's presence allowed it to escape. He told her of his allies' last stand against Alphonse Manada, how Bloodstream destroyed New Rome, and how Augustus chose to attack Leo Hargraves rather than stop fighting.

The courier didn't mention how he managed to hurt Lightning Butt though. His daughter might not react well, and Ryan himself didn't fully understand what happened. He needed more time to figure that part out.

The more Livia listened, the deeper the frown on her face. "This is horrifying," she said, sipping her coffee thoughtfully. "Seeing your stepfather in such a state..."

"I hate him." Seeing Bloodstream devour his own daughter only reinforced Ryan's poor opinion of him. "Death will be a mercy."

"Can we even kill him? If he makes up Dynamis' Knockoff Elixirs, then a part of him will remain within countless Genomes."

"I have the formula for Dr. Tyrano's vaccine. Unless Bloodstream's core is in contact with Len's blood, he won't develop an immunity to it." The monster didn't do so either when Shortie's fluids touched a Knockoff Elixir, perhaps

because her father had very little control over his fragments while neutered by Dynamis.

"But it works through injections," Livia pointed out. "Even with the best vaccination campaign, many will refuse to give up their powers. Especially since most paid a small fortune for them."

"Yeah, and people smoke while thinking they'll win the coin toss." Ryan let out a shrug. "I have an idea in mind, but I want your opinion first. How much time do we have?"

"I ran simulations while listening to your tale," Livia said, joining her fingers. "Now that I know what is inside Lab Sixty-Six, my visions are more accurate. The odds of this pandemic are low, but increase dramatically if Alphonse Manada takes over Dynamis. And he will, given time; it might take a year or ten, but the odds increase with time. It can happen even under Hector Manada's chairmanship."

The incompetent chairman didn't worry the courier much. By now, he had realized that Atom Smasher was the real threat among his family. The strongest, the most determined.

Bloodstream would need to go whatever happened, but Livia's prophecy reassured Ryan somewhat. "Out of all the disasters we must solve, this one is a long-term problem," the courier said. "The two other calamities won't wait years."

Livia scowled. "When will the Meta-Gang use Mechron's satellite weapon?"

"Somewhere between May 12th and 18th." Big Fat Adam used the weapon on the last date, but Ryan had seen him and Psypsy take over the bunker as early as May 12th. The

malevolent sociopath had almost pulled the trigger when the Manada invaded his HQ in the Dynamis loop. “And if nothing is done, Leo Hargraves and the Carnival will arrive in New Rome within three weeks.”

“And my father will wage war on them,” Livia said sorrowfully. “Destroying New Rome.”

“I’m sorry,” Ryan apologized. “Your father is not a nice man.”

“I know,” she said, looking away. “Do you have a paper sheet?”

A few seconds later, Livia scribbled a makeshift calendar on a paper sheet, planning the month of May. She added crosses on the 12th, 18th, and 28th—the rough date of Hargraves’ planned arrival, though Ryan never carried a loop this far.

“We must deal with Adam the Ogre first,” Livia stated the obvious as she examined the calendar. “We have four days to prepare an attack.”

“It will have to be done today in the final loop. The fatass is throwing people at the bunker’s defenses as we speak.” The memory of Hannifat Lecter threatening to eat a hostage still haunted the courier. “The longer we wait, the higher the kill count.”

“So this loop is not the final one even in the best case scenario?” Livia asked with a frown. “You want to assault the bunker the moment the next loop begins?”

“After I take out the trash first.” Much like during his suicide run, Ryan would demolish Ghoul, and then attack the bunker afterward. “If Adam and Psyshock can be neutralized, then I

can subsume their minions. If we have a cure for the Psycho condition, it'll be even easier."

"I can help with the assault, but I'm afraid my father will catch wind of the bunker if I call upon more help," Livia said. "Fortuna would hold her tongue though. Would the three of us be enough to defeat the Meta-Gang?"

"I'm not sure." Lucky Girl might make up for Darkling's absence or the plushie's inactivity, or maybe not. Shortie would probably help even without her memories, and perhaps Shroud too. "I need to perfect the memory transfer. The more people fighting with us the better."

"Especially since we need you to manually transfer memories. If you perish early, then this complicates the next loop." Livia crossed her arms. "Can you recreate the mind-transfer machine on your own?"

Ryan shook his head. Even with his considerable financial resources, the Genius device needed pieces difficult to make without a support network. "I will need more technological resources. Either the bunker, Vulcan, or Dynamis."

"I can introduce you to Vulcan," Livia argued. "I will not ask for the machine's blueprints, if you are worried about that."

"Will you do a new villain speech if I give it away?" Ryan teased her.

"I doubt it will surprise you again," she mused, though her smile quickly faltered. "What about Mathias?"

"I can convince the Carnival to halt its assault on your family if I swear to play double agent, destroy the Bliss Factory, and sabotage your mob's operations."

Livia frowned in skepticism. “Will Ischia Island’s destruction prevent Hargraves from showing up?”

“I’m not sure. The Carnival wants to end your family’s criminal activities, and honestly, I can’t blame them for it.” If only a battle between the two organizations didn’t threaten to tear the city apart... “And then there’s Narcinia. Your father abducted her and murdered her parents.”

Livia looked at her coffee cup, losing herself in the steaming blackness. She had confirmed this story in the previous loop, and it shook her to the core. Perhaps she thought that while her father was ruthless, he only went after people who threatened him first. Only now did she see Lightning Butt’s true, hateful self.

“I still can’t forgive Hargraves for killing my mother,” Livia said. “What happened to Narcinia’s parents didn’t make this a justified retaliation. However... I agree that Narcinia suffered a terrible injustice, and it is my duty to correct it.”

“The Carnival is pretty reasonable,” Ryan argued, having dealt with them extensively. “If they understand that you will inherit your father’s empire to better dismantle it, maybe they won’t poke the hornet’s nest. Returning Narcinia to them would show your goodwill.”

“Let me think about this,” Livia said. “I need more time to process simulations. A wrong move here could make my father overreact.”

What an understatement. She might as well have said the Titanic had a small ice problem.

“And finally, we must destroy what remains of your stepfather,” Livia changed the subject. “What was your idea?”

"A Carnival member, Dr. Stitch, is a Genius specialized in viruses and illnesses," Ryan said. "Since he already studied Bloodstream, I believe he could create something from the vaccine."

Livia's head perked up in interest. "A Knockoff vaccine plague?"

"Something like that. I can also contact Tyrano, see if he can help as well. If the sample in Len's body is neutralized, then Bloodstream cannot escape." Ryan finished his coffee. "As you see, princess, all the pieces are there. We just need to find the right way to assemble them. The sequence that will save everyone."

"Can we?" Livia asked with a frown. "Save everyone?"

"Yes." Everyone who *deserved* to be saved, at least. "It's not my first rodeo."

Livia looked into his eyes, her face undecipherable. "How many resets did it take you to reach this moment?"

Ryan shrugged. "Dozens."

"And you are not yet done." Livia shook her head, her gaze full of compassion. "I was sincere when I told you we should find a way to ease your burden. I won't have you martyr yourself on a cross for our sake."

"Who else will?" Ryan asked back. "Someone has to do it. Millions of lives are at stake."

"But the process doesn't have to be painful, or lonely," Livia argued. "I'm sure we can find a way to make your resets painless. I doubt I am the only one who cares for your well-being."

The time-traveler looked away. Shortie cared too, but she was family. Even Alchemeo had tried to set his foot down, to earn Ryan's forgiveness.

"I made promises," the courier said, thinking back of Jasmine, Bianca, and so many others. "Fulfilling them is all that matters."

"Not if it means you sacrifice your own happiness for others." Livia smiled. "A perfect ending for everyone includes you too, Ryan."

If only she knew. Ryan's mind wandered back to his first Perfect Run in Monaco, where he saved Simon and so many more from that hellish prison. Though he gave a happy ending to everyone else, the adventure left the courier with a bittersweet taste. He alone had remembered the moment they all shared together. His Perfect Runs afterward had left him with the same feeling.

But this time would be different. He hoped things would change this time around.

He wanted them to.

"I will try," Ryan said. "Any suggestion on how to proceed?"

Livia answered with a nod. "Join my father's organization, and tell the Carnival that you will act as their mole to buy time. I can introduce you to Vulcan so you may recreate your brain-transfer machine, and I will see how to deal with Narcinia. It will be easier to plan the raid on the Meta-Gang if we cooperate closely. Do you think you could turn some of the Psychos against Adam before we attack the bunker? What about Sarin?"

Ryan shook his head. “Sarin only attacks the harbor if Ghoul can back her up and Psyshock isn’t neutralized, but I need to offer the bag of bones to appease the Carnival and that telepath has to go. I have no other means of contacting her for certain.”

“I am not certain that trusting the Carnival is the right step,” Livia admitted, slightly worried. “But I trust *you*, Ryan. If you feel this is the right way...”

“It’s the best option we have right now,” Ryan said, rising from his seat. “I need to meet with Len now.”

Both to arrange the memory transfer, and prepare for Psyshock’s inevitable raid on the orphanage.

“I have her brainmap, and others. We can arrange the transfer as soon as you have the machine operational.” Livia’s fingers fidgeted nervously. “You will stay at Jamie Cutter’s house this time around?”

“It’s probable,” Ryan replied. “That or Len’s place.”

“Maybe I will pay you a visit then,” the mafia princess said with a friendly grin. “It doesn’t feel right you’re always the one coming to visit me.”

Ryan chuckled. “You will need a diving suit if I’m moving in with Shortie.”

“I would prefer a drier place,” Livia mused. “See you soon, Ryan.”

“See you soon, Princess,” he said, as he closed the door behind him. Now... now he needed to convince an old friend to have her brain rewritten. A tall order.

The courier returned to his car, finding Henriette playfully licking a dejected skull. The light had left out Ghoul's eyes, alongside all his hopes.

"Shortie," Ryan said, as he put on the Chronoradio. "Shortie, I know you can hear me."

The Chronoradio played a song from a time that never was.

"We need to talk," the courier continued, letting out a sigh. "Your father is alive. Dynamis holds him prisoner in one of their labs."

Her response came out of the radio seconds afterward.

"Meet me at the orphanage."

Ryan had heard these words before, but never with that tone. Anger, and determination.

Dynamis would never know what hit them.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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93: Defenders of the Realm

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Hi guys, apparently Royal Road allow you to vote for the hottest fiction on the website! You have the button on the bottom right after the chapter. Please vote for the Perfect Run!

“You don’t believe me?” Ryan asked Len, his feet dangling from the edge of the orphanage’s roof. The stars shone brightly in New Rome’s polluted skies, their light piercing through the darkness.

“How can I?” Len asked, holding her head with her hands. Her water rifle remained within reach of her hand. “Time-travel? Downloadable memories? This is... this is insane, Riri. Insane. And my father... you’re saying my father is alive, and that Dynamis... that Dynamis turned him into...”

Well, as alive as a virus could be. Wait, could Pluto kill Bloodstream for good if her power registered him? Food for thought.

Ryan raised a hand to comfort Len, but his old friend recoiled. Without her memories, all the trust he managed to build up between them had vanished; it would have hurt once, but not this time. With Livia’s help, forgetfulness would no longer be a curse, but a temporary obstacle.

If he could convince Len to accept the memory transfer procedure. Which considering her trust issues might prove difficult.

Perhaps Ryan should save a few seconds after he began a new loop? If he could only bring back a person at once, this would at least make the memory transfer permanent. They would only remember one loop, so it was an imperfect solution, but it was better than nothing.

“This... this is too much. Too much. I... I need time to process this.” Len joined her hands, hyperventilating. It took her a few minutes to recover, and Ryan waited patiently. “I need to see the tech in question, Riri. If it’s really mine... if it’s really mine, I will recognize it. All the other stuff, you could have invented or learned through other means, but...”

“Sure,” Ryan replied with a warm tone, trying to reassure her. “Anything you need.”

Len took a long deep breath. “Riri. What happened to me?” she asked with a soft, weak voice. “When we reached that lab, assuming I believe your tale... you said I died. But not how. How did I perish?”

“You really want to know?” Ryan asked with a sigh. “It will hurt, Shortie.”

“More than everything else you told me?” She struggled to hold back tears. “He killed me.”

“Yes,” Ryan admitted. She deserved to know the truth, no matter how horrifying. “There’s a piece of him in your blood. Some kind of sleeper agent or tracking device. When you approached your father—”

"I became him." Warm tears rained down Len's cheeks, while she pinched her nose not to sob.

Perhaps a part of her always knew it was a possibility, even if she refused to believe it.

She did believe Ryan. Even if the tale sounded outlandish, Shortie still thought her oldest friend wouldn't lie to her. No matter how horrifying the tale.

"Len, there's..." Ryan struggled to find the right words, so she wouldn't panic. "If the blood sample inside you could transform you into a monster, maybe it can do something subtler?"

Len glared at him, her sadness transforming into anger. "You're saying... you're saying that my father influenced my thoughts. My feelings... that my feelings for him aren't my own."

"Maybe they are, or maybe not. But the doubt remains as long as you carry that infection." The courier crossed his arms. "Len, we have to remove it. Not only for everyone else's sake, but yours too."

"How? It's inside me, Riri. It's in my blood like a cancer, and your vaccine won't work on it."

"I know a few Geniuses who could help." He had already sent an email to Dr. Tyrano through the scalie's secure channel, offering him to cooperate on Knockoff research... and asking for information about his secret 'Monster Girl' project, much to the courier's shame. "One can even help you with your..."

"My depression?" Len frowned. "I'm... I'm not a problem to be solved."

“No, no.” That was exactly why he had been opposed to interacting with her across many loops. If her experience didn’t carry through, then the courier would treat her less like a person and more like an equation. “It’s... if you want. After recovering your memories.”

“And if I don’t want your transfer?” Len wiped away the tears with her hand. “Will you repeat this conversation until I say yes?”

Ryan paused to consider the question, realizing that his entire plan hinged on Len accepting the memory transfer. If his amnesiac friend wouldn’t, then what could he do? Kidnap her and transfer the memories by force? Find a way to transfer the stored knowledge across time without the current Len’s consent?

“You would rather stay amnesiac?” the courier asked. “It’s not brainwashing. You will remember memories that you forgot, but it won’t erase yours.”

“But it will change me, and I don’t know how. You know, but...”

“You’re afraid of what you will learn,” Ryan guessed. Ignorance was bliss.

“Answer me, Riri.”

“I will respect your choice. Even if it hurts.” In the end, Ryan couldn’t force his decisions upon those he loved. “I can offer my hand, but you have to reach back too.”

Len raised her knees, holding them with her arms in a fetal position. Her expression was thoughtful, undecipherable.

"Psyshock will attack this place in two days," Ryan reminded her, changing the subject. "We need to prepare for it."

"This place is rotten," Len said, glancing at New Rome's bright neon lights. "The deeper I go, the stronger the stench. The flashy colors only hide the ugliness underneath."

"I agree with you that most of the locals don't have fashion sense, but there are quite a few locals overflowing with glamour." Ryan should introduce Len to Wardrobe at one point. "Where did you go after we split up?"

"The Canary Islands," Len admitted. "The sub's autopilot tried to bring me to the USA, but an engine problem halfway redirected it to the closest island. I stayed a few months there before moving on."

So the *Laïka* had honored its namesake. "Pretty nice place," Ryan said. "I'm surprised they managed to establish an independent republic from Dynamis, considering how half of Spain has fallen under their control."

Len's head perked up in surprise. "You went there?"

"Yeah, I think it was..." Two hundred years ago? Ryan's memory was a bit foggy, as his adventures in North Africa hadn't been memorable. "A while ago. We must have missed each other."

"It was... it was nice. The islanders are nice."

"Will you return there?" Ryan asked, his old friend shaking her head.

"They still fight each other sometimes," she said. "Wherever I went... there were always Genomes who wanted more. I

couldn't make a difference there, and I couldn't make a difference in New Rome either."

"You still can."

"Even if we reveal how the Knockoffs are truly made of, Dynamis will continue to oppress people. If they could do something like that for a few more euros... then they're capable of *anything*." She shook her head. "And the Augusti destroy lives through drugs and blood money. I've seen the ruins of Malta below the sea, Riri. Augustus made an underwater tomb for thousands."

She wasn't wrong, but again she only saw the darkness and missed the stars. "I think these groups can change," Ryan said, remembering his Il Migliore loop and his discussions with Livia. "If the right people are in charge."

"I hope you're right."

"But you don't believe me." Ryan shrugged, rising up and walking on the roof. "It's fine, I'll change your mind."

"You're going?" Len bit her lower lip. "You can... you can stay, you know."

"Thanks," Ryan said from the bottom of his heart. "I still have another date though."

He moved to the door separating the roof from the levels below, but his hand stopped on the handle. "Len, there's something I never dared to ask you before, in any of our conversations." Ryan peeked over his shoulder, Len still sitting on the roof's edge. "That day, when I returned to our hideout... you and the sub were gone. Did you leave, or was it the autopilot?"

Len looked away, avoiding his gaze. “I waited for you and Dad until the last second, and when you didn’t return, I... I didn’t know what to do. I thought you were both dead, and I... I just let the Laïka carry me away.”

With her family gone, Len had lost all hope for a better life.

But she had waited for Ryan until the very end.

And so, he wouldn’t abandon her.

Ryan left Len to meditate on what he told her, crossing paths with Little Sarah in the stairs. She must have tried to eavesdrop, only to find the door firmly closed. “Hey, pintsize,” the courier waved a hand at this petulant child, delighting in teasing her. “Have you seen my dog? I’m taking her on a walk.”

“Wait until I hit puberty, jackass,” the child replied, crossing her arms while pouting. “Your doggie is playing with that lazy cat and your rabbit outside.”

...

Ryan’s hands hastily moved to his trenchcoat, searching his pockets.

A-Bomb? Check.

Guns? Check.

Knives? Check.

Buzzer? Check.

Plushie?

Not check.

"Uh oh."

Ryan rushed outside much to Sarah's surprise, slamming the orphanage's doors open.

He found Henriette 'playing' with Eugène-Henry in the yard. The courier had introduced his pets to each other, and the aristocratic cat dealt with the lowborn dog the same way a noble did with a peasant; by trying to ignore her entire existence. Still, Henriette proved too obstinate, or too stupid, to realize that. She kept licking and nuzzling the cat in an attempt to elicit a reaction, to no avail.

And the plushie sat on the steps, the button on its back switched on. The vile, long-eared demon glanced south of New Rome, perhaps dreaming of setting the city ablaze.

How? Ryan didn't let it anywhere near the orphans! Who could have stolen it from him and switched the machine on?

Unless...

The courier had assumed a Meta-Gang member accidentally switched it on during the last loop, mistaking it for something harmless. But now that he thought of it, the timing of the furred horror's rescue was a bit too perfect.

"You could always activate," Ryan guessed in horror. "You were just pretending."

All this time.

All this time, the time-traveler thought he had bound the demon inside a pentagram, but it could always step over. Ryan's illusion of control shattered, his fingers trembling with dread. For centuries... for centuries, he had lived at the mercy of a horror that he had called, but couldn't put down.

The plushie looked at his maker with its big blue eyes, and then behind him; Ryan froze, as he heard Little Sarah had followed him outside. The courier's heart skipped a beat, as he watched all his hopes for this loop go down the drain.

And then the abyss looked away.

The plushie ignored them both, and gazed at Mount Augustus. It didn't enter cute mode, didn't make a sound. No pre-recorded message answered Ryan's words; neither a laser nor a switchblade shed blood all over the orphanage.

The plushie didn't want to play.

"You aren't going to kill anyone?" Ryan asked his dreaded creation. "Not even disembowel a Psycho or two?"

No answer.

Ryan didn't hear the whispers either. Alien voices followed in the plushie's wake, but they had gone silent. The toy's eldritch shadow, once so fearsome, had shrunk in size by half.

"You're talking to a toy," Little Sarah said. "I knew you were a druggie."

Not even the promise of slaughter or the presence of preteens elicited a reaction. Instead, the plushie kept glaring at Mount Augustus with its big blue eyes; the menacing aura within them replaced with sourness. Ryan reached a terrible conclusion, the maddening truth clear for all to see.

By defeating the plushie so thoroughly, Lightning Butt had done the impossible.

He gave it *depression*.

Ryan knocked on Shroud's door next. His visit was a bit earlier than usual, but he sweetened the deal with a free stuffed Ghoul. The Psycho had gone torpid, to the point Ryan wondered if his immortality gave in.

Though Ryan didn't mention time travel, he told the translucent vigilante almost everything else. Both sat on opposing chairs for an hour inside Shroud's hideout, the vigilante silent as a tomb. By the time his guest finished his tale, all windows had cracks and dawn rose on New Rome outside.

Mathias Martel only said one word.

“*Fuck.*”

“Pretty much,” Ryan said. “I’m pretty sure the Knockoffs also contain carcinogens, though I can’t prove it.”

Shroud joined his hands, meditating on what he had learned. “Do you have a hard proof that Bloodstream makes up the Knockoffs? We destroyed all our samples to prevent him from returning.”

“I have.” Len allowed Ryan to take a drop of blood for study, which he offered to the vigilante. “Put this in contact with a Dynamis Knockoff, and you will see. Keep a flamethrower nearby though.”

“I will need the vaccine data too,” Shroud said, as he carefully examined the blood in a syringe. Even now, Ryan half-expected it to burst out of its container. “If our Genius confirms what you said, then we will have to come to New Rome in force.”

"I would rather avoid that," Ryan said. "Trust me, you will get a lot more than pigeon shit on your windshield if you do that, Matty."

The glass manipulator's armor seemed to shift, threatening to grow spikes. After a short moment of hesitation, he removed his helmet, revealing his true face. He approached Ryan's head, gazing into his eyes with absolute, chilling seriousness.

"From what you're telling me, Adam the Ogre—a man so terrible he was already eating people long before he gained superpowers—is within days of getting his hands on an orbital superweapon, and Dynamis infected thousands of people with the seeds of a global pandemic," Mathias Martel said. "Both disasters are only possible because we failed to properly address them. Now, tell me Quicksave. How is this *not* a situation that deserves our full attention?"

"I told you, I can select whichever universe I want," Ryan lied. "The sun will set on New Rome if Sunshine makes his way here. Lightning Butt will see to that. Countless innocents will die."

"So you say," the vigilante replied.

Ryan squinted at the hero. "How many times has your group fought Lightning Butt?"

Shroud clenched his fists. "Too many times."

They had tried to bring him down for years, and failed. "Then you know Mob Zeus is a heartless bastard who only cares for power and revenge," Ryan said. The memory of that madman striking Sunshine down as the world collapsed around them flashed vividly in the courier's mind. "He's a

bitter old man dying of cancer. He has little left to lose, except for his daughter.”

“I know that.”

“Good. Now, imagine him near this city’s powder kegs. Do you think he will put aside his grievances against a greater threat, or make things worse for Leo just to spite him?”

Shroud’s silence was an answer in itself.

Ryan delivered the coup de grace. “You had a plan for New Rome, but it didn’t account for either Adam or Bloodstream. It didn’t survive contact with the enemy, so you’ve got to adapt.”

“Who do you serve, Quicksave?” Mathias asked, after pondering his words. “Which side are you on?”

“The realm!” Ryan put a hand on his chest. “And my own side.”

Mathias looked at him with a frown. “So you’re just trying to save your hide?”

“Didn’t anyone tell you I’m immortal?” Ryan shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t want this city to burn or the world to end, is that too much to ask? I have friends on both sides, and I want all of them to be happy. Isn’t that what you want too?”

“I want to save lives yes,” Shroud replied, hanging back in his chair. “But I want to save them *permanently*. We tried to deal with Bloodstream in the past, only for Dynamis to lie to us so they could exploit him for profit. We killed Mechron, but his weapons remain available to even worse villains. I don’t want to repeat everything in five years.”

Ryan examined him closely. "You knew something like this would happen with Bloodstream." That was what he gathered from their brief interactions last loop.

The vigilante nodded. "My mother, Alice Martel, was once called Pythia."

"The seer?" Ryan never met her, though she was part of the Carnival's original line-up. She had left the group by the time they tracked Bloodstream down. "My condolences."

"She still lives." Shroud looked away in sadness. "She almost died fighting Mechron, but she's recovering in Denmark with my father."

"Recovering, as in rising from the dead?"

"Nidhogg and his men haven't progressed that far yet," Mr. Safelite replied. "Before she was wounded in action against Mechron, my mother provided a detailed report of future threats to the world. Though Augustus was ranked high, Bloodstream topped the list. He was expected to cause an extinction event in the case your sister died."

So that was why the Carnival pursued that bloody headache so relentlessly. Unfortunately, all they did was delay the disaster and let Dynamis worsen it. Ryan shuddered upon remembering Len being absorbed into that eldritch horror.

The prophecy had come true.

But seers didn't decide the march of time.

Ryan did.

"It will still happen, unless we act," the courier said. "But we can still change the future. We can end this nightmare once

and for all, if we cooperate.”

“How?” Mathias asked, skeptical. “We aren’t powerful enough to destroy the bunker without Leo, Mr. Wave, and others at our back. Dynamis is corrupt, so we can’t rely on Il Migliore’s help either.”

“There are other heroes in Rome,” Ryan said. “Let me recruit a crack team of rogues and misfits! Who knows, maybe you will find love among them!”

Shroud didn’t put much trust in his wingmate. “Even if we somehow manage to prevail on our own, saving lives isn’t enough, Quicksave. Justice must be served. Augustus can’t keep poisoning people, and especially not continue to exploit the Costa’s daughter. He can’t get away with his crimes, and neither can the Manadas.”

“I know.” After watching Lightning Butt ravage New Rome in one loop and worsen its destruction in another, Ryan had sworn to bring the immortal emperor down. And maybe he was the only one capable of doing so. “But you can leave the Augusti to me. If you take care of the Bloodstream vaccine, my transparent friend, I swear I will destroy the Bliss Factory and return Julie Costa’s daughter to you. Blowing up stuff is my passion in life.”

“You can’t expect Leo and the others to wait things out.”

“There are other Mechron bases,” Ryan said, the vigilante’s eyes widening in alarm. “The bunker below the Junkyard is one of many, but I recorded their locations. Sunshine can hunt them down while we deal with the situation here in New Rome. With his legacy wiped out, we can finally exorcise Mechron’s ghost for good.”

With luck, the Mechron base could also cause the Bahamut to self-detonate, preventing anyone else from using the orbital laser ever again.

"And the Manadas?" Shroud asked. "Hector is mad, Fallout is madder, and Blackthorn lied to us."

"Actually, though his fashion sense would tell otherwise, I believe our dear gardener is the cleanest of them."

Ryan remembered Enrique complaining to his brother about lying to him at the end of the previous restart. Jasmine had also told the courier that the manager was supposed to manage Knockoff Elixirs' production until he visited Lab Sixty-Six and left in disgust. He must have found his family's dirty secret then.

Atom Smasher was too fanatical to back down, and his father too corrupt. Blackthorn though... Ryan had mistaken the gardener for a closet supervillain, but he had his heart in the right place.

Enrique was Livia's counterpart in Dynamis. A well-meaning man trying to reform his organization from the inside, but too bound by familial love to take a hard stance. They both needed to inherit for New Rome to know peace.

Removing Hector Manada would be easy; Ryan only had to reveal his corruption and alliance with Hannifat Lecter.

Fallout wouldn't give up power without a fight though.

"We can work with Greenhand to clean up the skeletons in his company's closet," Ryan said. "I think a part of him wants to take action, but he isn't sure how. If you approach him with hard data about the danger his company's miracle drug presents, he might turn his coat."

"I will inform Leo and Stitch about your plan, but I can't guarantee anything." Shroud marked a short pause. "You said Psyshock will attack Rust Town's orphanage on May 10th?"

"Yes, and we'll counterattack immediately afterward."

"The reason why the Carnival was so effective was because of my mother," Shroud said. "Now I see why. After she fell ill, I tried to pick up the slack, but I cannot see the future. You can though, Quicksave. It's almost unfair."

"Trust me, I earned that knowledge."

Mathias said nothing, examining Ryan carefully. His eyes wandered to the courier's mask and hat, the vigilante's face straining. He didn't say a word for half a minute, as if trying to figure something out.

"Have you fallen for me?" Ryan asked. "Trust me, I get that all the time."

"How far can you go back?"

The courier was thankful for the mask shielding his face.
"Sorry?"

"It can't all be visions of alternate timelines. You know too much, with too many vivid details. Even a powerful Blue like my mother would be hard-pressed to provide all the secrets you hand out like candies, and you're a Violet. You *know* me."

He was far too sharp for his own good.

"You don't just freeze time," Mathias guessed. "You control it. You're a chronokinetic."

Ryan's first instinct was to deny the truth, to mislead.

Instead, he held his tongue and considered his next words.

For centuries, the courier kept his cards close to his chest. His misadventures with Alchemo and so many others had taught him caution. But at one point, that caution turned into paranoia, until he could trust no one. Trust was a two-way street, an open wound.

Ryan only found the strength to reach out for Jasmine when all was lost, and she wagered her life on his success. Livia was a case of bad luck, but they learned to trust each other. Bianca sacrificed his life for him. Even Alchemo had made an effort to make up for his mistakes.

Slowly, Ryan Romano had learned to open his heart.

Though he killed the time-traveler a few times before they got to know each other, Mathias Martel had his heart in the right place. He reminded Ryan of Felix, a young man burning with a strong desire to make things right. After interacting with him over so many loops, Ryan had grown to know the vigilante. Even to respect him.

Perhaps the courier gave away so much information because he subconsciously trusted the Carnival member already. He would have been far more careful about what he said with someone else. Ryan wanted the vigilante on his side, to be a trustworthy ally rather than a means to an end.

And so, he took a leap of faith.

"What if I were, hypothetically?"

"Then I would assume you can't travel very far." Mathias intertwined his fingers. "Do you know why we're going all in

on Augustus now? We have worked down my mother's list of threats to the world. We've defeated Psychos, warlords, and monsters. But we could never beat *him*. And now... now we must."

Ryan tensed up. "He's going to do something."

"At one point in the coming years, Augustus will attack Dynamis and try to take over Europe by force. He will go all-out. It will be Malta all over again, except that he won't settle for anything but complete victory. And though it will cost many lives, he will get what he wants."

Ryan remembered watching New Rome burn, torn apart by the Augusti and the Il Migliore-Dynamis alliance. The courier thought Sunshine's presence started it, but in truth, it had only accelerated Lightning Butt's timetable.

Tyrants didn't go into quiet retirement.

When confronted with his inevitable death by cancer, Augustus would take a page from Big Fat Adam's book. He would try to ensure Livia would rule unopposed once he was dead and buried, by destroying Dynamis, the Carnival, and anyone he could get his hands on in the little time he had left. Perhaps Lightning Butt thought he would go out in a blaze of glory, leaving his daughter as queen of the ashes.

Did Livia see it in her visions? Was it why she was so adamant about managing her father so he wouldn't 'overreact'?

"Since we can't defeat Augustus directly, we decided to cripple the organization," Mathias admitted. "Even if he's all-powerful, he is only one man. He needs soldiers to carry out his will, drugs to fuel his war chest. If we do that, Quicksave, will it stop him?"

The vigilante's tone was hesitant, begging. He wanted to hear a yes, a confirmation that his efforts hadn't been for naught.

And Ryan couldn't say yes.

The time-traveler had managed to affect Augustus in the previous loop, true, but his punch hurt the courier more than his foe. The ivory titan's retaliation tossed Ryan through a building, and he then proceeded to survive Leo Hargraves going supernova. All of this happened *after* Lightning Butt trounced the plushie so hard that it sent the terrible monster into an existential crisis.

Sunshine could bring down Mechron, but not Augustus.

The plushie could destroy the world, but not Augustus. The extradimensional horror that haunted Ryan's dreams for centuries couldn't even scratch him. Darkling might have, but it had returned home.

Augustus was the most powerful creature on Earth short of the Ultimate Ones; and Ryan had no permanent solution to bring him down yet.

Only a hope.

"I may have a way," Ryan said. "To put him down for good."

"May," Shroud repeated, dejected. "May."

"May," the time-traveler admitted. "I need more time. I won't let him win, I swear it. Doesn't matter how long it takes, what it will cost me. *I won't let him win.*"

It didn't reassure Mathias at all, but it broke him out of his despair. "That extinction event, Adam taking over the

Bahamut... It happened before?"

Ryan hesitated, but then nodded slowly. Mathias Martel lowered his head, trembling with anger. At Dynamis, at the Meta-Gang, but at himself most of all.

"I'm trying to solve this, but I can't do it alone," Ryan admitted, both to the vigilante, and to himself. "So... are you in?"

Mathias snickered, a look of determination on his face. "Do you even need to ask?"

And so, Ryan recruited another Avenger to his cause.

Only one left. An independent hero unaffiliated with Dynamis, whose power and purity of heart was unmatched. Half a man, half a beast, and the best of both.

Ryan typed a number on his cellphone as he exited Shroud's shack, listening to the sound of waves crashing on the shore. He didn't have to wait long, as someone picked up before the courier could return to his Plymouth Fury.

"Yes?" The voice on the other end of the line

"Timmy?" Ryan replied, opening the door. Henriette yapped from the backseat, while Eugène-Henry napped and the plushie sulked.

"That is the Panda's name!" Poor boy, he must have waited next to his phone for hours, desperately wishing for a call.

"The Panda... the Panda can do anything. Even save cats up in trees!"

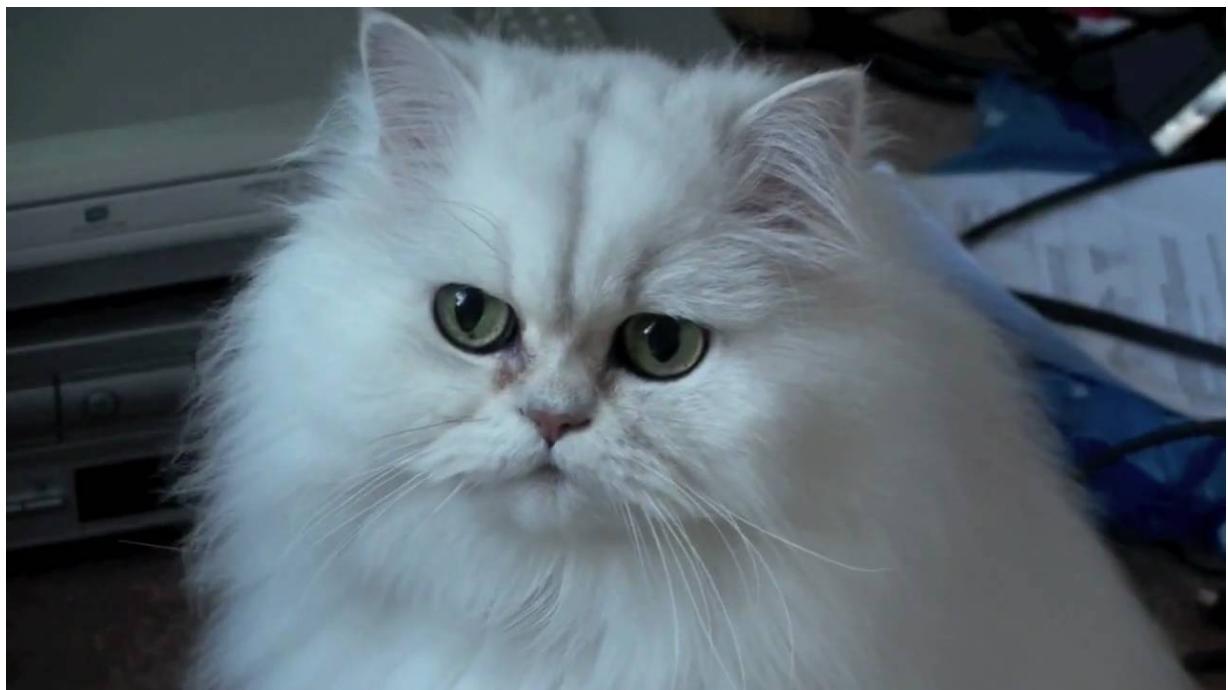
"It's your lucky day, dear bear."

Ryan smiled behind his mask.

"Tell me, have you considered joining a traveling circus?"

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Cat lovers, this is a message from his meowing majesty, Eugène-Henry de Monaco.



It has reached my royal ears that Royal Road now allows readers to vote for the hottest fiction. Yet my beautiful minion Ryan's face is not on the first page! I now implore you, vote for my human. He deserves it. Every voter will get a free Elixir, and the right to pet me (once; try to pet me twice, and you will lose a hand).

Everyone who doesn't vote shall be fed to hungry clowns; a capital punishment usually reserved for Psychos, furries, and dogs.

You can find the button on this chapter's bottom right. Make the right choice. The only choice.

My most meowing thanks,

Eugène-Henry, Trueborn Prince Suzerain of Monaco.

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James Heney, felix, Tom, Harrison, RandomAnkle, The Duke, RageBone, some guy, Geminus, Timothy Dingman, Mathias Nielsen, Leon Schultz, TaškuProsím, Miran 41, Matthew Lewis Worthington, Joshua Turnbull, Adwait Gautam, William Martinez, León Carter Lancaster, Psychman, Seebot.Haseeb, Tom, Steven Thomsen, Marcus Bae, Xiaoding Wen, Gimro, Okuyanokuyucu, Ragnar, Mark, James Short, Cosimo Yap, Thrackie Gregory, Vexdt, Jude, Douglas Hoeflin, Richard Davis II, Jian Yao, Aadarm, Zack Crum, Mr. Book-Stash, confusion, Tre, Samuel Alexander Vall Andersen, BeetleJones, Thundermike00, Shironic, Armand Sellier, styww2 w, Dominic Ferreira, Mr.Thr33, Ulthar, Steven McNeeley, Phoenix Van Wagoner, mcnamara ?, Orange, Johnny2by4, Deshawn, Jesse Tomlinson, John Parry, David Cox, Vaibhav Ahlawat, Jabberwocky, PleaseDontStep, KingGoomba, Davos6251, Conor lennon, K-Thomas, Lone Immortus, James Otto, Kvk, Fahad Takked, Ken Ip, Icqewby, Mark Ally, andrew barnes, Daniel Hepburn, Wilhelm bengtsson, Jebril Alan Calingasan, AsianEyezQ, Gio, Barry Pritchard, Kai Uehara, Platinum Star, Zebidizy, Sterban Friz, K, Bob Smith, James J, Venturas, Ho Jak, Noah, Jon Morehouse, Will H, Tae, Jonathan Gooch, X4D8, Ursae, Markeebean Bowes, Ganskvis, curtis mueLEN, Sandworm, Jonathan Hemlin, nathaniel everett, Dirkk Diggler, Fat Frog, Blorcyn, Connor Beeson, unsaintlyangel, Courier, David Cullen, SugarRoll, Xegzy, Alexander Goldfarb, campbell tyson, Dustin Wyke, Patrick Erdmann, Jannik, UnluckyDeath, Domini, Jeremy Engelberg, andy Kierindoongo, Ab9999, Eugene, Chick Pea, Mathew Moran, Vole, Rageflare, Sterban Friz, grinning panda, Zadaine, DHNightshadow, Jeppe Lund, Conor King, kyle hirshson, Robert Garrett, Patrick C, daz, Sebastian

Larsen, Domenic Stritzl, Tim C, Brendan Roberts, Ethan, Gary, Hanad Badar, Wancek, Argivian, Karolingia, Trucinox, Sahil, Gavin Turlock, Box Slayer, Jacob, Connor Isenman, Andrew, Jake Warren, Warior1411, Håvard Betten, Impetusin, Joel Sasmad, Luke Boughan, Anton Selling, Kageryu, DiNunzio, LT, Joseph Catanzaro, William Hoyt, dangerous mob, Abdiaziz Ali, Zipper Houston, Cypernetic, Peter Kim, Daniel Taller, Jacob Lawlor, Carter Hadley, Pierre Come, William Beyer, Michael Karr, Sebastian Lachs, Oiva Metsola, Sindre Tjetland, Israel, Валера Коровелков, Justin Kwang, Liam Farrell, Max Bardsley, Fushi, Slipperyfish, BoB, JmB, Andrew Warfield, Eitan Davidson, Philip Kessler, Andres Montemayor, Blxckninja, Thomas Wolf, DinnerTime, James Nagy, John Test, Tristan A, dave hutch, Mr. Finch, martin, Lennert Bex, Bradman, Casey Gillespie, Alex Anderson, Dali Donovich, Sharkmanwolf, HeavenDragon, Dominic Johnson, Andrew Liess, Liarke Lane, crownfall, Dave_S, Greenboy676, Krzysztof Wierczyński, Cal Fiala, Ryan Brudnicki, King Lokajad, Eric Jaynes, Mortal Complex, Username, Jonathan Hemlin, Reid, Sasa Mrdalj-Radulovic, Jarrod Young, Sir Sloth, John McCarter, Lee Moffat, GuGuy, Anton Lupalov, Racyn, Nikon, Tem M, Milo Goodell, glare31337, Ken Williams, Won Jun Chun, Josh Enterman, Ronan, Magical_Duck, Sam Vinh, Sree Kommalapati, Pride, BananaInMyPants, Виктор Фон Стыценкофф, Andrew Banal, TacoWasTaken, Lu, jimi robert-jones, Andreas Finn, Timothy Felker, v, William Fullerton, Won Jun Choi, Torphin, Jimbo, S T, JustAUser, Dale Tucker, Denis Gelrud, Zmelk, S.R. Williams, KilledbyBooks, Alex Kentwell, Julius Dubasas, Kaleb Uden, Travis Vasquez, Fatih Altunbasak, Deltoren, gamerthemage, kNevik, mikespelun, abele a, Toucan, PJ Thum,

DemonKingBaka, Caucasian Malaysian, Willshaper, Anthony L, Joshua Donahue, Blaek East, Aleksander Żołdkiewicz, Laurence Caraccio, Jacob Ellis, Blaek East, Deepsealife, Kristian Huse, Bob Mijano, Saaski, David Hansson, mikeju, Sam Miller, Joe Giannuzzi, Phantom, lockx, Ben Lenk-Ostendorf, Thomas Have, Joe, Dargon, David Burchfield, Julien Fellegara, thkiw, redslash5, FiveHands, B. Gazzola, Abhichon chandrasen, Nock, Nikhil B, Connor Alexander, NightWhisper, Samuel Smith, Aldhere, Jacob, Sam McNamara, Jarrod Broome, Rolf Bork, Callum Brocklehurst, Samuel Borges, Joe, Dardy Noongar, Joe Giannuzzi, Jonathan Kutz, Stuart Dye, DerWipe, Grosbilljunior, martin, GenericKane, Sharath, Augustus, Joseph, Abhichon chandrasen, MaikD, Matt Labrum, Robert, s476, Eneri, TKLD, Daniel Hughesdon, Jordan, Vega, Eric Vistnes, Jose, Davvy chapie, Joey Nguyen, Skovboa, maniac_ian, Sebin Paul, Liz Griggs, BluEarth, MaliMi, Marcus Österberg, Orm, DaQualyn Singleton, Rheklr, evilperson41, lloyd kostuik, Corwin Brewer, Loïc Fernandes, Eric jian, Gianni Ghiribelli, John Smith, Willshaper, Tibstrike, Ploxzer, Alexander Dupree, Josh Delgado42, Domenic Stritzl, Not N. Octopus, Hazza Vanderbyl, Hoobie Gomez, charlyfu, Cliint, Paul Rettig, Luke, Jacob Goodwin, Kristian Oinonen, Bennet Larson, Mikołaj Wiszniewski, Bobby Jones, Phillip Ingram, Ariel Reyz, altus, lione pouet, Nicolas Marty, Bobo Bo, ScottDR, Kyle Wong, Henry Chow, Thundabear95, Aqua, eva0ne, Philip Lee, Ivan Delgado, Geffery Dopp, Christian Alex, Kaleb Uden, Dax, jacob johannes, House of Pantheon, FiveHands, Melanie, Caldrick, Kezrin, Michael Frankford, Brody Brown, Actaeix, Desert Wreck, dave hutch, Zachary Venne, AlthePal, MaliMi, Athur3s, Brent, Slimereaper, Sub Electricall, Warren Zielke, The Knight Commissar, Dorian Lee,

Svend, Ryan Size, BB King, Markus, HollowIce, Long Le, Blah64, Hamis, Tip Top, Adrian Engel, Brenden, Josh Huynh, Mohammed Hajjaj, Massgamer, afgasd adgasd, Harrison Russel, Yeno Memevig, Finn Ryan, Nicholas Jensen, T T, Manu, Deinos, maltmana, Alyaseen, Dylan, Svarog, Nick Smith, Conner M Tatum, ParoxysmDK, James Deziel, Amaury, michele calderoni, Kirvin, Jordan Litwin, Magnus Steffen Nørregaard, Justin Jones, Marcus Pehan, Cole Rosenhein, Enzo Morvan, Art238, Bon Bon, Richard Barboza, Alexander, Charlie Taylor, bob Johnson, Doom, Jeff Gault, George Ive, John, shawn, Daniel Hernandez, John Bush, war doggle, WowIExist, Edwin Jose, Andrew Wilson, Pooya Daravi, Sunerl, Steven Lindsay, Thaco4, Tyler Chesney, NLRUmbra, Kyle J Smith, Rommelfanger Bob, Davvy chappie, Branden Bryan, Alex Nimmer, Jordan McDonald, Matthew Powell, JJ B, Andrew Odom, Danielle Warvel, Colin, Ivan Kalinovic, AdAstridPerAspera, Reviv3pls, Dark Chaos, Saysca, Folk Chanin, Jdosnoen, Konrad2, Bunny Waffles, John Johnson, Colby, Pumpkin Mouse, Helsgarde, Harry Williams, Alex Canavan, Hobold the kobold, Adam Johnson, Daniel Aguirre, Zack Hoeken, Daniel Mackie, Chip Twothousandone, KatarnK, NOTOBOK, Razvan, Calvin, John, Jordan Chan, Heikki Aitakangas, OccultOwlbear, TheBreaker, Justi martinez, Thomas Rossiter, Jonathan Caselli, John, Richard Lee, Njordt, Joshua Thompson, PJ LeBlanc, Demetre Zurebiani, Iron_Giant, Guilherme Silva, Slade Schlaudecker, The Arcane Emperor, Erik Sjöström, Michael Forrester, BadSnake971, ZRhulad, Ryan, Cole Mathews, Scott Bosse, Timo Reti, Dietz, Thomas Gamble, Nonnuvya Bizniz, Sean Basa, Tagmin, Julien Castellijos, Kasan, Zach Jamison, Zack, Ethan Bell, William Vickers, Njordt, Alexander, Devarya Raman, Marcus Seigman, James Jackson,

Preston M, Subliminary, TDMC, Jordan, Kite 7, Alfredo Spuri, Russel Todd, Demetre Zurebiani, Zach, Tate Browder, Brandon Stiles, Minow, Joachim Janssen, Michael S., edmuck, Jade Green, Victor Newman, Malphas, Kyle Reid, ae兹里th ferova, Hulg Gohen, Jackietron201, Dark Chaos, Michael Yamashita, Hntpo, Andraste Chevalier, Julien Castillejos, William Johnson, John Evans, Kyoma, Liark Lane, mcanamara ?, HarbingTarbl, Spartanstoryteller, Thordur hrafn, David Ge, IronJim, Demetre Zurebiani, hippityhoppity, Dertyer, Guy Incognito, Paul Hughes, TaoBio, Soufyan Zerrad, mars kiyu, ludi, Meredith Leu, Gaëtan Hillion, Bernice0311, Galandry, Eirik, Andrey Kutsey, Scipio, Andrew Rutherford Butler, Aeon, brett thomas, Yiğit Köymen, Thiago Ruiz, Imran, Dark Chaos, Tijay Arnie, Comedy Knight, Qwer, Gerrant, Ciara Banks, William Swearingin, Anonmily, William Brayer, Armo, Aehs, sedael, Darien Benner, Ligma, Michael Buchler, Daniel Spencer Vargas, Gabriel Aptekar, BedlamBlade, Walter, Joko, Goggy123, Erostan, Clemens Hochstädter, Noah Rimmer Skov, Jacob Barger, Sam Paley, Ariel reyz, Juppaware, House of Pantheon, Aymeric Penven, Harold Sandahl IV, Francis Chartier, Kody Ihnat, Rein Warner, mikael persson, morganmoll, Warper 6, Andrew Holland, Jdosnoen, Xerias, manspider0002, Zachary D Nickell, Maalsc, TTG, Oliverthms, Richard Wall, Siphor, Dark Chaos, Jeremy Humphrey, Nikhil Majumdar, Leaored, Cipkenop, Chistopher Waits, Robert Blank, Ervin Ughy, Phoebe Vale, Shaoraka, Zachary Smith, PonyReader, agoniste, Max Hu, Brycen Legler, KeyMan BrB, Jonathan Spaulding, Ausner Gentil, Kazzy, Erriballon, Larry Smith, Sanjay, Oliver Gray, Adrian Barter, Alex Rhone, Karthic, Tailor Tylbury, Bob le Poisson Rouge, Colin Ford, Ashley Cameron, Bogdanov Dmitriy, Ivan Elyshev, Particlepigeon, Ryan

Trueman, Kalle, Roden, Andrew Stinson, Thomas Tessier, M Clason, Alex Lindsay, Sadinar, Daniel Everest, Exiled Knight, LinenZero, Tomas Puskas, Kyle Reese, RandomGift, Corgi McStumperson, Peter Christensen-Calvin, James Teeple, Dom Ceremonia, Mikkel Kolding Christensen, Sands, BlackFire13th, Kevin Ramos, Charles handgis, damien, Jeb, Jeb, Sebin Paul, Andrew Kahn, 白酒鬼, Trevor Sales, Calvin Miner, Rory, PbookR, Glader, John Carroll, Quentin, Andrew Parsadayan, Igor Mikulik, RepossessedSoul, James Walsh, Athra, Chris M, Jim of Trades, Koen Hertenberg, Alex Pruitt, Saul Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.

94: Cheat Code

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Woo, currently third place in hot fiction and the 10,000 followers threshold has been reached! Thanks guys, you're awesome!

It was May 10th. Psyshock would attack the orphanage any minute now, and a rabbit had hanged himself in the kitchen.

“Come on...” Ryan muttered to himself in consternation. The world-destroyer had used a rope rather than warm intestines, but it had scared Little Sarah to death all the same. “You know it won’t work, right? I’ve tried.”

The plushie played dead.

The courier’s eyes wandered to the walls, covered in gunshots; an empty Beretta awaited on the kitchen’s table, alongside knives, Len’s antidepressants, and alcohol. Little Sarah had come to Ryan crying upon finding the rabbit in this state, and the time-traveler couldn’t blame her.

That wasn’t the first complaint he had received either. Another child had found the plushie in the disaffected shower room with a bucket of water, a bloody pentagram,

and a jumper cable; though thankfully it didn't steal that from Ryan's car.

Somehow the courier found the plushie's behavior even creepier than usual.

"What are you trying to achieve?" Ryan asked carefully, unsure how that pattern would progress. The beast no longer reproduced in the presence of children but no longer seemed to care about them either, which worried the courier.

An orphan walked into the kitchen, to find Ryan talking to a hanged rabbit. He looked at the time-traveler and then at the plushie, his face as blank as a Dynamis infomercial.

"It makes sense in context," Ryan said.

The child walked away wordlessly.

Ryan looked back at the plushie's big blue eyes, trying to figure out what happened. He remembered what his Elixir had told him, when he briefly entered the Black World.

The plushie didn't understand death, so it killed others in an attempt to figure it out; or perhaps because it found it funny. But its inability to slay Lightning Butt had forced the monster to reevaluate its approach. It had decided to understand death by *experiencing* it.

The plushie was having a suicidal phase.

How long would it last? Ryan's own lasted a while, and involved at least two plane crashes, one yacht, lasers, sharks, piranhas—and as it turned out, Spy movies had lied to him—giraffes, drug-fueled orgies, and one meteorite.

The courier's hand instinctively moved to the pocket where he kept his A-bomb, and Ryan sighed in relief upon finding it safely in its place.

And then the plushie's ears rose up in interest.

"No," Ryan said, shielding his bomb like a maiden's virginity.
"No, don't you dare."

The plushie's head turned to look at Ryan, glancing at his pocket.

In the end, the courier left the plushie hanging from the ceiling and wisely slithered out of the kitchen. He felt the dreadful creature's gaze on his back even when he exited the room.

If only the courier could pull the off switch. The realization this terrible monster had been pretending it worked all along had crushed all of Ryan's hope of containing it. He thought of all the time he put the plushie on a shelf, thinking himself safe. Even when he and Jasmine—

...

Oh gods, it had been watching all along.

Ryan exited the orphanage through the front door on this terrible realization, his heart filled with dread and horror. Happy memories had suddenly turned dark and grim. "Riri," Len said, awaiting him outside in full power armor. "I... I have something for you."

She tossed him a handheld version of her water rifle, which Ryan gladly accepted. The Meta-Gang's minibus had reached the courtyard.

The courier didn't shoot at it on sight this time around, and instead waited for its passengers to step out. Mongrel, more beast than man; Mosquito, utterly anemic without the special blood juice which Ryan provided him in the last loop; and Psyshock, whose mere presence infuriated the time-traveler.

"Hey, Psypsy," Ryan 'greeted' the Meta-Gang's members, while Len's fingers tensed on her rifle's trigger. "I know you won't care, but the kids here are underage. They're way too old for you."

"Little Cesare," Psyshock replied, Mosquito cracking his knuckles and Mongrel letting out a bestial hiss. "And is that Little Len too? I could recognize her work anywhere. Is your father joining us from beyond the grave too?"

Len remained as silent as a tombstone, and Ryan couldn't help but flinch. He already heard Psyshock say those exact words before, but they hit much harder now.

The telepath didn't remember the previous loop, and since he hadn't adjusted his behavior either, then Big Fat Adam was certainly alive again. Ryan would have preferred both of them buried for good, but it meant he could predict their behavior.

"Not yet," Ryan replied, raising his water rifle. "I'm afraid this place is invitation-only. If you take another step, I will have to show you the door, face first."

Psyshock's tone turned vicious. "You were not so brave during our last—"

Ryan activated his power, shot both Mosquito and Mongrel with the water rifle in the frozen time, tossed his weapon, and grabbed a Bliss inhaler hidden beneath his trenchcoat.

“Encoun—” Psypsy didn’t finish his sentence, as Ryan applied the inhaler to his face and pumped his brain full of drugs. From the telepath’s point of view, the courier appeared to have teleported in front of him. Giant water bubbles had captured his allies, quickly drowning them into unconsciousness.

Tentacles wriggled free out of Psyshock’s clothes, revealing his true monstrous self, but the drug acted quicker. The telepath’s limbs trashed around like beheaded snakes while he collapsed to the ground, his brain overwhelmed by Bliss. Soon Psyshock went limp, liquid dripping from his inhuman skull.

The whole conflict had lasted half a minute.

“I prefer to make my fights fun and relaxing, like smelling flowers in a park, but you’re an exception,” Ryan said before kicking the helpless Psyshock. “You really overstayed your welcome.”

He was saving himself for Wardrobe anyway.

“That was quick,” a new voice said. Ryan didn’t even turn around, as Shroud appeared at his side. “I see you rehearsed.”

“About that, Shortie, you modified the oxygen supply as I asked?” Ryan pointed a finger at Mosquito, who struggled to stay conscious in the water prison. “Bugs and water don’t mesh well.”

“I... yes, I did. He shouldn’t get brain damage.” Len glanced at Shroud, leaving the next part of her sentence unsaid: *this time*.

The next member of Quicksave's Avengers arrived while driving a fearsome bicycle, honking to intimidate his foes. The Monster of the East had come to lay waste to Psychos and evildoers alike, to bathe his fur in their blood.

"Is the Panda on time?" Timmy said as he abruptly stopped his vehicle near the Meta-Gang's minibus, ready for battle.
"He will save the day!"

"You're a bit late for that round, my young Pandawan," Ryan replied, patting the manbear on the shoulder. "But you're early for the main course."

"Oh, so we'll eat before defeating bad guys?"

"We shall eat, yes," Ryan raised a fist to the heavens. "We shall eat villains' dreams and drink their tears."

"I-I understand, Sifu!"

"What can he do?" Shroud asked, glancing at the Panda with clear skepticism.

"He can transform into the most powerful creature on Earth," Ryan boasted on his apprentice's behalf. "I thought he would be a good addition to your traveling circus."

"T-that's right!" The Panda nodded sheepishly. "I... the Panda doesn't have much work experience, but it would be an honor to serve with the Carnival, sir!"

"You will learn," Shroud replied with a shrug. "It's not skills that make a hero, it's the heart. You can pick up the first through time and effort, the second not so much."

Ryan had half-expected the silicanetic to look down on the Panda like Enrique did, and was pleasantly surprised. Then

again, the Carnival had a tremendously high rate of turnover, so they couldn't afford to turn down volunteers. The mere idea of joining this illustrious group of heroes invigorated the Panda, the manbear ready to take names and prove his worth.

"How many more are we waiting for?" Len asked Ryan.

"Two more." Ryan had considered bringing Atom Kitty to the party too, but putting him, his sister, and Livia in the same team was bound to backfire. At this point, Felix was too scornful of his family to stand them. "Afterwards, drug bust, and we haul everyone we catch to jail."

"There is no need to keep them prisoner," Shroud said while glancing at the captured Meta-Gang members. "They are Psychos and murderers, nobody will blame you for putting them down."

"Putting them down?" The Panda asked, suddenly a lot less enthusiastic.

"We'll bring them in by the book," Ryan reassured his young Pandawan. "By the book."

"And how do you intend to imprison Psychos?" Shroud asked with heavy sarcasm. "They have unique powers. Sarin and Frank the Mad in particular will destroy any jail they're put into."

Those two Ryan could turn around, and he had a solution for the rest. "Not if the prison is located twenty leagues under the sea."

Mr. Looking Glass immediately caught on and glanced at Shortie. "Your underwater base?"

"I cut off some of the habitats from my sanctuary," Len explained with a nod. "They're, they're self-sustaining, but isolated. Like an... an underwater asylum."

"Unless they can turn into fish, the prisoners won't swim far before the pressure crushes them," Ryan said. "We can try to rehabilitate people before putting them six feet under, Glass Cowboy."

"Even Adam the Ogre?" Shroud deadpanned.

"Now, don't be silly. Whalie will be extradited to Monaco." With luck, the staff would appropriately eat him and call it karma.

"Psychos cannot be cured," the vigilante said, before crossing his arms in doubt. Perhaps he had guessed Ryan had a plan to change that, though he couldn't tell just yet. "Unless you can pull off a miracle."

"I'm... I'm not so sure either, Riri," Len said. "But... well, imprisonment is always better than killing. That won't change."

Shroud suddenly turned invisible much to the Panda's surprise, as the sound of a new car echoed in the distance.

Livia's group arrived in a platinum version of Pluto's Lamborghini driven by Cancel. Livia and Fortuna sat at the back. The former wore her Queen Crimson costume, without the helmet but with a new, white cat-themed necktie; the latter used a tight, white latex catsuit that only enhanced her curvaceous form and meshed well with her golden hair.

The sight of two Genomes in fashionable costumes restored Ryan's faith in humanity.

“Livia, Fortuna,” the courier greeted his favorite ladies as they exited the car, before waving a hand at Cancel. “Oh hi, Greta!”

“Hi, nice to meet you!” the budding sociopath replied with the same cheery tone as the courier. “So, whom do I kill today?”

“That one, Cancel,” Livia said while nodding at the unconscious Psyshock, before greeting everyone else with a warm smile. “Ryan, Len, Mr. Panda.”

“I... hello.” Len wasn’t sure how to answer. Though Ryan couldn’t see her face beneath her power armor’s helmet, she probably examined Livia with mistrust. Shroud’s disappearance didn’t help matters; considering he hadn’t turned visible again, he must have learned of Cancel’s range and stayed out of it.

“Y-you know the Panda?” Timmy hyperventilated at people recognizing him.

“Not before Livy told me about you,” Fortuna admitted, though she couldn’t resist a black and white bear’s charm. “I loooove pandas though, they’re so fluffy. I had a stuffed doll of one when I was a child.”

“The Panda is very cuddly in his natural form too,” the manbear replied with a friendly nod. “His fur is soft and perfumed.”

“Aw, he’s drugged out,” Cancel complained as she examined Psyshock. “I prefer it when they see what’s coming.”

“You mean...” The Panda gulped, suddenly a lot less enthusiastic. “You mean death?”

"Yes, death," Greta replied as if it were obvious. "People are only genuine when they die. It's only when I kill meanies that I build a real human connection with them. You should try it out sometimes."

Ryan noticed the Lamborghini's windows cracking at the edge, though it was barely noticeable.

"He can brainwash and take over others' bodies, and getting rid of him is the only way to save his victims," Ryan told the disturbed Panda. "Sometimes, a hero must get his hands dirty."

Well, truth be told, there were probably non-lethal ways to cure Psyshock's thralls, but the time-traveler didn't care about them. The brainjacker and his boss were the strongest arguments for the death penalty the courier had ever seen, and would receive no mercy from him.

"Wait for my signal to execute him," Livia ordered Cancel. "We will deal with the rest shortly."

"As you wish, boss!" Greta replied, a hand on her waist. "You're sure you don't need more backup? The neighborhood isn't safe."

"Fortuna will take care of me," Livia replied with a smile, before glancing at Ryan. "As will this shining knight."

"I left my armor in storage, unfortunately," Ryan replied.

"Let's recover it then."

Cancel pulled Psyshock's body in the Lamborghini and drove away afterward, but not before Livia picked up her helmet from the car's chest. The seer waited for the hitman to leave, to turn and look at an empty spot. "I can see you."

Shroud dropped his invisibility to Fortuna's surprise, and took his anger out on Ryan. "You want us to cooperate with *his* daughter?"

"My father doesn't know anything about this plan," Livia replied with a cold frown. "And he will not."

"This changes little," the vigilante stated. "I do not appreciate dealing with the heir of a drug-running empire."

"Nor do I appreciate you dating my best friend and lying to her," the Augusti princess replied icily, the glass telekinetic flinching upon realizing that she knew his secret identity. "But we all have to make compromises for the greater good."

"Your best friend?" Fortuna scowled. "Livy, you like someone more than me?"

Shroud seemed to suppress the urge to put a hand on his helmet, while Livia reassured the oblivious Fortuna by warmly taking her hand into her own. "Of course not," she said, "you are more than a friend to me. You are almost a sister."

"And we would have been if Felix hadn't treated you like crap," the blonde replied angrily. "I swear, next time I see my brother I will clout him on his thick head!"

Shroud crossed his arms. "Why would you cooperate with us on this?"

"The same reason as you," Livia answered. "To protect this city from destruction."

"D-destruction?" The Panda asked, suddenly uneasy.

"About that, Livy, what are we here for?" Fortuna asked her best friend. "I haven't mentioned this secret mission to anyone else, not even Narcinia, but I want to know."

Shroud looked at Fortuna with a hint of scorn. "You came all the way here not knowing why?"

"Well, Livy is my dearest friend," she replied confidently. "If a friend needs help, you give it no questions asked."

This made Shroud shut up, and he seemed to look at Fortuna with a brand new perspective. Ryan wondered if he was starting to see the good qualities in Lucky Girl, just as the courier did in a previous loop. If only she wasn't so vain, the courier might have dated her seriously.

"The Meta-Gang has found a cache of Mechron weapons," Livia explained. "They intend to use it to destroy New Rome, and we must stop them."

For a moment, neither Fortuna nor the Panda seemed to have understood what she said. The Panda looked at Ryan for confirmation, while Fortuna glanced at Livia as if she were joking. "Mechron? The Mechron?" she asked. "You're joking, right? Livy, we're in May, April is long gone."

"I am not joking Fortuna," Livia replied. "That is why the Meta-Gang thought they could take our families on."

"Oh." Fortuna blinked a few more times, before panicking. "Wait, why just the two of us?! We should tell your father!"

"So he can get his hands on Mechron's weapons?" Shroud asked, less than thrilled by the prospect.

"Better than Psychos!" Fortuna replied. "I heard they eat people!"

"I have seen the future, Fortuna," Livia said calmly. "That technology will cause harm no matter who gets it. It has to go. If anyone but us knows, it will find its way into the wrong hands."

"I..." Fortuna scratched the back of her head. "You're sure about this, Livy?"

Livia nodded gravely, and Shroud found his tongue again. "So this is a temporary alliance until the Mechron base's threat is dealt with," he stated. "We agree to destroy it together, and then it's business as usual."

"Yes," the Augusti princess said with a nod. "Afterward, we will discuss what you came to New Rome for, and see if we can reach a diplomatic solution."

Ryan said nothing, trying to make these two get along on their own. Thankfully, though he was ruthless when the situation called for it, Looking Glass would prefer something else than total war. "Everything rests on this mission," he said.

"Alright, Livy. You're the one who can see the future, so I won't tell a tale." Fortuna grinned ear to ear. "My power will guide us to victory."

Ryan glanced at Len and the Panda, who had remained silent so far. "So, ready to clean up the trash?"

"This... this is everything the Panda trained for, all his life." Instead of being crushed by the weight of the situation, the manbear had risen to the occasion. "This is the moment of truth!"

"They... they tried to take the children," Len said, shaking her head. "They have to go, before they come back."

“The children?” Fortuna glanced at the orphanage, noticing children looking through the windows at them. “Oh my gosh, and here I thought it was a dog shelter!”

“It’s both,” Shroud replied, before snickering. “Perhaps you could offer your next lottery winnings to those who need it.”

“That’s a wonderful idea!” Fortuna replied with enthusiasm, much to the translucent vigilante’s surprise. “By the way, have we met before? Your voice sounds familiar.”

Shroud’s tone turned drastically deeper. It reminded Ryan of Christian Bale having a cough. “Unlikely.”

Livia decided to switch the subject to something lighter, and instead smiled at a handsome courier with a hand on her chest. “Do you like this necktie more than the other one, Ryan?”

“You are *perfect*,” Ryan reassured her, before glaring at Fortuna. “Unlike the fashion disaster here. She doesn’t even wear a mask!”

“Excuse *you*? I have a fashionable piece to go along with my costume, thank you very much!” And on these words, Fortuna put a golden domino mask on her beautiful face. “Ta-da!”

Though the color did mesh well with her hair and clothes, Ryan wasn’t impressed. “Clark Kent, that mask doesn’t hide anything.”

“Of course it doesn’t!” She sounded almost proud of it too, putting a hand in her hair. “Look at me. Look at *me*. It would be cruel to deny our foes the ecstasy of my beauty, especially since this would be the last thing they ever see!”

"They'll probably go blind from the horror," Ryan deadpanned, Shroud chuckling in response.

"H-how dare you!" Fortuna put her hands on her waist, furious. "Be glad I am taken, if you had been my boyfriend I would have made you invite me for dinner to apologize."

Ryan grinned behind his mask. "You are taken?"

"I have found the one," Fortuna boasted. "The perfect gentleman."

Shroud looked *really* uncomfortable, so Ryan decided to tease him further. "Do you have a photo of the victim?" he asked Fortuna.

"Of course!" Lucky Girl showed the group a photo of a sour Mathias Martel on her cellphone. The poor game designer looked as if he had been dragged in front of the camera by force. "Isn't he the cutest?"

"Oh yes, he's a very transparent person," Ryan said with a nod. "You see it on his face."

"His eyes are a window into his soul," Livia added with a giggle, while Shroud did his best to ignore them.

The Panda, who didn't know better, spoke his mind, "He doesn't look very happy."

"Because he doesn't understand we're meant to be together, but he will," Fortuna said while putting back her cell phone in one of her catsuit's pockets. "It's fate."

Ryan would have pitied Mathias, but better him than the courier. If the time-traveler had interfered in the previous days, then that golden retriever would have targeted him

instead. “Time is running out,” Shroud complained, while Len agreed with a nod.

“I have timed everything based on the information Ryan provided,” Livia said. “Once Greta slays Psyshock, the Meta-Gang will go on high alert. It has to happen at the moment we attack the Junkyard, to deny Adam the Ogre time to prepare and maximize confusion in his ranks.”

“She made the plan?” Shroud asked Ryan, incensed.

“We did,” the courier replied with a shrug. “Hey, you wanted a seer, we have one.”

Looking Glass’ dislike was clear, but he had committed to this course of action and swallowed his pride. “We will destroy the Meta-Gang’s base after we finish,” he said. “I won’t take any risk of their technology ending in the wrong hands.”

“That is the plan,” Livia replied aloofly. “Len will attack from the water access, while we distract from the front. I will debrief you on the way to the Junkyard.”

“How far ahead have you planned?” Ryan asked his former first lady.

“Up until we move inside, afterward... afterward things become more difficult, especially since I still can’t see you.” Livia put a hand on her waist, which made her look glamorous. “Surprise me, Quicksave.”

“Always.”

“Leave it to me, Livy,” Fortuna said with a smirk. “None of these mutants are getting anywhere near you, I swear.”

Ryan had long pondered how to break into Mechron's mainframe, realizing it would either take an ungodly amount of loops and memorization, or an army taking huge casualties.

Instead, he chose a third option: bringing in a living cheat code.

From what Ryan knew of Elixirs, he had assumed that Lucky Girl's worked as a guardian angel, influencing events around the spoiled brat to make her happier. Perhaps it thought that Shroud would make the perfect match for Fortuna... or more probably making the vigilante fall in love with her would put her off the Carnival's radar.

The courier wondered how far Yellow Elixirs could see in time. Fortuna's power had limits since Ryan and other Yellow Genomes could counter it, but it was pretty damn powerful.

The only true obstacle among the Meta for Fortuna would be the Land. The terrakinetic had already slain Lucky Girl once before, so Ryan wasn't in a hurry to see it happen again, but Livia seemed to have a plan to deal with her.

After this exchange, the group separated. Len dragged the captive Mosquito and Mongrel inside the orphanage, to put them in an automated bathysphere and then move on to Mechron's bunker next. Ryan, the Panda, Livia and Fortuna boarded the Plymouth Fury, while Shroud flew above them. The courier smashed the accelerator, ready to bring the fight to the Meta-Gang.

And his car refused to move.

After a few fruitless attempts, Ryan turned around to glare at Fortuna.

"W-why are you looking at me like that?" the oblivious blonde protested. "It's not my fault if you're too poor to buy a Ferrari!"

"You don't insult my car." Ryan raised a threatening finger at her. "I've blown up cities for less!"

"Did you?" Livia and the Panda asked at the same time, the former more curious than surprised.

"If you even ask, then you don't know me enough." Ryan glanced out of his window, looking up at Shroud.

"Translucent."

The vigilante froze in midair. "No."

"Yes. Sit in the back."

"No," he repeated. "Find another car."

Ryan gave the vigilante 'the look,' until he gave in.

In the end, Fortuna happily sat in the backseat's middle, an angry Shroud on one side and an amused Livia on the other. A happy and determined Panda sat at the front next to Ryan while he turned on the car.

This time, the Plymouth Fury worked again, and Livia couldn't stop chuckling.

There was no escape.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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95: Double Date

Ryan drove his Plymouth Fury through dilapidated streets, while his partner-in-crime explained the plan in the back. He had put on the bowler hat, like a crown of pain and destruction.

“When Psyshock dies, the bunker will go in high alert,” Livia explained, checking on her phone. Cancel waited on the other side of the line to execute the metal squid. “According to Ryan, Adam the Ogre explicitly ordered the Land to close the bunker’s entrance if intruders get too close to it. This means we have only a short time window to either take down the Land, or reach the base’s entrance before she can close it.”

“How long?” Shroud asked, trying to disguise his voice by making it rougher.

“Minutes,” Livia replied.

“How do we prevent her from noticing our approach?” The vigilante was always such a downer. “Her range extends for miles. I checked.”

“The good thing about Ghoul, is that like with Lego toys,” Ryan said while opening the glovebox, “he comes in many parts.”

A skeletal foot wriggled within it.

"Oh, I wondered where the rest of him had gone," Shroud noted from the backseat.

"W-what is this, Sifu?" The Panda asked, disturbed.

"It's like a rabbit foot, it brings luck." Ryan glanced at Fortuna in the rearview mirror. "Though less than the living charm over here."

"Thank you for recognizing my superiority, though it is obvious," Fortuna said with smug pride. "And this is disgusting."

Ryan froze time and tossed the severed foot at her lap, causing Lucky Girl to scream when the clock resumed. She made a cute sound and grabbed Shroud on instinct, much to the vigilante's confusion. He seemed torn between reassuring her and annoyance.

"I have a hand in the trunk, if you prefer it," the courier mocked the blonde.

"I will show you a hand!" Fortuna complained before throwing the foot at the driver. She would have aimed true too, if Ryan didn't freeze time to catch the projectile. "I will slap you in the face!"

"Anyway, as long as we have her tenant's body parts in the car, the landowner won't pay attention to us." Ryan put the foot back in the glovebox. "She will think Psypsy picked Ghoul up and they're now returning home. At least, until we crash through their front door."

Livia answered with a nod. "The Reptilian, Acid Rain, Gemini, and the thralls should protect the Junkyard's surface, while the rest of the gang is in standby inside their base.

Psyshock's execution will free his victims, the Reptilian shouldn't be a problem, and I can handle Acid Rain."

Ryan blinked. "You can?"

Though he couldn't see her face with her helmet on, the courier was pretty sure Livia grinned in response. "I can see where she teleports before she does."

In the end, the life of a Genome was a giant game of Rock-Paper-Scissors. One power trumped another, forming a delicate, complex web.

And then you had people like Lightning Butt, who just plain cheated at life.

"Gemini and the Land don't have any hard counters though," Livia said, as the group came within sight of the Junkyard's walls of car piles and trash. "Fortuna, Shroud, can you take care of them?"

"Leave it to us, Livy," Fortuna replied before frowning. "Now that I think of it, I should get a pseudonym too. I would have taken Diana if Felix hadn't run off, but..."

"You should choose a name that fits yourself, not others' desires," Shroud said.

"You're right, but I should get something that my boyfriend will like, since we'll spend our lives together," Fortuna said while checking her phone. "I'll harass him with suggestions until he likes one!"

Ryan could tell that the boyfriend in question was strongly resisting the urge to facepalm, doubly so as the Panda started offering suggestions of his own. "How about Lady Luck?" the manbear proposed. "The Legend?"

"I would have said Almost-Invincible, but the last half is already taken," the courier joked at the front.

"Excuse you? *Almost* Invincible?" Fortuna sneered arrogantly. "Nobody can hurt me. I'm the world's luckiest woman."

The memory of the blonde model bleeding out after Pluto shot her in the chest flashed through Ryan's mind. "Only if another Yellow isn't involved, Goldie," Ryan said. "The Land is one, and you should stay as far away from her as possible, least you find your luck running out."

"That can't happen."

"It can," Livia said, shocking her best friend. "The Land is a Yellow/Orange Psycho who can gain conceptual dominion over an area, and this control trumps yours over luck."

Ryan's brief presidential term had given him insight into the Meta-Gang's operations and abilities. In particular, he had learned that the Land could also telekinetically manipulate earth, but her precision was inversely proportional to her range. While she was near impossible to destroy while fused to the earth's soil, she could only create quakes in that state. However, this power combination also made the Land Fortuna's natural counter.

"Your power is a guardian angel," Ryan told Lucky Girl. "But like all Yellow powers, it follows esoteric rules. Which means it's nonsensical, but with its own internal logic."

"I don't get it," Fortuna said with a frown.

Her boyfriend caught on though. "Your power alters probability and events to protect you, under the guise of luck," Shroud explained. "But the Land has supreme

spiritual control over an area. By that logic, its authority is higher than your power's in her territory."

"So she can harm me?" Fortuna asked shyly, her pride replaced with doubt. She felt suddenly a lot less confident about this mission, but Livia reassured her by holding her hand.

"You will live, if your..." Livia trailed off, glancing at Shroud. "Your *partner* protects you during the battle. The Land will need to take back physical form to use her full terrakinesis, which will give you an opening to take her down."

"A deal is a deal," Shroud said, though the main reason he ended up with Fortuna was due to her power foiling his assassination attempts. "Unlike your kind, we do not betray our alliance in the middle of a fight. If you have my back, I will have yours."

"You better!" Fortuna said, regaining her bravery. "If I die, I swear I will haunt you!"

Ryan suddenly wondered how the Land and Geist's abilities would interact, and folded the idea away into a corner of his mind. Maybe the former could exorcise the latter, especially since his power anchored him to an area too.

In any case, if they could take out the Land, then the Meta-Gang didn't have anyone capable of bringing down Lucky Girl. With that walking four-leaf clover on their side, the battle would be as good as won.

Gemini and Ink Machine would be the hardest to contain due to their abnormal physiology, followed by Frank. Ryan could take care of his former bodyguard, but he could only hope Fortuna and her long-suffering boyfriend could deal with the former two. He had also informed the Panda of his

power's regeneration, so he could pull his weight in the battle to come.

Which would start within seconds, as the Plymouth Fury finally reached the Junkyard's entrance fence. The Reptilian and Gemini stood watch over the entrance, with Lizard-boy's reptilian eyes squinting as the car approached.

Ryan hoped for one of them to shout '*you shall not pass*', and was deeply disappointed when they didn't.

"Lucky girl!" The courier kept one hand on the driver's wheel, and tossed Len's water rifle at Fortuna with the other. "Aim for the eyes!"

"Go get them!" Livia encouraged her best friend, while Fortuna opened the windows with a grin.

"Stop right there!" The Reptilian panicked, but Ryan answered by accelerating. "Stop!"

Fortuna fired at the Psychos with the water rifle as the car passed, not even bothering to aim. Her projectiles hit true nonetheless, trapping the Reptilian in a sphere of water. The water phased through Gemini however, the ethereal woman of light vanishing as the car approached. Her monstrous shadow chased after the Plymouth Fury, but not quickly enough to make a difference.

Ryan raced through the Junkyard's labyrinth of forking trash walls and twisted turns. He still carried the reflexes from his first suicide run, and experienced an impression of *déjà vu*. Someone should sound the alarm in five, four...

"Now!" Livia said, typing on her phone.

No bell raised the alarm.

Cancel must have executed Psyshock on the spot, freeing the thralls and sowing confusion into the ranks. Ryan didn't understand how much until they reached the bunker's entrance without the Land stopping them; Acid Rain guarded the tunnel leading beneath the Junkyard, and instantly summoned her toxic clouds above their hands.

"Thieves!" she shouted at the Plymouth Fury's sight, her face twisted into an expression of frothing fury as she drew two knives. "Thieves at the gates!"

Fortuna opened fire at her with the water rifle, but the Land seemed to have finally noticed the intrusion. The Junkyard trembled as an earthquake shook its foundations, tossing trash and collapsing car walls. A golden shroud became visible around Fortuna, like an angel's halo.

A similar glow surrounded her bubble projectile, but flickered in and out of sight. Acid Rain managed to dodge the attack, just as the Land's invisible pressure overwhelmed Ryan's crew; it felt like being out in the woods, stalked by a wolf pack. The courier abruptly stopped the car near the bunker's entrance. "Go, go, go!" he shouted, all but leaping out of the vehicle.

"Y-yes!" The Panda opened his door and transformed as soon as he could, while Livia stepped out more calmly. Shroud attempted to open his car's door to fly into the fray, but the lock refused to move. He grumbled at Fortuna, as he carried her in his hands like a bride through the opposing door.

Good thing he did too, as Acid Rain's toxic raindrops fell from the skies while the Land caused a nearby trashwall to collapse near the Plymouth Fury. Ryan, Livia, and the Panda quickly moved out of the way, while the flying Shroud

carried his beloved above the ground Superman-style. Acid Rain's raindrops miraculously dropped where he wasn't.

The Plymouth Fury wasn't so lucky though.

"My car!" Ryan screamed in horror, as piles of trash entombed his beautiful companion. "You killed my car!"

Again! Did the Meta-Gang have a vendetta against Chrysler?

"Fortuna, give me the rifle!" Livia shouted at Fortuna, who tossed the water weapon at her best friend. No sooner did the Augusti princess catch it that Acid Rain teleported behind her, knives raised. The Panda attempted to pounce on her, but wouldn't reach her in time.

So Ryan stopped it.

"Sorry Helen," the courier said, as he put on the *Fisty Brothers* and quickly activated his time-stop. Acid Rain's eyes widened upon hearing her real name, but she teleported out of range before the clock could freeze. The courier quickly grabbed the paralyzed Livia and moved her out of the way, in case the teleporter flanked her again.

Acid Rain reappeared the second time resumed, her weapons lunging for Ryan's throat. "You piece of shit!" she snarled, as a shiver went down the courier's spine. "I'll gut you like a—"

Time skipped forward.

When Ryan regained consciousness, he found himself a few steps away from his starting location, and Acid Rain's knife stabbed the transformed Panda's arm; though her blade cut

deep, it didn't do much to slow down a seven hundred kilo behemoth.

Acid Rain herself barely had the time to blink as Livia pulled the water rifle's trigger, the Augusti princess having positioned herself right behind the teleporter. A sphere of water swallowed Helen, and when she attempted to teleport away atop a hill of junk, the prison followed her. Acid Rain covered her mouth in an attempt to hold her breath, as she and the bubble rolled down the trash pile.

It had been too late to save Ryan's bowler hat though. Acid raindrops had wormed a hole in it, and slightly damaged Livia's suit.

"She tried to stab you," the Augusti princess said while the Panda removed the knife in his arm. Livia's secondary power allowed her to skip time forward, creating an anomaly where everyone followed their predestined actions like sleepwalkers while she could adjust her own. Ryan, though, couldn't be interacted with in that state. "The blade phased through you."

"How did she behave in the erased time?" Ryan asked, glancing at a flying Shroud and Fortuna. The Land seemed to have singled them out as the real danger, trying to bury them beneath debris to no avail.

"She teleported away when I activated my power, but since I can predict her actions with my Blue power, I simply had to wait for her to reappear." Livia rushed at the bunker's entrance tunnel, which the Land had started collapsing with a quake. "And now we must act!"

"Pandawan, with me!" Ryan shouted at his sidekick, while shouting one last observation to Lucky Girl and Looking

Glass. "Windshield, the Land controls the *land*! I don't think her power affects people in the air!"

"I wasn't gonna let her go anyway," the glass manipulator replied. He looked truly dashing, holding his girlfriend like a bride before the altar. He would soon have to walk the talk too, as Ryan noticed Gemini's shadow slither into the Junkyard's center.

Fortuna didn't seem to like it one bit though. "I know how you feel," she told her masked *beau*, her arms around his neck. "You fell for me at first sight. Don't worry, I get that all the time."

"That couldn't be farther from the truth," Shroud replied with heavy sarcasm, gathering a cloud of glass shards from the trash walls to throw at Gemini.

"I get that all the time," his oblivious girlfriend repeated, deaf to both sarcasm and common sense. "The sight of me dazzled you, because you are poor and your life is meaningless. But though you have that dark, mysterious charm, it cannot be. I am not the kind of girl that cheats on her boyfriend with the first mysterious stranger!"

"That shouldn't be a problem," Ryan heard Shroud deadpan back, before the courier entered the tunnel with the transformed Panda rushing at his heels.

Ryan hoped they could manage the Land and Gemini, but Livia didn't seem worried. She must have seen them prevail in her visions. In any case, the courier's group quickly arrived in front of the bunker's blast door, while the earth walls around them threatened to collapse. A pack of Dynamis dog drones immediately ambushed them.

“Spring roll attack!” The Panda shouted as he outpaced his teammates and pounded on the robots like a rolling boulder, flattening one of the machines. Two others attempted to flank Livia, and rushed at her with iron jaws.

“Heavier caliber?” Ryan asked Livia before tossing her his coil gun. His accomplice grabbed the weapon in her right hand while holding her water rifle with the other. Though she was no talented marksman, she shot one drone with precision, blowing off its head; most probably her power helped with aiming.

The other machine was within an inch of closing its iron jaws around Livia’s neck, but Ryan froze time and punched it with *Fisty*. The blow sent the metal hound crashing against a wall when time resumed.

Individually their abilities were powerful, but together, they were invincible. The sheer synergy had turned this whole raid’s difficulty from hard to easy. “We should strongly consider taking over the world with our combined powers,” Ryan told Livia. “None shall stand in our way!”

“Which of us gets America?” the mafia princess asked a hard question. “I take the south, you take the north?”

“Or we marry and we share everything.” He couldn’t help himself but flirt with ladies mid-battle.

To his surprise, Livia teased him back. “Only if you conquer France for our honeymoon.”

The Panda, who had summarily crushed the remaining drones while screaming his attacks’ names, looked at the duo in horror. “Sifu, you aren’t considering turning to the dark side?”

"Nah, it's purely hypothetical," Ryan reassured him while the trio crossed the blast door, the tunnel collapsing behind them. The Land had closed the bunker's entrance for now, trapping them inside.

"Unless..." Livia left her sentence hanging, looking at Ryan. He immediately caught on.

Unless they tried in another loop?

Ryan had worried bringing in more people through loops would limit his options, but a time-traveling buddy opened so many possibilities. "You know what, how about we take some holiday time after we finish work?" It had been a while since he had gone on a vacation loop, but it would be perfect to de-stress after all these doomsday scenarios. "I will show you places you can't even imagine."

"That would be fun," Livia replied with a warm, delightful chuckle. The seer seemed to enjoy this raid as much as the one on Star Studio, and somehow her good mood only reinforced Ryan's. "Though we should find a team name."

"Crimson World?" Ryan happily suggested.

"Two Violets do not make a red, Ryan," Livia giggled in return, as they crossed the metal corridor leading towards the recreational area. The invisible pressure of the Land's power vanished, either because Looking Glass managed to force her to manifest or because her power's range stopped at the bunker's entrance. "How about Lady and Knight?"

"Crimson Queen and Purple World?"

"Are you two together?" the Panda asked, unable to suppress his curiosity. "You look so cute, it makes me fuzzy inside."

"Not yet," Ryan joked, before glancing at the reinforced windows on both sides of the path. The area had fallen into complete chaos, with Psyshock's thralls having collapsed unconscious after their brainwasher's demise.

Most importantly, Shortie had risen from the bunker's sea access in full power armor, and took the Psychos by surprise. Ryan noticed a few familiar faces like Pale Guy and Fuckface trapped in water spheres, but his best friend struggled with Rakshasa and Ink Machine. The former summoned gremlins faster than the underwater Genius could trap them in water bubbles, while the latter harassed her in close combat, stretching her liquid limbs into axes.

"No, not yet," Livia said, her tone changing from teasing to serious. "She can handle them, Ryan. But only if we take down Adam and Frank quickly enough, or else there will be casualties."

The courier nodded. Though this loop was a test run for the final bunker raid, he couldn't let any innocents die if he could help it.

Ryan's thoughts turned to what he would do after New Rome. He came to this city expecting to either return to wandering the Earth if he couldn't find Shortie, or settle down with her if he did. In the end, while he and Len reconciled, they couldn't return to the happy, blissful romance they once shared. The wheel of time had turned. They would remain close family, but no more than brother and sister.

Ryan was happy with it, but he wondered if he would stay with Len and the orphans after solving the crisis in New Rome. Adventure was in his blood, and he yearned for new experiences. At one point, the courier had found a lively

partner in Jasmine, who shared his sensibilities, but... but she was gone.

For the first time in a long while, Ryan wondered what he wanted to do with his life, now that he had friends who could remember him. And he had the intuition Livia was the key to figuring it out.

But these questions could wait for later.

The trio rushed into the recreational area, finding the atrium deserted. Though the *Street Fighters* arcade game was mercifully intact, alongside the bar, no group of Psychos barred the group's path. Perhaps Shortie had already dealt with the main defenders, or some had perished trying to access the bunker.

The moment of respite lasted until the elevator's door opened, and a colossal figure with carbon skin walked into the atrium.

"I am sorry." Big Fat Adam said as he walked out of the elevator, with Sarin and Frank in tow. He carried some strange, coiled cannon in hands, probably salvaged from Mechron's armory. "That is not an exit."

"Indeed, fatass," Ryan replied, Livia taking position at his side while the Panda let out a fearsome roar.

This time, Hannifat Lecter had nowhere to run.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Here's an amazing fan art courtesy of Emiliano Cortes! You can find their stuff here:

<https://www.instagram.com/emicorrtes/>





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96: Beast of the East

Ryan went straight for the killing blow.

"CIA!" His hand moved inside his trench coat, and brought out a fake badge he had prepared for this day. "Arrest this man! The senate impeached hi—"

Adam didn't let him finish, and instead pressed his cannon's trigger. A black sphere came out of it, forcing Ryan's group to disperse. The courier instinctively dived down towards the *Street Fighters* arcade game, desperate to protect it, while Livia and the Panda moved to the other side.

Though the cannon's black projectile moved slowly, it shredded the bunker's metal walls like paper, absorbing anything in its path like a tiny black hole. Ryan briefly mistook it for a Black Flux weapon, but on a closer look, the projectile simply pulled things towards itself.

A gravity gun.

Did it have something to do with Dynamis' secret weapon to deal with Augustus? Food for thought.

Sarin immediately followed her boss' lead, unleashing a shockwave at Livia. The seer saw the attack coming before the Psycho even pulled the trigger, and stepped out of the way. The Panda let out a fearsome roar and charged at Big Fat Adam, claws extended.

"See?!" Ryan looked at Frank while waving his badge, who was slightly confused. "He doesn't respect the democratic process!"

But to his surprise, Big Fat Adam happily played along. "See, that's what I told you, Frank," Hannifat Lecter said with joviality, before backhanding the Panda so hard the manbear tumbled backward. "The storm is here. The CIA is taking over, trying to kill me as they did with Kennedy. They slew my vice-president, like they're going to kill all the senators."

"They won't get to you, Mr. President!" Frank swore, his fists raised so high that they hit the ceiling. "The White House will not fall!"

"You have to protect democracy, Frank," Big Fat Adam continued to brainwash his bodyguard with a sinister, televangelist's smile. "If you fail all is lost."

Frank let out a roar of rage, grabbed the recreational area's bar counter, and threw it at the Panda. The poor manbear couldn't dodge, the heavy projectile exploding on contact. Though it didn't kill the seven hundred kilos bear, it stopped him dead on his tracks, and allowed Frank the Mad to bull rush him. The whole atrium shook with every step of the iron giant.

The fatass had anticipated someone might use Frank's delusion against him, and prepped him up accordingly. That damn, cunning bloody bastard...

"You know, of all the foes I've fought in my long life, you're probably one of the most dangerous," Ryan confessed to Adam. Augustus was far more powerful, but Hannifat Lecter more than compensated in cunning and sheer depravity. "And that's *really* saying something."

"What can I say, mate? If a man is a man, he knows what he wants and gets it. And what I want," He raised his gravity cannon at Ryan, "is to make you squirm."

Ryan stopped time, the projectile stopping in midair. Good, a Black Flux weapon would have still worked.

Speaking of Black Flux, Ryan rushed at the false president to introduce him to his minority's rights. Tossing his false CIA badge aside, the courier punched the cannibal in his stomach. Having managed to rattle Augustus in the previous loop, Ryan expected to inflict some damage. Big Fat Adam's carbon skin was way less resistant than Lightning Butt's body, as the latter tore through the former like butter.

The Ogre didn't even flinch. If anything, the blow seemed to damage *Fisty*'s pistons more than the Meta-Gang's leader.

Why? Why didn't it work? Had his encounter with Lightning Butt been a fluke? Had Ryan only managed to hurt Augustus because the Plushie softened him up first?

Unless... unless Ryan needed to focus his powers first? The courier could only produce visible Black Flux particles while wearing the power armor, after all.

"I need the Saturn armor to use that power?" Ryan muttered to himself, right before time resumed. Hannifat Lecter's projectile demolished the *Street Fighters* game, much to the courier's dismay. "The arcade!"

This was it, if his Plymouth Fury getting drowned in garbage hadn't ruined this run, that tragedy did!

"You tell me, mate," Big Fat Adam replied, wielding his cannon with one hand and trying to smash Ryan with his

other fist. He didn't have time to do much, as a coil gun shot him in the left eye, blowing it up in a brief shower of blood. "Argh!"

Ryan took the opportunity to leap back to safety, glancing at his savior. "Thanks, I guess the two of you didn't see eye to eye."

"Oh, right, I'm supposed to quip," Livia said, wielding the coil gun and aiming to finish Big Fat Adam's bullet surgery. "Anyone in favor of safety glasses, say 'eye'!"

Ryan groaned, but forgave her weak pun-fu.

She fired another projectile at One-Eye Adam, but he protected his face with his hand. The bullet bounced off his carbon skin, though it pushed his palm back slightly.

"Sarin!" he snarled, trying to wipe the blood off his face.

"Kill that one!"

Sarin unleashed a shockwave at Livia. Though she failed to hit the Augusti princess, her assault forced Livia to fall back to behind the ruins of the bar counter. The Panda wasn't in a better position, the much bigger Frank having tossed him against one of the atrium's walls.

Hazmat Girl turned at Ryan to blast him, and the courier decided to use his secret weapon.

"Bianca."

Sarin froze in place.

"Your boss isn't working to find a cure, but I am," Ryan pleaded, a hand extended. "We can make you human again."

She unleashed a shockwave, and he dodged by leaping to the side. “Are you a Blue or some shit?” Sarin asked angrily. “A telepath reading my brain?”

“You’ve got air for neurons, how could I read it?” Ryan asked, though all it did was infuriate the Psycho. “You must have seen it too. He’s throwing you at this base’s orbital command center, not at the Elixir labs!”

“He’s distracting you,” Adam said after wiping off the blood from his face. His only remaining eye glared with malevolence as he raised his gravity gun at Livia’s hiding spot. “Don’t listen and power through.”

“It’s true,” Livia said from her hiding spot. “Ryan!”

Realizing her intention, Ryan rushed at Sarin, just as a chill went do—

Time skipped forward a few seconds, and when it resumed, Ryan had slammed Sarin to the ground. Holes had appeared where Livia used to hide, and where Hannifat Lecter’s remaining eye should have been. The cannibal screamed in pain, while Livia kept hitting his head with bullets; the Panda had managed to free himself from Frank’s grasp by returning to human form, and then shifting back into the powerful animal.

“Look outside, we aren’t here to kill anyone!” Ryan told Sarin, before adding a caveat. “Except Psypsy and your boss, but they’re asses! The rest of you, we will cure!”

“Shut the hell up!” Sarin’s gauntlets vibrated, and she aimed for the courier’s head. A shockwave hit the ceiling, causing concrete and pipes to fall in the middle of the room.

"Think wisely, Bianca! You've been with him for years, and what does he have to show for it? Nothing! He doesn't want to save anyone, and deep down you know it too! You think you will be able to return to a normal life as long as he's around?"

"What chance is there to turn my life around at all?" she snarled, managing to kick him off her. Both rose back to their feet, with Hazmat Girl threatening to blast Ryan again. "Why would you care?"

"Because you don't deserve this," he argued, dodging another volley. "You don't deserve to be trapped in that suit, unable to touch, to smell, to taste. You made a mistake when you took these Elixirs and you've paid for it ever since."

"You don't know what it feels to be me, jackass!" Sarin snarled back. "I don't know how you can read my memories, but fuck off from them!"

She pointed her gauntlets at the ground to increase the size of her jumps, soaring above the room until she almost reached the ceiling. She bombarded Ryan from above with repeated short blasts, but the courier dodged each one. "I don't want to hurt you, Bianca!" Ryan pleaded, showing one of the guns he kept in his trench coat. "I could breach your suit with a bullet in my sleep."

"As if I would—" Ryan grabbed a weapon and shot her so fast, that she couldn't even finish her sentence. The bullet grazed her mask, right near the point where it combined with the rest of the suit.

This time, when Sarin landed on the ground, she didn't immediately attack. She touched her mask, and gazed silently at Ryan.

"It's over for him," the courier said, glancing at Adam. "But not for you. You can still survive this."

"You don't know me," she said, "and you don't know him either."

"Oh, I do, and that's why he will die. But it's not too late for you."

"Are you a white knight or some self-help shitstain?" Sarin let out a hiss of disgust. "Why should I even trust you?"

The courier answered by tossing the *Fisty Brothers* and his gun to the ground. Sarin flinched in response, perhaps expecting a trick, but all Ryan did was to raise his arms and put himself at her mercy.

"Bianca," he said. "I'm your last chance. Your last, *last* chance at turning your life around. Don't waste it."

"I won't," Sarin replied, pointing her hands at his head. "I won't waste the chance to wipe off that thick skull of yours."

"You may slay me, but I have at my back a force you cannot hope to defeat," Ryan bluffed. "You've been on the losing side long enough. You would rather die as Sarin... or live as Bianca?"

Sarin raised her vibrating gauntlets...

And hesitated.

Her hands looked within an inch of opening fire, and her gas mask was as impenetrable as ever. Yet she didn't attack. Ryan's words had planted the seed of doubt in her mind, and now she didn't know what to think.

Meanwhile, Livia ran out of bullets, tossing the coil gun aside.

"Head trauma, Ryan!" she shouted at the courier. Big Fat Adam had dropped his gravity gun, and the Augusti's projectiles had slowly pushed him against the elevator's doors. "His power only protects his skin, but not the organs beneath! If we keep hitting his head, he'll get a concussion and bleed internally!"

"You're Augustus' girl," Big Fat Adam rasped angrily, trying to detect her by sound. When he did, he lunged at her with nightmarish speed, mouth opened and hands raised. The blood flowing from his eyes made him look like a ghoul rising from the dead to devour the living. "I'll send you back to your old man in pieces!"

Leaving Sarin to mull over her doubts, Ryan activated his power, caught Livia in the frozen time, and pulled her out of the way. Big Fat Adam's sharp teeth closed on nothing but air, and Lightning Butt's daughter instinctively grabbed the courier by the arm.

"You should stop doing that, princess," Ryan teased her, her fingers holding him by the sleeve. "People will talk."

"Let them," Livia replied playfully. "You may rescue me as many times as you like."

"Mr. President!" Frank tossed the wounded Panda aside and moved towards Livia and Ryan. "I'm coming!"

Instead of running away, Livia faced the titan and said two words.

"Stop, *Vladimir*."

For a moment, Ryan thought he had misheard, and so did Frank. The giant flinched, as if he had been stabbed in the heart.

"Your true name is Vladimir Khabarov," Livia continued. "Not Frank."

As Psypsy had said in a previous loop, Frank the Mad... Frank the Mad was no American.

He was *Russian*.

"This is communist propaganda!" Frank snarled, covering his head with his hand as if he could block Livia's voice. "I was born in Arkansas, like Country Music!"

"Your family farm wasn't in Arkansas." Since Livia couldn't hit the giant physically, she targeted his fragile mind. "It was in Novgorod. Your father wasn't a cowboy, but a soviet, and he perished choking on stolen caviar."

"Lies!" Frank snarled while raising his fist. He attempted to squash Ryan and Livia like bugs, but the courier froze time to move out of the way. The giant's fist hit the floor, going through it like steel through paper.

Sarin chose this moment to pick a side. She blasted the ground below Frank, part of the floor collapsing below the giant's weight. The self-hating colossus fell down the hole halfway, with only his torso sticking up. He attempted to raise himself up, to no avail.

"Sifu, get down!"

Ryan turned around, to see that Big Fat Adam had recovered and tried to flank him; the blinded madman must have detected them by listening to their exchange with Frank.

Suffering from his cooldown, Ryan attempted to back away, but Livia held him by the sleeve.

Instead, his bloodied pandawan tackled the ogre before he could get anywhere near his master. The two brawled for a second, but the more experienced Adam quickly grabbed the bear's hands with his own. The Psycho opened his mouth, to reveal a syringe full of swirling liquid.

An Elixir, but not a Mechron-made one. This was the same Blue Elixir the cannibal had attempted to turn Ryan into a Psycho with after blowing New Rome to kingdom come. And true to his sick obsessions, Adam spat it at his foe.

The courier barely had the time to blink in horror as the Elixir shattered on the Panda's face.

Blue liquid splattered on the Panda's soft fur; and though true Elixirs couldn't bond to animals, that one must have detected the human beneath. The green Genome switching back and forth between his two forms as his body absorbed the liquid. Big Fat Adam pushed his victim backward to fall on his back with cruel glee, while Ryan held his breath in horror.

"I got one of you," Hannifat Lecter gloated triumphantly.

"Indeed you did," Livia replied with smug calmness.

Her tone surprised Ryan. Why didn't Livia seem concerned? Why didn't she fall back? Unless... unless she had seen this event in a vision, and let it happen? Why?

Only when the Panda settled back in his animal form, did Ryan understand.

His body had completely absorbed the blue Elixir, the syringe's shards crushed beneath his mighty feet. Instead of madness, the monster of the east moved with focus, and purpose, and strength.

Out of all the millions of people living in New Rome...

"No way..." Sarin whispered with shock and jealousy, as the manbear took a step towards Adam. The cannibal heard him coming, but he had guessed what happened from the sound. The realization had left him too shocked to move.

Livia had predicted she and her father could take two Elixirs with no ill effect.

And when the Panda's eyes shone with a blue hue, Ryan felt a moment of religious awe. A Gregorian song echoed at the back of his mind, and he could almost see holy light shining into the bunker.

For *God* existed, and He had fur.

The Panda launched himself in the air, his right leg and arms extended, the left knee folded. How could a giant bear fly like this, Ryan would never understand, but he did. Perhaps Big Fat Adam might have dodged, if he still had eyes, or maybe he would have been paralyzed in awe too. The Panda shouted his attack's name, with his cute, amusing voice.

"Soaring Panda!"

How could something so *ridiculous* look so *good*?

The Panda's feet hit Hannifat Lecter's head with so much strength, that Ryan heard a loud 'crack' as both connected. The monstrous Psycho flew backward and crashed on the ruins of the arcade, while the victorious bear gracefully

landed on his feet. His pose reminded the courier of a Bruce Lee movie, and perhaps it came straight from it.

As for Adam the Ogre, he did not rise up again. And hopefully, he never would.

Frank, who had observed the scene with horror, attempted to free himself to no avail. His body absorbed the metal within the floor, trapping him further like quicksand.

"It's over, Frank," Sarin said, vibrating hands pointed at his head. "Don't make me blast you."

"I must fight the communists' infiltrators!" he shouted.

And Ryan answered, "No, Frank. You *are* the communists."

And then Frank was a zombie.

Or he might as well have been, for Ryan's words were the coup de grace. The giant looked at his chest, scratching at it as if he could exorcise the Marxist-Leninist evil that infected him; but when he couldn't, he slammed his head against the floor and mentally shut down. Perhaps his suppressed memories had resurfaced, flooding his brain just as Livia had expected.

His false patriotism shattered, the once-proud giant had become an immobile pile of scrap. The courier observed him in a minute of respect, as he watched this proud giant, this loyal bodyguard that perished protecting presidents so many times, reduced to such a pitiful state.

"How did you know about Frank's past?" Ryan asked Livia, as Sarin lowered her gauntlets, still on her guard.

"I looked for a future where I won the fight," the mafia princess replied not so smugly.

"Your power is almost as busted as your best friend's."

"Says the pot calling the kettle black," Livia chuckled.
"Speaking of best friends, ours should be done now."

"I got one, Sifu!" the Panda said triumphantly, sitting atop a crushed Big Fat Adam's stomach. "I got one!"

The circle was complete. When Ryan met him, the Panda had been the disciple.

Now, he was a master.

The 'Battle for the Junkyard' ended in a complete, near-flawless victory. The only loss on Ryan's side was his car, which had been wounded in action; though the Chronoradio and key functions had survived the Land's attack, so the time-traveler could always repair it.

The group had gathered the Psychos in the bunker's hangar, with Sarin and the Panda helping Len move the unconscious Meta-Gang members into bathyspheres. They would transport the Psychos to underwater jails, until Ryan could figure out a cure for their condition. Psyshock's thralls would also be kept there, to receive medical attention and avoid the bunker's secret from spreading yet. They would be released once the base was destroyed.

As for Big Fat Adam, Len insisted on bubbling him too. Unlike the other prisoners though, he drowned to death in it, waking up just long enough to understand he was about to die. Communists could never make a good product,

especially for people who tried to attack orphans under their care.

As for Fortuna and Shroud, they had both walked inside the bunker without a mask and arm in arm. The former looked giddy; the latter, as if he wished to die inside.

“You won’t believe it!” Fortuna announced. “Mathias... Mathias is the Shroud!”

“No way?” Ryan replied with a falsely surprised tone. “Your *boyfriend*?”

“My boyfriend!” Fortuna squealed, though her companion looked more... *resigned* than anything else. “I would never have guessed!”

“I knew he wasn’t all that clear,” Ryan said.

“How did it happen?” Livia asked, half curious, half displeased.

“The Land took back physical form to fight us at full power, as you suspected,” Shroud answered with a sigh. “A rock hit my mask while I was holding Fortuna, and it shattered.”

It must have looked very dramatic. “How unlucky of you,” Ryan put salt on the wound.

“All along I wondered why you were always there when I had a problem, but now I understand!” Fortuna put a hand on her boyfriend’s shoulder. “You were watching over me, like a guardian angel! How romantic!”

“That couldn’t be farther from the truth,” Mathias replied, though he sounded a bit more ashamed than usual.

"You don't need to be mean, I know you care now," Fortuna said with a foxy grin.

A flash of flustered embarrassment passed on her boyfriend's face, which he immediately suppressed with a stoic face. "I trapped the Land inside a glass prison outside, while Gemini surrendered after she realized all was lost," he said, before glancing at Sarin. "Why is she still running around?"

"She turned her coat the right way," Ryan replied. "She will be very important later."

Mathias' eyes squinted at the courier, and the Augusti woman at his side. "After we put the Meta-Gang in custody, we will need to talk about this place's future... and yours. Yours most of all."

"Have you told Sunshine about us?" Ryan asked, while Livia bristled.

"Not yet," Shroudly Matt admitted. "I wasn't sure if my hypothesis was correct, but after seeing this place... now I am. And I have enough questions for a lifetime."

"They will wait after your girlfriend's," Ryan mocked him.

"Yes, indeed!" said Lucky Girl. "I want to know everything! How long have you been a hero? Are you on a team? Do you have a sidekick?"

Mathias sighed as Fortuna dragged him away. Though Ryan noticed he didn't struggle as much as he should.

"They remind me of a tree and moss," the courier told Livia. "She's growing on him, and he's starting to like it."

"He will have to come clean to her though," Livia said icily. "Or I will tell the truth for him. Fortuna deserves that much."

Probably, but Ryan doubted Lucky Girl's power would work so hard to set them together if it wouldn't make her happy in the end.

"You look concerned, Ryan," Livia said with a frown. "Is something the matter?"

"Yes. The bunker is ours with no strings attached, we caught Adam before he could pull off his plans, nobody I liked has died so far, and the **Panda has two powers.**" He emphasised these last words, because he could hardly believe it himself. "Everything went well."

Livia chuckled. "Ryan, that's good news."

"I'm just expecting for the other shoe to drop," the courier replied.

"Why would it?" she asked. "We worked hard, and it paid off. The previous loop ended in disaster, but we learned from it and acted accordingly."

We. Such a sweet word to hear. Though there was so much left to do, Ryan no longer carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. He had people willing to back him up now, for better or worse.

"What comes next?" Livia asked. "Now that Adam has been dealt with, we should prepare for what comes afterward."

"I will infiltrate your family," Ryan said. "Brief Alchemo, Len, and Sarin on the memory map front. See how to deal with Dynamis for good. Contact Vulcan to recreate the Saturn armor, see with the Carnival how we can deal with the

bunker, Narcinia, and the Bliss Factory. Research the Psycho cure, and probably plan a trip to Antarctica.”

“Antarctica?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Well, we will discuss how to deal with the Carnival together. I already started doing simulations, but you are our ace in the hole.” Livia smiled at him. “You will meet with Jamie tonight, to infiltrate my family from the bottom?”

“Yes. I put him on a list.” He hadn’t interacted with Jamie, Ki-jung and Lanka for many loops, and he yearned to meet with them again. Now that he could theoretically bring a limitless number of people into his loops... he was no longer afraid of trying to befriend others for the long term. “But I meant something else for the infiltration phase.”

Livia raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you, but I’ve been hesitating for a while. Because...” Ryan gathered his breath. “Because if I do, I can’t take it back. It will be complicated, and it may not work. But if it does...”

He left the sentence hanging, watching as Livia’s breathing shortened. She must have guessed his intentions, but since she couldn’t predict him, she felt anxiety rather than serenity. If he hadn’t misread all the signals she had sent him in this loop and the previous one, the seer wanted Ryan to make a move; but was afraid of the shame she would face if she had guessed wrong.

“Ask away,” she said shyly.

“Livia.”

Ryan grabbed her by the waist and pulled her closer. Though she gasped in surprise, being unable to predict the gesture, Livia didn't resist. She felt light as a feather in his arms, a fragile porcelain doll.

He ignored all the gazes his teammates sent him, focusing entirely on her blue eyes, and the pinkish blush spreading on her cheeks.

"Are you available tomorrow night?"

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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John Test, Tristan A, dave hutch, Mr. Finch, martin, Lennert Bex, Bradman, Casey Gillespie, Alex Anderson, Sharkmanwolf, HeavenDragon, Dominic Johnson, Andrew Liess, Liarke Lane, crownfall, Dave_S, Greenboy676, Krzysztof Wierczyński, Cal Fiala, Ryan Brudnicki, King Lokajad, Eric Jaynes, Mortal Complex, Username, Jonathan Hemlin, Reid, Sasa Mrdalj-Radulovic, Jarrod Young, Sir Sloth, John McCarter, Lee Moffat, GuGuy, Anton Lukanov, Racyn, Nikon, Tem M, Milo Goodell, glare31337, Won Jun Chun, Josh Enterman, Ronan, Magical_Duck, Sree Kommalapati, Pride, BananaInMyPants, Виктор Фон Стыценкофф, Andrew Banal, TacoWasTaken, Lu, jimi robert-jones, Andreas Finn, Timothy Felker, v, William Fullerton, Won Jun Choi, Torphin, Jimbo, S T, JustAUser, Dale Tucker, Denis Gelrud, Zmelk, S.R. Williams, KilledbyBooks, Alex Kentwell, Julius Dubasas, Kaleb Uden, Travis Vasquez, Fatih Altunbasak, Deltoren, gamerthemage, kNevik, mikespelun, abele a, Toucan, PJ Thum, DemonKingBaka, Caucasian Malaysian, Willshaper, Anthony L, Joshua Donahue, Blaek East, Aleksander ŻołĄdkiewicz, Jacob Ellis, Blaek East, Deepsealife, Kristian Huse, Bob Mijano, Saaski, David Hansson, mikeju, Sam Miller, Joe Giannuzzi, Phantom, lockx, Ben Lenk-Ostendorf, Thomas Have, Joe, Dargon, David Burchfield, Julien Fellegara, thkiw, redslash5, FiveHands, B. Gazzola, Abhichon chandrasen, Nock, Nikhil B, Connor Alexander, NightWhisper, Samuel Smith, Aldhere, Jacob, Sam McNamara, Jarrod Broome, Rolf Bork, Callum Brocklehurst, Samuel Borges, Joe, Dardy Noongar, Joe Giannuzzi, Jonathan Kutz, Stuart Dye, DerWipe, Grosbilljunior, martin, GenericKane, Sharath, Augustus, Joseph, Abhichon chandrasen, MaikD, Matt Labrum, Robert, s476, Eneri, TKLD, Daniel Hughesdon, Jordan, Vega, Eric

Vistnes, Jose, Davvy chapie, Joey Nguyen, Skovboa, maniac_ian, Sebin Paul, Liz Griggs, BluEarth, MaliMi, Marcus Österberg, Orm, DaQualyn Singleton, Rheklr, evilperson41, Lloyd kostuik, Corwin Brewer, Loïc Fernandes, Eric jian, Gianni Ghiribelli, John Smith, Willshaper, Tibstrike, Ploxzer, Alexander Dupree, Josh Delgado42, Domenic Stritzl, Not N. Octopus, Hazza Vanderbyl, Hoobie Gomez, charlyfu, Cliint, Paul Rettig, Luke, Jacob Goodwin, Kristian Oinonen, Bennet Larson, Mikołaj Wiszniewski, Bobby Jones, Phillip Ingram, Ariel Reyz, altus, lione pouet, Nicolas Marty, Bobo Bo, ScottDR, Kyle Wong, Henry Chow, Thundabear95, Aqua, eva0ne, Philip Lee, Ivan Delgado, Geffery Dopp, Christian Alex, Kaleb Uden, Dax, jacob johannes, House of Pantheon, Melanie, Caldrick, Kezrin, Michael Frankford, Brody Brown, Actaeix, Desert Wreck, dave hutch, Zachary Venne, AlthePal, MaliMi, Athur3s, Brent, Slimereaper, Sub Electricall, The Knight Commissar, Dorian Lee, Svend, Ryan Size, BB King, Markus, HollowIce, Long Le, Blah64, Hamis, Tip Top, Adrian Engel, Brenden, Josh Huynh, Mohammed Hajjaj, Massgamer, afgasd adgasd, Harrison Russel, Yeno Memevig, Finn Ryan, Nicholas Jensen, T T, Manu, Deinos, maltmana, Alyaseen, Dylan, Svarog, Nick Smith, Conner M Tatum, ParoxysmDK, James Deziel, Amaury, michele calderoni, Kirvin, Jordan Litwin, Magnus Steffen Nørregaard, Justin Jones, Marcus Pehan, Cole Rosenhein, Enzo Morvan, Art238, Bon Bon, Richard Barboza, Alexander, Charlie Taylor, Doom, Jeff Gault, George Ive, John, shawn, Daniel Hernandez, John Bush, war doggle, WowExist, Edwin Jose, Andrew Wilson, Pooya Daravi, Sunerl, Steven Lindsay, Thaco4, Tyler Chesney, NLRUmbra, Kyle J Smith, Rommelfanger Bob, Davvy chappie, Branden Bryan, Alex Nimmer, Jordan McDonald, JJ B, Andrew Odom,

Danielle Warvel, Colin, Ivan Kalinovic, AdAstridPerAspera, Reviv3pls, Dark Chaos, Saysca, Folk Chanin, Jdosnoen, Konrad2, Bunny Waffles, John Johnson, Colby, Pumpkin Mouse, Helsgarde, Harry Williams, Alex Canavan, Hobold the kobold, Adam Johnson, Daniel Aguirre, Zack Hoeken, Daniel Mackie, Chip Twothousandone, KatarnK, N0T0B0K, Razvan, Calvin, John, Jordan Chan, Heikki Aitakangas, OccultOwlbear, TheBreaker, Justi martinez, Thomas Rossiter, Jonathan Caselli, John, Richard Lee, Njordt, Joshua Thompson, PJ LeBlanc, Demetre Zurebiani, Iron_Giant, Guilherme Silva, Slade Schlaudecker, The Arcane Emperor, Erik Sjöström, Michael Forrester, BadSnake971, ZRhulad, Ryan, Cole Mathews, Scott Bosse, Timo Reti, Dietz, Thomas Gamble, Nonnuvya Bizniz, Sean Basa, Tagmin, Julien Castellijos, Kasan, Zach Jamison, Zack, Ethan Bell, William Vickers, Njordt, Alexander, Devarya Raman, Marcus Seigman, James Jackson, Preston M, Subliminary, TDMC, Jordan, Kite 7, Alfredo Spuri, Russel Todd, Demetre Zurebiani, Zach, Tate Browder, Brandon Stiles, Minow, Joachim Janssen, Michael S., edmuck, Jade Green, Victor Newman, Malphas, Kyle Reid, aezrith ferova, Hulg Gohen, Jackietron201, Dark Chaos, Michael Yamashita, Hntpo, Andraste Chevalier, Julien Castillejos, William Johnson, John Evans, Liark Lane, mcanamara ?, HarbingTarbl, Spartanstoryteller, Thordur hrafn, David Ge, IronJim, Demetre Zurebiani, hippityhoppity, Dertyer, Guy Incognito, Paul Hughes, TaoBio, Soufyan Zerrad, mars kiyu, Iudi, Meredith Leu, Gaëtan Hillion, Bernice0311, Galandry, Eirik, Andrey Kutsey, Scipio, Andrew Rutherford Butler, Aeon, brett thomas, Yiğit Köymen, Thiago Ruiz, Imran, Dark Chaos, Tijay Arnie, Comedy Knight, Qwer, Gerrant, Ciara Banks, William Swearingin, Anonmily, William Brayer, Armo, Aehs, sedael, Darien Benner,

Ligma, Michael Buchler, Daniel Spencer Vargas, Gabriel Aptekar, BedlamBlade, Walter, Joko, Goggy123, Erostan, Clemens Hochstädter, Noah Rimmer Skov, Jacob Barger, Sam Paley, Ariel reyz, Juppaware, House of Pantheon, Aymeric Penven, Harold Sandahl IV, Francis Chartier, Kody Ihnat, Rein Warner, mikael persson, morganmoll, Warper 6, Andrew Holland, Jdosnoen, Xerias, manspider0002, Zachary D Nickell, Maalsc, TTG, Oliverthms, Richard Wall, Siphor, Dark Chaos, Jeremy Humphrey, Nikhil Majumdar, Leaored, Cipkenop, Chistopher Waits, Robert Blank, Ervin Ughy, Phoebe Vale, Shaoraka, Zachary Smith, PonyReader, agoniste, Max Hu, Brycen Legler, KeyMan BrB, Jonathan Spaulding, Ausner Gentil, Kazzy, Erriballon, Larry Smith, Sanjay, Oliver Gray, Adrian Barter, Alex Rhone, Karthic, Tailor Tylbury, Bob le Poisson Rouge, Colin Ford, Ashley Cameron, Bogdanov Dmitriy, Ivan Elyshev, Particlepigeon, Ryan Trueman, Kalle, Roden, Thomas Tessier, M Clason, Alex Lindsay, Sadinar, Daniel Everest, Exiled Knight, LinenZero, Tomas Puskas, Kyle Reese, RandomGift, Corgi McStumperson, Peter Christensen-Calvin, James Teeple, Dom Ceremonia, Mikkel Kolding Christensen, Sands, BlackFire13th, Kevin Ramos, Charles handgis, damien, Jeb, Jeb, Sebin Paul, Andrew Kahn, 白酒鬼, Trevor Sales, Calvin Miner, PbookR, Glader, John Carroll, Quentin, Andrew Parsadayan, Igor Mikulik, RepossessedSoul, James Walsh, Athra, Chris M, Jim of Trades, Koen Hertenberg, Alex Pruitt, Saul Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri Thornber, Marc Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.

97: A Breath of Fresh Air

“Sorry, I can’t do that.”

Ryan scratched Eugène-Henry’s back while watching Dr. Tyrano on his computer screen. The A-bomb laid on the desk, right next to the late Fat Adam’s gravity cannon. “You’re saying no to unlimited fundings, resources, and safety from the monster you keep bottled up in your lab when he inevitably breaks out? Because you know he will.”

“I don’t know how you managed to learn that much about my work,” Tyrano admitted, a little disturbed. *“But I am contractually bound to Dynamis for the next two hundred years. I can’t even leave the building without a heavy escort.”*

“Two hundred years?” Were there other time-travelers running around in Italy? “Is that even legal?”

“In New Rome, it is.”

Ryan massaged his temples, at his wit’s end. “Think, Tyrano, think! You’re using an unstable product to turn people you know into timebombs! What will you have after everyone has turned into a Bloodstream clone?”

Dr. Tyrano remained silent for a moment, but Ryan guessed his answer before he even spoke.

“Dinosaurs,” the scalie answered. *“I’d still have dinosaurs.”*

That made Ryan think more than it should.

Still, the fact Tyrano wouldn't leave the Dynamis HQ nor agree to sabotage the Knockoff supply dashed a few of the courier's hopes. Even if the Carnival developed a vaccine plague to cure New Rome's population, they would have to assault Lab Sixty-Six again to finish off Bloodstream for good.

Still, Ryan didn't give up on the saurian Genius.

"What if I told you we have access to a completely safe Knockoff variant, so strong it even works with robots?" The courier tempted him. "That we have not one, but *two* Genomes with multiple powers and no-side effects to study? That we possess a wealth of research and information on Elixirs... and a lab capable of creating life from scratch?"

Then he delivered the coup de grace.

"Inhuman life?"

Tyrano's slitted eyes expanded like a frog's, to Ryan's shock. The courier wondered if it was what passed for arousal for humanoid dinosaurs. To hook him further, the courier forwarded the Genius a sample of his Elixir research, including a bio-scan of Mongrel.

"We're working on a cure for the Psycho condition," Ryan said. "Though you're contractually obligated to work with Dynamis, certainly you can sacrifice some of your precious time for it. Who knows, maybe you could make a Green Knockoff capable of granting your dearest, cold-blooded wish."

The Genius barely took a glance at the data before raising his white flag. "*Where do I sign?*"

“First...” Ryan scratched Eugène-Henry behind the ears.
“You must give me access to *that* folder.”

“*Oh, that one?*” Dr. Tyrano seemed strangely embarrassed about it. “*It’s something of a side-project, and early results weren’t promising. But it will change the world, you’ll see!*”

“I’ll keep an open mind,” Ryan said, as he received an email called ‘*Monster Girl Project.*’ He opened the video file within.

The courier instantly regretted it, as an abomination came into view.

The screams and moans that came out of this... this *thing* startled Ryan so much, that he almost fell from his chair. His terrified cat leaped out of his lap to take over the nearby bed.

“Oh God... oh God...” Ryan covered his mouth, though he couldn’t tell if it was in horror or terrible awe at the man’s demented genius. There were things that could still surprise him after eight centuries of time-traveling. “*Why?!*”

“*A creative spur!*” Tyrano explained, as if it made up for this crime against nature. “*I couldn’t do that to a reptile!*”

“Why a *mink*?!” Ryan asked, closing the video feed when he couldn’t take the abomination’s screams anymore. “Is... is that thing still alive?”

“*No, no, it died, unfortunately,*” Tyrano reassured him. “*But I have a spare.*”

Ryan resisted the urge to throw up, and stopped the video call feed. He would have nightmares for years to come. Even the most depraved *Sonic the Hedgehog* fans didn’t go as far as Dr. Scalie did.

The courier took a moment to gather his breath, only to suddenly hold it. Two long ears rose from the side of the desk, a monster rising from the depths of Hell.

“No,” Ryan said with false panic.

The plushie looked at his maker, then at the A-bomb, and finally back at his maker. Meanwhile, Eugène-Henry ignored them all to vanish beneath the bedsheets, considering the matter beneath his kingly notice.

“No!” Ryan forbade the plushie.

And for the first time since this loop began, the furred fiend answered.

“I will always be your friend!”

This plushie hastily pushed the A-bomb’s button with a loud ‘click.’

Nothing happened.

The plushie hit it again, and again, and again in quick succession, growing more and more frustrated. Its eyes turned red as it glared angrily at Ryan.

“It’s a prop,” the courier replied with a grin. “I gave the real one to Vulcan.”

He had bribed his favorite dwarf Genius with so much technology, that she didn’t even ask him to ruin Star Studios this time. Vulcan insisted that Ryan become her assistant instead, and wouldn’t take *no* for an answer.

The courier was more than willing to help her, but only in short bursts. Though Ryan could now interact with Vulcan

without feeling stabbed in the gut every time she opened her mouth, the shadow of *his* Jasmine remained ever-present. The courier also intended to use this loop to deal with the Bliss Factory and Narcinia, and so would rather stay a contractor working for multiple branches of the Augusti's organization.

The plushie's eyes turned blue in disappointment, so Ryan tossed it the gravity cannon. "Here, if you want to work your way up the suicide chain," he said. "Aim for the heart though. There's a chance you might live if you go for the head. I know from experience."

The eldritch horror examined the cannon curiously, though the weapon was ten times larger than it was. "Please don't kill anyone else!" Ryan pleaded as he left the fiend to its experiments, rising from his seat to move to his door.

"So?" Shroud asked, having waited for him in the next corridor. He had managed to repair his glass mask, though Ryan wondered why he bothered to hide his true face anymore.

"He won't help sabotage the tomato juice factory," Ryan replied with disappointment. "He fears his bosses' wrath more than ours."

If the courier was on a Meta run, he might have changed that, but Ryan would have his plate full with the Augusti for now.

One day had passed since the bunker raid, though Ryan spent last night at the harbor helping Jamie protect drug supplies. Luigi hadn't shown up this time, probably at Livia's urging, but Jamie still invited Ryan to stay at his house all the same. That guy was so nice, he made the courier want to adopt him.

Ryan spent the day in Mechron's bunker, settling things here. He had contacted Alchemo, who should make his way to New Rome by the next day and help take over the bunker's mainframe. With Dr. Stitch and Tyrano's long-distance assistance, the courier would have the best medical team in the world to figure out a cure for the Psycho condition.

The night, he would dedicate to Livia.

"Then we will need to clean up Dynamis' upper echelons," Mathias said. "We planned to wait for Hector Manada to retire, but we can hasten his departure all the same."

"I've seen Hector Manada fall many times." Ryan said with a shrug. "His children might be willing to switch to a safer, better product than one capable of causing a pandemic."

"Fallout won't follow," Mathias said. "Enrique might, once we provide him with the necessary data to show the destruction Bloodstream could unleash; and especially if his family lied to him. But Alphonse is another beast entirely. He won't surrender Bloodstream, even for a better alternative."

"Why wouldn't he?" Ryan asked with a frown. "He's a red, a commie infiltrator. He wants to turn everyone into a Genome, maybe even for free."

The vigilante remained skeptical. "Think about it. Fallout not only controls the Knockoff supply, but with Tyrano's cure, he can also remove powers at will. That's not the case with Mechron's variants, if I understand correctly."

Ryan pondered Shroud's point, and had to admit that he might be right on the money. Atom Smasher planned to make everyone a Genome so people like Augustus couldn't monopolize power, but he didn't wish to coexist with other

organizations. Neither did he hesitate to lie to his close allies, so that Dynamis could develop a monopoly on Knockoff Elixirs.

If Dynamis could both give superpowers and take them away, then it could become a true superpower. People would be kept in line by the fear of losing their Knockoff Genome abilities, and the Manada would monopolize the market.

“Fallout cares less about his Knockoffs’ potential side-effects than the societal control they grant his organization,” Shroud said. “If he was truly the hero he believes himself to be, he wouldn’t have created something so dangerous in the first place. In the end, Alphonse Manada only believes in his vision. He won’t deviate from his chosen path unless forced to.”

“I can stop time,” Ryan said, remembering Bianca running off to sacrifice herself. “I will stop him.”

“Can you?” Shroud asked, doubtful. “Among the most dangerous Genomes operating in Italy, he comes a close third behind Augustus and Leo.”

“I can, with this base’s resources.”

“This place will have to go, Ryan,” Shroud insisted. “Maybe there is something here that could defeat Fallout, or even Augustus, true. But the risk of dangerous weapons spreading to the public is too great. Even distributing Mechron’s Knockoff formula doesn’t strike me as a good idea. It might weaken the position of Genome warlords, but our post-war society is too fragile to survive ten million people with flamethrowers for arms.”

"You're preaching to a convert," Ryan replied. "But I will only destroy this place after it helps solve the current crisis."

Shroudy Matty crossed his arms. "Do you truly believe Psychos can be cured?"

"You don't, my transparent friend?"

"No," the vigilante replied, before adding, "but if there is a chance it works... if there is even the slightest chance it works, I can't stop you from trying. It would help too many lives."

"For your mom, one of the Genomes I called is specialized in brains." Shroud's head perked up at Ryan's words. "He can even cure mental illnesses, Alzheimer's, and even a Psycho's brain tumors. He could help you too."

Ryan couldn't see Looking Glass' face behind his mask, though the vigilante turned his head sideways, thoughtful. "Why do you think the Alchemist distributed these Elixirs in the first place?"

To turn us into interdimensional squids, Ryan thought. "I dunno, improve the human condition?"

"I think so too, and yet we used them to ravage the world." Shroud shook his head. "When I hear all the positive things Geniuses can make, I can't help but wonder why Mechron built weapons rather than medical supplies. Not even superpowers could change human nature."

"Take it from someone who knows," Ryan replied. "There will always be rotten apples like Late Adam, but most people I've met only need the right circumstances to turn their lives around. Anyone can choose right over wrong. Even a spoiled, self-obsessed brat with a busted power."

Shroud chuckled. “Do you know that she sculpts in her spare time?”

She must have shown her boyfriend her gallery yesterday night. “Pretty neat, huh?”

“She’s good at it,” Mathias continued, his tone warm. “I thought she relied on her own luck to do everything, but she hides artistic sensibilities that appeal to me as a game designer. I can’t quite explain it. And she won half a million euros in lottery winnings this morning, but instead of sitting on it, she wants to distribute it to Rust Town’s orphans.”

My, was he speaking fondly of Fortuna? Yesterday’s battle had greatly helped to turn his opinion of her around.

“She’s a golden retriever,” Ryan summed it up. “Loud, no respect for personal space, but surprisingly warm and loyal underneath.”

“Worse. She’s a much better person than I thought.”

The courier put his hands behind his head. “Will you be transparent with her on your next date?”

“Will you turn back time to make your own go well?” Mathias deadpanned with a joke of his own, before answering. “I think I will clear things up with her, but... not as long as she’s working as a hitman for Augustus. That’s a dealbreaker.”

“Unlike other members of her group, she isn’t in it for the killing,” Ryan said. “She wants to protect Livia first and foremost. It’s almost romantic.”

“Is that why you’re dating her?” Shroud’s voice turned from amused to serious. “To turn Augustus’ daughter around?”

"I asked her out because I wanted to," Ryan replied. He really had a thing for Blue Genomes shorter than himself.

"Giving her access to this place is dangerous, Ryan. What if she changes her mind and informs Augustus?"

"She has earned my trust and helped me when I needed it," the courier replied. "I want to return the favor."

Her father would wreck the world for her sake, if he didn't. She didn't deserve to have her sire's crimes on her conscience.

"Mark my words, Ryan, you can't save everyone." Shroud marked a short pause. "Especially from themselves."

And yet, he had to try.

"After Alchemo comes here, we'll use your rabbit foot of a girlfriend to access the mainframe," Ryan said, changing the subject. "You can confirm what I said about the other Mechron bases then, and we will unlock the self-destruct mechanism."

"I will have to inform Leo about you, you understand that?" Shroud asked. "Even if you turn back time again, I can't keep that to myself."

"Even for my cute, beautiful eyes?"

"Not even for them," the Carnival member replied with a chuckle. "Is there a way for you to carry others through time? I suppose it is only mental, since there aren't twenty of you running around."

Sharp guy. "I have a procedure to transfer information directly into your brain, though your past self will have to

submit to it.”

“He won’t,” Shroud said, shaking his head. “I know myself. I am too paranoid to let anyone alter my brain, even if you earn my trust beforehand. I’m not sure I would even accept such a procedure at Leo’s urging, and I respect him more than anyone.”

Ryan had expected as much. The only people he imagined would go through with the memory transfer unconditionally were Alchemo, who understood the technology; and Sarin, who had nothing left to lose. Even Len had remained on the fence so far. “I’m trying to improve a system that could bypass that extra step, but nothing’s confirmed yet.”

“I don’t like it,” he admitted. “You hold all the cards, and all I can do is go along.”

“Well, I also trusted you enough to share my greatest secret too, Safelite,” Ryan pointed out. “I can count on one hand those who know my true, phenomenal cosmic power.”

“I wonder what adventures we went through for you to do so.”

“We defeated the Meta-Gang together once, though Lightning Butt destroyed the city after you recruited Atom Cat.”

“Good to know,” Shroud replied dryly, though he didn’t like it. Neither did Ryan, since Atom Kitten would clearly be much happier with the Carnival than with Dynamis. “A shame. I was interested in Felix Veran. He has a great deal of potential as a hero, and a courageous heart.”

“As much as the Panda?”

Shroud scoffed. “Come with me and see for yourself.”

The vigilante led Ryan into the bunker’s atrium, where they found the transformed Panda folding paper sheets under Len’s watch. Sarin was playing pool near a pile of books, including *Discours de la méthode: Pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*, by René Descartes.

“Look, Sifu!” The Panda exquisitely folded the paper sheet in the shape of a mantis so fast that Ryan could barely see his paws move. The construct joined four others, representing a monkey, a tiger, a crane, and a snake. “Tada!”

“Nice superpower,” Sarin snickered. “Can you unlock Rubik Cubes too?”

“One of my teammates, Origami, can turn herself into paper sharp enough to slice throats,” Shroud replied dryly. “She could even slice through your suit.”

“You’re salty, aren’t you?” The Psycho taunted him, while focusing on her game.

“Earn my trust first, turncoat, and then we’ll talk.” Though he tolerated Sarin, the vigilante mistrusted her as much as Ryan did in the early days of his presidency. “If you sell us out as you did your previous employer, I will slay you myself.”

“I told your hat pal, if you truly can cure me, then you’ve got nothing to fear from me.” Sarin hit an 8-ball with her pool stick. “Don’t make me wait too long.”

The courier ignored them to focus on his bear disciple. Even Ryan couldn’t fold paper that fast, even though he had mastered the skill years ago. “I thought you were a martial

arts Genius?" he asked his pandawan. "Or does your brilliance extend to all eastern disciplines?"

"No, that's not it," Len said while shaking her head. "I ran tests. It... it took him minutes to pick up origami, and he... he learned French five pages into Descartes' book."

"The more I read, the more it made sense," the Panda said.

"I think... I think he can learn almost any skill at an accelerated pace," Len theorized. "Pick up a new language quickly, gain new skills by learning them through osmosis..."

Ryan knew it took on average ten thousand hours to master a skill, but clearly bears only needed half of one. "But how did enhanced learning help make you fly, my young pandawan?"

"That was so weird, Sifu. My vision went all blue, and then I remembered watching Bruce Lee's flying kick in the *Green Hornet*." And to illustrate his point, the Panda mimicked a few kung-fu moves with his paws. "Then I could do it too!"

"You learned one of Bruce Lee's moves, by *remembering* it?"

"Yes!" The manbear nodded. "That's how I learned martial arts, but I was never this good before!"

In half an hour, the Panda had mastered kung-fu, origami, and Descartes.

Ryan dreaded to imagine what he could achieve in a week. His pandawan probably couldn't learn what a normal human couldn't, but anything else was fair game. Arithmetic, philosophy, martial arts... perhaps even Genius technology, if given time to observe it. Bruce Lee's moves were made

for humans, and yet the Panda's second power allowed him to adapt them to his beastly body proportions.

His arrogant young disciple had ascended to shatter the heavens.

Speaking of power, Ryan needed to run tests on his own after he created the new iteration of the Saturn Armor. He would also add a few improvements to deal with Alphonse Manada, such as switching the chest-blaster with the gravity cannon. He had the feeling it would help deal with the nuclear disaster, maybe even Lightning Butt too.

"Well, I should go prepare for my date," Ryan said. Livia asked him to pick her up at nine, and to be on time. For once, the courier didn't dare to be fashionably late.

"Good luck, Sifu!" The Panda cheered him up. "I knew the tension was palpable!"

Len, though, seemed a lot less enthusiastic. "Riri, umm... can I... can I talk to you alone for a second?

Ryan nodded, his adoptive sister leading him outside, to the corridor overseeing the hangars. Henriette was playing with the children near the submarine, the dog delighting at having company. The group brought much levity to an otherwise claustrophobic, lifeless place.

Len glanced through the corridor's window, her arms folded. "You and her..."

"It's hard to explain," Ryan admitted.

The Genius held her breath. "In the past loops, did... did my other self know?"

"Well... I kinda told you how I felt, and we decided to stay family afterward."

Len's gaze saddened, as she glanced at the Mechron-made submarine floating in the bunker's water access. "We... we could reach the United States with it," she said. "Cross the Atlantic Sea."

"Even I can't turn back time that far," Ryan said sadly. "Trust me, I tried. I tried many times."

"I know, I..." Len bit her lower lips, and didn't finish her sentence.

Ryan didn't need her to do so, to guess what she didn't dare to say. That part of her wondered how their relationship could have ended. They had left each other in tears, and though they had started picking up the pieces, some of them had been forever lost to the sea.

"We could leave this place," she said, though with hesitation. "After we... after we deal with Dad."

"I can't do that, Shortie. Not anymore." If she had asked when he first arrived in New Rome, Ryan wouldn't have hesitated. But now... now the time-traveler had too many people to fight for. He couldn't leave them behind in the dust.

"She will be fine," Len protested. "She's... she's his daughter. Let them tear apart New Rome, if they want that rotten place so much."

"So I should let her father kill people for her sake?" Ryan asked, and instantly regretted it. Len flinched as if she had been slapped. "I'm sorry."

"You don't want her to end up like me," the Genius guessed, avoiding his gaze.

Ryan glanced at the Mechron submarine. "Do you think we could reach Antarctica with that thing?"

She frowned, not understanding what he wanted to say.
"Yes, of course."

"There's so many mysteries to uncover around the world, so many wonderful places to explore, Shortie," Ryan said.
"Things that make life worth living. Don't bury yourself under the sea, please. Even whales rise up to take a breath of fresh air sometimes."

"I just don't know what to make of everything," Len admitted. "The Carnival... they killed my father, but if what you've said is true..."

"You will let the Carnival operate on you?" he asked her.
"Remove your father's blood tracker?"

"It's... it's the last part I have left of him."

Ryan put his hands in his pocket, choosing his words carefully. His thoughts turned to his discussion with his own Elixir, when he briefly crossed the Black World portal.
"Someone told me once that you have to let the dead rest. By trying to keep the dead alive, we only make everyone suffer. Nobody can move on."

Len wouldn't answer, her face as blank as a death mask. Ryan's hand reached for her shoulder, but she avoided his touch. Too soon. Still, he accepted it, hoping his words would prevail.

"Shortie, you're family," he said. "That will never change. Not even whatever happens with Livia, if anything happens between us, will change that. You will always stay my best friend, my sister, my most important person in the world."

"I..." She bit her lower lip. "I... I don't know what to answer."

"Then don't say anything," Ryan answered with a smile. "What I mean to say is that you're not alone, and you never have been. You don't need a ghost to carry on. The children love you, and whenever you trip, I will be there to help you rise back up."

Ryan and Len fell into a comfortable silence, just as a black sphere phased through the hanger and collapsed into nothingness. It miraculously didn't harm anyone, though the courier should probably check up on his bedroom before leaving.

"Now, I hope I didn't give you diabetes," Ryan joked.

And to his surprise, she chuckled and relaxed. It seemed his wit had broken through her shell. "Riri, about your memory machine..."

"You will try it on? Recover your other self's memories?" She answered his question with a nod. "What made you change your mind?"

"Even after what happened between us... you offered me your hand." The shadow of a smile appeared on her face. "It's time... it's time I do the same for you."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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98: White Night

He found Livia waiting for him at the Deadland motel.

Ryan drove to the meeting spot in his Plymouth Fury, having repaired his car after the Land wrecked it; though he had to drown it with perfume to hide the Junkyard's stench. The courier himself had switched from his normal clothes to an elegant black jacket with a purple polo shirt underneath, with no bright color to be seen; Darkling would have loved it.

A pity he couldn't raid Dynamis' cashmere factory without putting the company on high alert or starting a war with the Augusti. Neither could he use Mechron's matter replicator without Alchemo jailbreaking the mainframe first.

Of course, Ryan could have always spent money, but a cashmere suit wasn't *bought*. It was *taken*, by either strength or wits.

Livia had put a lot of effort into her appearance too, more than Ryan had ever seen her do. She wore an elegant sleeveless dress and golden bracelets, but also black stockings, red high heels, and golden earrings. She had put a lovely crimson rose in her hair, black linings around her eyes; it contrasted well with her sapphire eyes and the silver hair flowing on her back. Though she couldn't compare with her best friend Fortuna in the beauty department, Ryan found Livia quite lovely. A true princess.

She hadn't seen him yet due to the ambient darkness, so he watched her from afar for a short while. Livia waited in the parking lot, with her hands joined. She fidgeted in place, and let out a long, heavy breath as if to calm herself.

She hadn't seen how the date would end, and it made her nervous.

Ryan drove to her side, ending her silent agony. Livia immediately corrected her expression upon noticing him, smiling warmly at his arrival. "Did you order a pumpkin carriage, princess?" the courier asked, upon stopping in front of her.

"Will your car turn into a vegetable at midnight?" she teased him, while sitting at his side. Her perfume smelled of rose and strawberry. "This only leaves three hours."

"Livia, I can time travel. I can make three hours last a lifetime."

"I don't doubt that," she said, closing the car's door behind her. "But I would prefer it if you could bring me home before two in the morning, or my father might get upset."

"You've never had a sleepless night out in town?" Ryan asked, amused, as he drove away through New Rome's streets. "My, it was about time I came into your life."

Livia blushed a little, embarrassed. "I wasn't that sheltered," she protested. "With my power, I could experience wild moments by proxy, with none of the hangovers, drowsiness, and side-effects that came with it."

"Watching is not the same as living."

"No, but I don't enjoy parties that much," she admitted. "I prefer simpler moments with just a few friends. The more people surround me, the more my power goes into overdrive. Too many interactions at once."

"Cancel blocks your visions?" Ryan asked, his date answering with a short nod. "You could always hang out with her then."

Livia shook her head. "I don't like Greta. That woman is capable of *anything*. She could be just as hideously violent as Adam the Ogre, if she had any motivation." Lightning Butt's daughter frowned, as they approached the highway where Ryan and Felix once engaged her aunt Pluto in a car chase. "Where are we going?"

"Away," Ryan replied.

She blinked in surprise. "Away from the city?"

"Well, I figured you probably visited all of New Rome's restaurants, either directly or with your power. But there is one place I'm sure you've never been to before."

"Within an hour's drive of New Rome?" Livia asked with skepticism, before grinning wickedly. "I doubt so. Unless... unless, you intend to take me out of the city to ravish me in the wilderness?"

"Did you bring a chastity belt? It has been a while since I unlocked one."

Livia's smile turned coy and playful. The young woman wasn't as innocent as she let it seem. "If my father heard you, he would have you struck down."

"I have a lightning rod in the car boot. Does your father even know you're in a car with a dashing courier?" His date's mischievous smile was an answer in itself. "Would he let you date anyone?"

"Only an Augusti. My father mistrusts anyone outside of our clan. He wouldn't let Felix anywhere near me again, even if..." Her bashful smile turned sour.

"So you're disobeying him even as we speak?" Ryan mused, trying to distract her from her bad memories. "You live a dangerous life."

His date chuckled in response, which Ryan took as a good sign. "Not as much as yours. To be fair, you're the first who dared to ask me out at all. Most men are simply too frightened to try." She looked at him warmly. "That's one of the things I like about you, Ryan. You dare it all."

"You haven't seen anything yet," he replied, a foot on the accelerator. "Is your seatbelt tightly on?"

"Yes, it i—"

She gasped in surprise, as the Plymouth Fury raced on the highway. One hundred kph turned into one hundred and fifty, while Ryan switched the Chronoradio to *Mad Max 2*'s main theme. They passed by two cars, violating all road safety laws as they went.

"Stop!" Livia pleaded as the speed kept climbing, a hand on his arm. She screamed as they passed by a car so closely that they nearly brushed against it; though she could sense the cars coming, she couldn't foresee how Ryan would react to them, if he did. "Stop, you madman!"

"Don't try this at home, kids!" The courier said, using brief bursts of time-stop to avoid colliding with other vehicles.

Livia's scream of fear transformed into laughter, as the adrenaline pumped through her veins and the Plymouth Fury reached its maximum velocity. Ryan had modified his car to reach over three hundred kph, and at this speed, the world around them turned into a blur. Other cars became spots of color, the highway ahead became a tunnel of light.

If only Ryan could have driven his Plymouth Fury rather than the Pandamobile when Pluto came for his head. Cruella would never have come within an inch of his car.

Once he sensed they were close to their destination, Ryan activated a hidden button. The car hood opened to reveal a Genius device, the tip of a particle accelerator. Tiny light spheres came out of it, stretching reality apart.

"Have you watched *Back to the Future*?" Ryan grinned at Livia.

She answered with a panicked, exhilarated scream, as particles swallowed the Plymouth Fury. The stars above fell down in a rain of light, reality itself shifting around them.

Space stretched on until it shattered, and the car emerged on the other side.

Ryan hit the brakes and the device deactivated. The Plymouth Fury emerged from a particle cloud to slow down beneath alien skies, on a highway without cars.

Livia let out a heavy breath, as she recovered from the adrenaline rush. Only then did Ryan notice that her left hand held his right tightly; she must have seized it instinctively when they reached maximum speed.

Ryan's thumb brushed against her warm fingers, and Livia squeezed tighter in return.

"You okay?" The courier asked her. Instead of answering, she broke the hand contact and slapped him behind the head in response. "Ouch!"

"You madman..." Livia let out a nervous laugh, as the tension went down. "That was insane, Ryan."

"We'll have to do it again, on the way back."

"Oh, God." She smiled, catching her breath. "Did you ever get a driver's license?"

"Now, don't ask too much."

Livia giggled, and glanced outside her window. Her eyes widened upon seeing the world around them.

While they were still on the highway, purple auroras had taken over the night sky above them. The northern lights shone with the brilliance of stars, and within them one could glimpse images of strange places. Seas of mercury, clouds of floating ice, green lightning coursing through black, empty space.

The highway was deserted except for the Plymouth Fury, and seemed to stretch on forever. The land around the road had turned into a red desert, though one could see another highway in the distance. Even the temperature had increased, from chilly to warm and comforting.

"What is this place?" Livia asked as they exited the car, astonished.

“A thin place. A natural space anomaly, if you will.” Ryan moved to the car boot, where he kept the dinner. “I nicknamed it the *Midnight Road*.”

“I see other people,” Livia said, pointing at two silhouettes on the second highway.

“That’s us.” Ryan raised his hand, and the silhouette on the distant highway imitated him. “Do you see?”

“No.” The Augusti Princess had tears at the edge of her eyes. “No, I can’t see anything.”

She wasn’t talking about her eyes.

In the end, they sat at the highway’s edge, their feet dangling about the desert. Ryan offered Livia a sushi box, and chopsticks to go with it. “Space folds back?” his date asked after wiping away the tears, looking at the other highway in the distance.

“Yep,” Ryan replied, his mouth full of fish. “The highway stretches for thirty kilometers, and then loops back. It’s shorter on the sides.”

“Did you make this place?” Livia asked, tasting a Futomaki with a curious frown. “Or did another Genome build it?”

Ryan shook his head. “It’s a natural phenomenon, though you need Genius tech to access it. The colored dimensions are above our realities, beyond space and time as most humans understand it, but there are other realms sideways too. They follow the same timestream as our own.”

“So this is an alternate universe?”

“I wouldn’t say that. It’s... it’s more like a cave inside a mountain, except the mountain is Earth’s reality. A place where space-time folds due to gravitational or electromagnetic anomalies.” Ryan glanced at the purple auroras above their heads. “I think this place is close to the Purple World. Like a border realm between our universe and the big crossroads of all space and time.”

“I cannot observe anything within the colors dimensions, except the Blue one,” Livia guessed. “That is why I can’t detect you either, since you exist in two dimensions at once.”

Ryan nodded, before noticing that his date didn’t seem enthusiastic about finishing her plate. “You don’t like the food?”

“I’m sorry...” She made an embarrassed smile. “I hate it.”

Ryan’s heart skipped a beat. “You hate Japanese food?”

“I don’t like sushi, no.” Livia sheepishly shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

Goddamn it, he knew he should have picked French food! Nobody disliked French food, except the British and the truly wicked.

“But I love the place, and the gesture,” Livia immediately reassured him, when she saw his dejected face. “It more than makes up for the food.”

“I will have to reload now,” Ryan grumbled. “The date is not perfect.”

“No, Ryan, no,” Livia protested, instantly serious. She put a hand on his arm and squeezed it tight. “No, don’t, please.

It's because this moment is genuine that I enjoy it so much."

"Relax, I was kidding," Ryan teased her, his index finger brushing against her cheek. She blushed so much that a scarlet streak had formed beneath her eyes. "Though you've got a smile to die for."

Livia exploded into laughter, almost spitting out her food. The sound of her voice warmed Ryan's old, weary heart. "Does that pick-up line ever work?" she asked with a wide grin on her face.

"More than you think."

"But not on me," she said, as he removed his hand. "You will have to do better."

"You might regret it. I invented lines so powerful, that a few countries made them illegal."

His date rolled her eyes, and dared to put his boast to the test. "Then prove me wrong."

Instead of answering with words, Ryan put the sushi plates aside, and grabbed Livia by the waist. His date let out a squeal of surprise as he quickly lifted and put her on his lap. She weighed almost nothing, their feet dangling into the void.

"Ryan!" Livia laughed, so red the courier wondered if she might faint from the embarrassment. "You're going too far this time!"

"Come on, my lap feels better than the interdimensional highway's concrete." He put his arms around Livia and held

her tight, her head resting against his shoulder. “Unless Your Majesty would prefer a nobler seat?”

“I ought to have you whipped for your insolence, but I have the feeling you might enjoy it.”

“You would be right, mistress.”

The mafia princess laughed heartily, accepted the Throne of Romano as her seat, and made herself comfortable. Her back rested against the courier’s chest, and he sensed her hastening heartbeat beneath her skin. Though the scarlet streak across Livia’s face had transformed into a light blush, Ryan could tell the situation was new to her. She had only ever dated Felix, who had never been as comfortable with physical contact as the courier was.

“Can you reach these places?” Livia pointed a finger at the alien mirages in the skies, pictures of alien worlds, unlike Earth.

“Some,” Ryan confirmed. “Others I plan to visit one day.”

“Take me with you when you do,” she all but ordered him, sounding like a true queen. “To make up for your bold transgression.”

“And what if I commit crime after crime?” he teased her.

“Maybe I will punish you, or maybe not,” Livia replied coyly, putting her hands on his own. They felt warm and comforting to the touch, like Jasmine’s had been. “How did you even find out about these thin places? Did you stumble into one by accident?”

“I learned of them while researching particle physics in Switzerland.” Ryan shuddered. “Don’t go to Monaco.”

"What is happening in that place?" she asked, curious. "My power will not show me. I heard nobody that goes there come back, but you said you lived a full life there?"

"Shrimps, and caviar," Ryan replied darkly. Even now both gave him PTSD. "It's shrimps and caviar, until you can't take it anymore."

"That doesn't explain anything." Livia frowned, sensing his unease. "Something happened in this place. Something that hurt you deeply."

Ryan's first instinct was to deny the truth, but her firm gaze dissuaded him. "I..." the courier trailed off, having lived with this secret like a boulder around his ankle like a ball and chain. He had never told anyone, carrying that cross across time. Nobody would have understood.

But she would.

He could see it in her eyes. Livia had watched whole lifetimes through her power, from what she had told him. She couldn't comprehend the sheer weight he carried, but she could imagine it.

"I told you I stayed there a full life," Ryan unburdened himself. "I meant a *full* life."

Livia guessed the truth. Her expression shifted into one of horror, as she covered her mouth with a hand. "No."

Ryan looked away at the otherworldly desert beneath the highway, without uttering a word.

"Is that why you always say you're immortal?" Livia's eyes softened in compassion. "Does Len know?"

"No." Shortie already had enough burdens on her frail shoulders, and ghosts of her own. "You're the only one."

"Did you..." The seer bit her lower lips, as if afraid to go on. At that moment, Livia reminded Ryan of Len so much. They shared the same kind heart, beneath all the hardships. "Did you have... a family?"

"I... I never dared to," he confessed. "If... if my timing was even slightly off during the conception, then a different child would be born from loop to loop. I wouldn't have survived it. Not mentally."

"I'm sorry I asked that," Livia apologized. She turned her head, and her hand touched his chin to make him look up at her. "I'm..."

The seer struggled to find the right words to comfort him, until she did.

"I've seen other lives I could have lived with Felix," Livia confessed, her gaze sad and regretful. "Growing old together, having children. I saw these possibilities, but I couldn't make them true. I won't pretend I understand what you went through, because..." She let out a brief sigh. "Because watching is not living."

"But you know how deep the pain goes."

"Yes, I do." Her hand brushed against his cheek. "You don't have to suffer alone, Ryan. Now... now you don't have to suffer anymore. I will help you with your burden, I swear."

"Thanks." He took her left hand and kissed it gallantly. Now that he had her, Ryan could carry others through time. He could build lasting friendships, maybe even a family. The

courier could finally create a future he was happy with. "I will return the favor."

"You already did," Livia admitted, sounding as tired as he was. "I've had this power for nearly a decade and a half, Ryan. Truthfully, I've never gone on without it for so long since I was a child. It's... it's refreshing, but scary too."

"I get it. I feel that way whenever Cancel enters the picture. My power can be a pain, but it's reassuring." In the end, Ryan's Elixir had tried to help. The entity had remained at its human's side for centuries, sharing his hardships and victories. "I've figured the best thing I could offer you... was the unexpected."

"It was a wonderful gift." Livia fell silent, gazing at the alien horizon. Something weighed on her mind too.

Ryan guessed what. "You've seen your father wage war in the future."

"Ryan, this is a blissful moment. Let us not ruin it with my sorrows."

"I thought I already beat you to the gloomy confessions?" he asked, tightening his hold on her waist, his cheek brushing against her neck. "Let's be honest, we'll never find better therapists than each other."

Livia chuckled, though it sounded bittersweet. "Yes, I've seen it," she admitted with a heavy heart. "One night, I dreamt that Felix would barge into my room riding a white stallion, and carry me away from this city. It was a little girl's foolish dream, but I hoped it would come true one day."

"Would you settle for a knight in power armor?" Ryan jested. "Lasers are the new swords."

“Do you know Dynamis has lightsabers?” Livia asked him playfully. “Perhaps you should grab one. A blue one.”

“And you take the red, Queen Crimson?”

“I love the dark side,” his accomplice joked back. “But I prefer you on the side of the angels.”

“Come on, we had the most fun in our Meta run.” Though the end was a lot grimmer than expected.

“Yes, but no matter how much you try to hide it, Ryan, your true self shines through. Your good, gentle self.” Her smile faltered. “What father plans to do... I will stop it, you have my word.”

“I will help.”

“You already did, more than you know. More than you should have.” Livia looked into his eyes. “You don’t have to go further, Ryan.”

“No, I don’t,” he agreed, meeting her gaze with a determined one of his own. “But I want to.”

They locked eyes for minutes afterward, Ryan seeing multiple emotions flash through Livia’s blue eyes. Surprise, compassion, joy, gratitude... and something else. Something deeper, and more intense.

“We should go,” Ryan said. “It’s past midnight.”

“Not yet,” his date replied, staring at the skies. “Let us stay a little longer.”

They sat there in a comfortable silence, watching the auroras.

In the end, Ryan brought Livia back to Mount Augustus. He stopped before the fortified fence circling the hill, right as the clock struck two in the morning. “Right on time, princess,” the courier said, glancing at his fellow Genome. “So, what’s my date review? Ten out of ten, twelve and a half without factoring in the food?”

She didn’t answer. Livia had spent the whole return trip without saying a word, her head resting against the palm of her hand, her eyes gazing beyond the window. Perhaps she regretted that her Blue power now worked again.

Ryan cleared his throat, slightly embarrassed by the silence. “Livia?”

“I need to show you something,” she shook her head, peeking out of the car’s window and at the entrance portal’s camera. After a minute of waiting, the doors opened for them. “If you want to.”

Ryan had a pretty good idea of what awaited him, but he needed to be sure. “You understand that your father will know?”

Livia looked into his eyes, and he understood.

She had made that choice *because* of her father, knowing the consequences.

It was an act of rebellion.

Ryan drove the Plymouth Fury upward, towards the villa at Mount Augustus’ summit. He glimpsed guards protecting the property, but paid them no mind. Eventually, he parked his car near the house’s entrance, exiting it with Livia.

The Augusti princess led him into the villa through the front door, none of them saying a word. Though it was dark inside, she knew the place like the back of her hand and guided them through whitened corridors. Lightning Butt had devised his home like a true Roman villa, showcasing an obsession with marble deity statues and pillars that bordered on the pathological.

Ryan didn't pay his surroundings much attention. His eyes remained firmly focused on Livia's back, as he followed her. He could see shivers along her naked shoulders, her body rife with anxiety and tension.

Eventually, she led him to a room with a large red door. The seer froze for a few seconds, let out a heavy breath, and opened it.

Ryan walked into a bedroom almost as large as his luxury apartments, back when he worked for Il Migliore. Unlike the rest of the villa, it had been decorated in a more modern style. Paintings of cities, of smiling families, and natural wonders covered the walls, next to shelves full of dusty books. A reinforced window provided a direct view onto a beautiful terrace outside, and a king-sized bed lined up against a wall.

Livia wordlessly sat on the mattress after closing the door behind them, and joined her hands together. She didn't face Ryan, her eyes looking down at the ground. Her face was red, her breathing short, and she seemed terrified of asking him a single question.

Ryan cleared his throat. "Livia..."

"Do you want to kiss me?" she asked meekly while looking up at him, afraid of his reaction.

His lips met her own, and she didn't say another word for the rest of the night.

Neither of them did.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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99: How I Met Your Daughter

It was May 8th for the seventeenth time, and Ryan Romano had died happy.

Or he could have, as he woke up in a king-sized bed and in Livia's arms. Ryan had beat up Ghoul again in his sleep, only to quickly snap out of this nightmare. And a nightmare it had been. The courier usually didn't care about dying and beginning again, even in his dreams, but now he did.

He didn't want her to forget him.

Livia was holding him even now, her arms around his neck, her breasts on his chest, a leg over his thigh. Her hair covered her restful face like silver strands. The seer was warm to the touch, and she lightly snored, which Ryan found cute. Still, he might have to sleep with earplugs from now on.

Ryan Romano had been with countless people in his long life, and in his mind, lovemaking said a lot about a person's character. Len had been hesitant, clumsy, and vulnerable; the Doll, curious and playful; Jasmine had been wild, energetic, and liked weird roleplay.

Livia though?

It had been... right. Just right. Like fitting the right key in a lock. Livia was less experienced than her partner, but she was delicate, attentive, and considerate. And she laughed, sometimes at the most inappropriate time. Ryan couldn't explain why, but her laughter relaxed him.

For a moment, the courier completely forgot about Psychos, Bloodstream, and the fact he just bedded Lightning Butt's daughter in his own house. He only cared about the lovely woman in his bed. For an instant, Livia was his world.

He wanted to wake her up, to face her, and hold her hands while they kissed. He wanted to hold her, to become one with her. But the seer slept so soundly, and so blissfully, that Ryan couldn't bring himself to disturb her rest. In her own dreams, Livia looked happier than the courier had ever seen her.

Ryan was hungry though. The courier had noticed a kitchen on his way to Livia's bedroom, so he would go prepare the breakfast. He was sure Augustus' daughter would love to wake up in front of pastries.

Livia wouldn't let Ryan go though, even in her sleep. When the courier tried to sneak out of the bed, she just held him tighter. He had to freeze time to escape her grip and put a pillow in his place, but a frown appeared on the seer's face as time resumed.

The sight made Ryan feel... It took him a while to figure out the right word.

Loved.

Ryan felt loved. Livia wanted him at her side so much, she wouldn't let him go even in her dreams. Once, the time-traveler would have backed away in fear afterward; fear that

he might die, and that this moment would lose its significance. Fear of the pain he would feel, if Livia forgot him.

But now?

Now, Ryan wanted to return to her. It took all his willpower, and screaming stomach, not to slip back into the bed.

The bedsheets, no, the whole room reeked of sex, so Ryan opened the windows to let the fresh air in. The morning sun outside blinded him and burnt his skin like a vampire, though he quickly recovered. Only redheads had to fear the morning sun, for they lacked a soul.

Ryan thought of putting on his clothes, but they were... dirty. Instead, the naked courier explored the bedroom and found a white bathrobe with cat motifs. The time-traveler wondered if it had once belonged to Felix, before putting it on alongside the slippers.

Before moving to the door, Ryan took a moment to examine the paintings in the bedroom. Some represented Livia as a child with two people whom he recognized as her parents. Augustus always looked grim in reality, but his painted self smiled warmly; it made Mob Zeus seem less like a bloodthirsty monster, and more like a human being. Most importantly, he hadn't turned into an ivory statue then, his hair white and his eyes blue like his daughter. As for his wife, she was a carbon copy of Livia, albeit older and stouter.

Other pictures represented cities like New York, with one tower in place of the World Trade Center. A painting of Paris had zeppelins flying in the sky alongside steam-powered devices. It seemed Livia liked to paint about alternate

universes in her spare time. Or perhaps she dreamed of happier realities than her own.

In any case, Ryan silently slipped out of the bedroom, and quickly found his way to the kitchen. Unlike the straight antiquity style of the rest of the villa, the architect designed this room to mix the old and the new. High-tech fridges and ovens faced a five-meters long marble counter and ivory statues of Roman Deities. Venus and Mars holding hands, Jupiter triumphant, Diana and Apollo hunting side by side. How could Ryan resist making breakfast in such divine company?

The courier searched the room, and found a silver platter. He put it on the marble counter, and started preparing the breakfast. Livia was quite skinny, which Ryan found unhealthy, so he prepared fried eggs, bacon, coffee, and French croissants.

The courier would make pancakes for her tomorrow.

Ryan raised his eyes to look at the statues while he prepared the breakfast. Maybe it was sleeplessness, but... the statue of Jupiter seemed vaguely familiar.

Very familiar.

Ryan blinked, one hand holding a knife and the other a buttered toast. The Jupiter statue was a carbon copy of Augustus, standing still while gazing at the counter.

The courier dropped everything and moved to the side, but the statue's eyes didn't follow. Come to think of it, Lightning Butt always kept a shroud of lightning around his face, to intimidate others. This statue had none.

Was Mob Zeus arrogant enough to populate his own villa with statues in his likeness? Or was it something else?

Ryan knew he should take the platter and return to Livia, but he couldn't suppress his morbid curiosity. The time-traveler moved in front of the statue, and waved his hand before its eyes.

No reaction.

"Oh look outside, it's a wild Hargraves!" Ryan pointed at the kitchen's window, and the sunlight outside. "Quick, he's getting away!"

The statue didn't react. It didn't breathe, didn't blink, didn't do anything. Damn, Discount Zeus was arrogant enough to build statues of himself and put them in his kitchen.

Ryan poked the ivory construct in the nose, and decided to call it quits.

This time, Augustus woke up.

The ivory statue's eyes glanced down at Ryan, blinking a few times. It reminded the terrified courier of a grandpa with Alzheimer's, suddenly remembering his son's face. Was Lightning Butt sleeping with his eyes open, like a crocodile? Or did his tumor cause him to have a brain seizure?

"Hey, what's up?!" Ryan asked, trying to lighten up the atmosphere. He better make a good impression, as Lightning Butt wouldn't take *anyone* dating his daughter well.

"Who are you?" Augustus asked, his eyes squinting. There was no fear nor surprise in his voice, which Ryan found quite intimidating. The tyrant was so confident in his own power,

that catching an intruder in his own home didn't even phase him.

"I'm Batman," Ryan replied, trying to sound calm. However, he couldn't shake the ominous feeling of dread pervading the room.

"Whom?" Lightning Butt observed Ryan's bathrobe, his eyes flaring with crimson lightning upon recognizing the outfit.
"This belongs to my daughter."

In hindsight, sleeping with Lightning Butt's daughter beneath his own roof might not have been Ryan's brightest idea.

"You know what, don't mind me, I'll take the doo—" Ryan tried to take a step back, but Augustus swiftly grabbed his shoulder with his right hand. Lightning Butt had invaded his personal space, like Germany with Poland.

"You are not going anywhere," Lightning Butt said, his tone suddenly a lot more threatening. "Thief."

Of what, a bathrobe? Ryan would have bore that badge with pride if it had been a cashmere suit, but he wouldn't go to war for *cotton*. "Nah, I'm rich." Rich people didn't steal, that was known. "I'm a good friend of your daughter, and she invited me for a sleepover."

"Lies," Augustus replied, his grip on Ryan's shoulder tightening. It didn't hurt yet, but the courier could tell that the murderous mob boss would tear him in half at the slightest provocation. "My daughter would inform me. She knows the rules. I do not know how you bypassed the guards, but you were foolish to come here."

"It was late, you can check the cameras or ask Livi—"

“You will not get anywhere near my blood,” Augustus interrupted him. “Now, tell the truth before I tear off your limbs.”

Damn it, that paranoid psychopath wouldn’t listen! Ryan looked into the madman’s eyes, and saw that nothing the courier could say would change his mind. One glance, and Lightning Butt had already condemned the courier to death.

Ryan could try running back to Livia to clear this up, but Mob Zeus could move inside his time-stop and zap him with lightning; and if the courier perished now, then Livia would forget that night. She would forget *him*.

The courier had to delay, and pray for Lightning Butt’s daughter to wake up.

“I will not repeat myself again,” Augustus said, tempting fate. “Where did you find—”

Ryan froze time, and didn’t move. As far as the world was concerned, he had stopped just like everything else.

“—these clothes?” Augustus blinked, glanced around, and let out a sound that could pass for a sigh. He waited several seconds for the effect to end, with a look of resigned acceptance.

“I’m sorry, sir?” Ryan asked when time resumed, feigning confusion. Thankfully, he had an excellent poker face. “What did you say?”

“I said that—” The clock stopped again, and once more Ryan feigned being paralyzed. Augustus let out a snarl of anger and frustration, much to the courier’s deep satisfaction. The mob boss clenched his jaw, even after the flow of time resumed.

"I'm sorry, sir," Ryan apologized, delighting at the ivory man's frustration. After watching this selfish *prick* try to murder Leo Hargraves as the world collapsed around them, it felt quite good. To add insult to injury, the courier looked at Lightning Dad as if he had gone senile. "Do you need medicine, sir?"

Augustus waited a bit longer, half-expecting time to freeze again. Finally, once he thought himself safe, he opened his mouth again. "I said—"

Time froze again.

Instead of sighing or raging, Augustus squinted at Ryan, his expression thoughtful.

"I can see electrons move in your brain. You are not affected by this... this temporal anomaly. You are its source." Damn, Lightning Butt was brutal but not stupid. "Stop this at once."

Ryan didn't break character, even as time resumed. Augustus waited a few more seconds, his face undecipherable, before opening his mouth again.

"As I said—"

And time stopped again!

Augustus' hand moved from Ryan's shoulder to his neck and lifted him above the ground.

"You dare to mock me?!" Mob Zeus snarled angrily. The courier kicked and punched the invincible man's arm in the frozen time, but he didn't even notice. Unlike when Ryan struck him in the previous loop, Augustus didn't react with shock at someone being capable of harming him. The time-traveler's blows couldn't hurt him.

Damnit, as he had guessed, Ryan needed the Saturn Armor to use his Black superpower. He couldn't damage Lightning Butt without it!

"You would strike me? Madness." Augustus sneered as time resumed. "This is your last chance. Where did you find these clothes?"

"In your daughter's wardrobe!" The courier blurted out.

Lightning Butt noticed the sparkle in Ryan's eyes, alongside his messy hair. The ivory man's eyes noticed the breakfast for two, prepared with love, and he finally *understood*.

The Augusti patriarch didn't want to admit it though. His fingers tightened around the courier's neck, squeezing the air out of him. "What did you do?" he snarled, lifting Ryan higher until his head touched the ceiling. "What did you do to my daughter?"

Ryan wanted to say something clever, but Augustus squeezed his throat so tightly that no word came out. Lightning Butt eventually realized the interrogation wouldn't go anywhere like this, eased his grip enough to let the time traveler breathe, and looked into his captive's eyes.

"Did you sleep with my daughter?" Augustus asked, his cold fury ten times more threatening than his snarls.

Knowing nothing he said would save him, Ryan answered with the first thing that came to mind.

"YES DADDY, YES!"

Augustus brutally slammed Ryan against the counter.

A normal human would have gone splat from the impact, and the shock made the marble crack. The silver platter almost fell off to the ground, and one of the coffee cups shattered. Ryan saw stars for a moment and landed on the ground, chest first. Lightning Butt released his grip while his victim gasped for air.

“You will die begging,” Augustus said with cold fury, towering over the courier like the specter of death. His whole body cackled with crimson lightning, the microwave and electrical devices in the room malfunctioning. “Like a jew on a cross.”

“And it was...” Ryan coughed, defiant. “*Unprotected.*”

Lightning Butt gave Ryan the *Palpatine electroshock treatment*, by zapping him with electricity. It was a low-current blast, not enough to kill the courier; but it hurt. It hurt like **hell**. A lightning bolt hit Ryan in the chest, his skin burning, the bathrobe releasing smoke.

The courier’s body trembled, the nerves in his body stimulated by the lightning. It felt as if his body had caught fire, his lungs melting.

“Dad!”

Her shrieking voice echoed in the kitchen, but Augustus kept zapping Ryan with murder on his mind. If anything, he only increased the voltage, even as a chi—

Time skipped forward, and when it resumed, her arms immediately seized him.

The pain in his chest remained, alongside severe burns, but no lightning coursed through Ryan’s nerves anymore. He

had crawled near the statue of Minerva, with Livia kneeling protectively at his side. She wore a black bathrobe of her own, but no slippers; the seer must have rushed into the kitchen the second she woke up.

Lightning Butt dropped the lightning halo surrounding his head, though rage still possessed him. Augustus sternly gazed at Livia. “You used your power on me, daughter?”

“You were electrocuting my *boyfriend!*” she hissed back.

Though Lightning Butt had shrugged off Ryan’s blow, his daughter’s words made him flinch in surprise. If he still had any doubt about what happened, her revealing dress and the intimate way she held Ryan close dispelled them. The courier could hear Livia’s accelerating heartbeat beneath the cotton.

“You willingly gave yourself to this...” Augustus glared at Ryan with disgust. “This miscreant?”

“Ryan is nothing of that sort,” Livia replied with a frown. “He is a kind and noble man.”

“Conqueror... of Monaco...” Ryan rattled, his muscles still struggling to move. The crimson lightning must have messed up his nervous system, the wrong limbs answering his mental commands.

Augustus completely ignored the courier, refusing to acknowledge his existence. Instead, he studied his daughter with an imperious gaze. Yet Livia refused to back down and locked eyes with her sire.

“How long?” Lightning Butt questioned his daughter.

Livia frowned, biting her lower lips. “A little more than one week.”

That long? Ryan wondered, before realizing that she counted the previous loop. They could consider the Star Studio raid their first date...

“Is this about Felix?” Augustus asked angrily. “Revenge for his abandonment?”

“No,” Livia replied angrily. “I chose Ryan for himself.”

“You chose wrong.” Lightning Butt’s eyes flared with a burst of lightning. “Look at this clown. I have seen his kind countless times. All he wants is your beauty, your money, your power. He is a parasite.”

“You say that about everyone, Dad.”

“Because it is true. Do you think he would be interested in you if you weren’t *my* daughter?”

“You don’t know him, Dad,” Livia replied, her gaze harshening. “And if you think I wouldn’t have done my research, then you don’t truly know me either.”

Ryan almost opened his mouth, but this time wisely remained silent. One wrong move and Lightning Butt might slay him before Livia could react. The shame and the pain, he could live with. But her forgetting him would hurt far deeper than the lightning.

Augustus’ face twisted into an angry scowl. “Livia, step aside.”

She briefly hesitated, but held her ground. “No, Father.”

“Step aside, daughter.”

“No,” she repeated, the word so sweet to hear. “I won’t let you murder him like Narcinia’s parents.”

Augustus’ eyes widened in surprise, his jaw clenching. “Who told you about that? Felix?”

“Does it matter?”

“Felix,” her father said, reaching his own conclusions. “He will pay for this slander with his tongue.”

“You won’t touch his tongue, or any part of Felix,” Livia declared, grabbing Ryan’s hand. “Nor will you harm my current boyfriend. I’m an adult, I can date whoever I want.”

“I am your father,” Augustus raised his tone, “and you shall obey me.”

“If you touch them, I will leave.”

These words silenced Lightning Butt, making him blink repeatedly. He looked as if he would stumble. The illusion of invincibility was stripped away, and for a brief moment, Ryan could see the lonely, paranoid old man beneath the iron-fisted dictator.

“I will leave,” Livia said, struggling not to cry. “I will go, and I will not return. Bacchus and Mars can have your rotten empire of filth for all I care.”

“Livia.” Augustus’ tone softened a little. For the first time, Ryan heard something other than wrath and cruelty in the titan’s voice. “You are my heir, and my daughter. But you are still a young woman, and naive. Experience comes with

age, and it is my duty as your father to protect you from threats you cannot see. Your mother..."

"I can protect myself," Livia replied firmly. "Even from you."

Augustus' fists tightened, to the point that a normal person might have started bleeding. Could the superpowered tyrant cancel his own power? Could he hurt himself?

"I could not protect your mother, but I will protect you. Felix is a shameless traitor, and this little shit..." Lightning Dad glared at the courier, with the same hatred he usually reserved for Leo Hargraves. "This man is turning you against me, your own father."

"No, Dad," Livia argued firmly. "You are doing that on your own."

Augustus turned into an ivory statue, as still as stone.

"Dad, please. I want him." Livia breathed deeply. "He is kind to me, and he makes me smile."

Augustus' silence stretched on for several, agonizing seconds. The air was heavy with an undercurrent of electricity, as if a thunderstorm might explode any moment. The microwave had short-circuited. "You," Mob Zeus glared at Ryan. "What is your name?"

By now, the courier had recovered enough to form complete sentences. "Ryan 'Quicksave' Romano. I'm immortal, but don't tel—"

"If you disrespect my daughter," Augustus interrupted him, his voice booming like thunder, "I will kill you."

"Yes, Lightning Dad."

Augustus' eyes narrowed dangerously. He did not like the nickname. "If you break her heart, I will kill you."

"Yes, Lightning Dad," Ryan repeated, returning the man's vicious gaze. By now, he understood that submission would be seen as weakness, but open defiance wouldn't be tolerated. He had to assert himself, without being too disrespectful.

"If you break up with her, I will kill you."

"Yes, Lightning Dad."

"Thank you, Father," Livia whispered in relief, holding Ryan's hand.

Augustus stormed out of the room, coldly furious. He didn't spare a glance to Ryan, and did his best to ignore him. The tyrant punched a wall on his way out, his fist going through stone like paper.

Ryan coughed. "That's almost *exactly* how I expected to meet your parents."

"Are you insane?!" Livia hissed when her father was gone. "Couldn't you wait for me to wake up before wandering off? He could have killed you!"

"I wanted to prepare your breakfast," Ryan replied, pointing at the silver platter. The coffee cups were gone, but the pastries had survived.

Livia's anger immediately turned into a blush, and she gave him a bittersweet smile. "We'll go to Venus and Narcinia," she said. "They will cure your wounds in no time."

"It's fine. It can wait a little."

“Ryan, you were struck by lightning.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time. Do you have ointment?” Livia frowned at his question, but nodded. “Good. I will put some on while you return to bed.”

“And then what?”

“And then I will bring you breakfast properly this time.”

“You’re such a gallant fool,” Livia said with a chuckle, before helping him rise back to his feet. “How did you imagine it? Me introducing you to my father?”

“With your daddy pointing a shotgun at my back, and Bacchus officiating the wedding.”

She giggled. “I wouldn’t count on it. Bacchus worships a stranger god than the Catholic Church’s.” Her pale fingers brushed against his wound. The skin hurt, but his heart was soothed. “We will still go to Venus after breakfast. I told you before, Ryan, you don’t have to suffer anymore.”

Ryan put his hands around her waist, while she moved her hands around his neck. “And next breakfast? What will it be?”

Livia smiled, and briefly kissed him on the lips without a word.

Strawberries then.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

I waited so long, so very long, to write that shocking scene.

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Arcane Emperor, Erik Sjöström, Michael Forrester, BadSnake971, ZRhulad, Ryan, Cole Mathews, Scott Bosse, Timo Reti, Dietz, Thomas Gamble, Nonnuvya Bizniz, Sean Basa, Tagmin, Julien Castellijos, Kasan, Zach Jamison, Zack, Ethan Bell, William Vickers, Njordt, Alexander, Devarya Raman, Marcus Seigman, James Jackson, Preston M, Subliminary, TDMC, Kite 7, Alfredo Spuri, Russel Todd, Demetre Zurebiani, Zach, Tate Browder, Brandon Stiles, Minow, Joachim Janssen, Michael S., edmuck, Jade Green, Victor Newman, Malphas, Kyle Reid, aezrith ferova, Hulg Gohen, Jackietron201, Dark Chaos, Michael Yamashita, Hntpo, Andraste Chevalier, Julien Castillejos, William Johnson, John Evans, Liark Lane, mcanamara ?, HarbingTarbl, Spartanstoryteller, Thordur hrafn, David Ge, IronJim, Demetre Zurebiani, hippityhoppity, Dertyer, Guy Incognito, Paul Hughes, TaoBio, Soufyan Zerrad, mars kiyu, Iudi, Meredith Leu, Gaëtan Hillion, Bernice0311, Galandry, Eirik, Scipio, Andrew Rutherford Butler, Aeon, brett thomas, Yiğit Köymen, Thiago Ruiz, Imran, Dark Chaos, Tijay Arnie, Comedy Knight, Qwer, Gerrant, Ciara Banks, William Swearingin, Anonmily, William Brayer, Armo, Aehs, sedael, Darien Benner, Ligma, Michael Buchler, Daniel Spencer Vargas, Gabriel Aptekar, BedlamBlade, Walter, Goggy123, Erostan, Clemens Hochstädter, Noah Rimmer Skov, Jacob Barger, Sam Paley, Ariel reyz, Juppaware, House of Pantheon, Aymeric Penven, Harold Sandahl IV, Francis Chartier, Kody Ihnat, Rein Warner, mikael persson, morganmoll, Warper 6, Andrew Holland, Jdosnoen, Xerias, manspider0002, Zachary D Nickell, Maalsc, TTG, Oliverthms, Richard Wall, Siphor, Dark Chaos, Jeremy Humphrey, Nikhil Majumdar, Leaored, Cipkenop, Chistopher Waits, Robert Blank, Ervin Ughy, Phoebe Vale, Shaoraka, Zachary Smith,

**PonyReader, agoniste, Max Hu, Brycen Legler,
KeyMan BrB, Jonathan Spaulding, Ausner Gentil,
Kazzy, Erriballon, Larry Smith, Sanjay, Oliver Gray,
Adrian Barter, Alex Rhone, Karthic, Tailor Tylbury, Bob
le Poisson Rouge, Colin Ford, Ashley Cameron,
Bogdanov Dmitriy, Ivan Elyshev, Particlepigeon, Ryan
Trueman, Roden, Thomas Tessier, M Clason, Alex
Lindsay, Sadinar, Daniel Everest, Exiled Knight,
LinenZero, Tomas Puskas, Kyle Reese, RandomGift,
Corgi McStumperson, Peter Christensen-Calvin,
James Teeple, Dom Ceremonia, Mikkel Kolding
Christensen, Sands, BlackFire13th, Kevin Ramos,
Charles handgis, damien, Jeb, Jeb, Sebin Paul,
Andrew Kahn, 白酒鬼, Trevor Sales, Calvin Miner,
PbookR, Glader, John Carroll, Quentin, Andrew
Parsadayan, Igor Mikulik, RepossessedSoul, James
Walsh, Athra, Chris M, Jim of Trades, Koen
Hertenberg, Saul Kurzman, Johnathan, Rhodri
Thornber, Marc Claude Louis Durand, Drekin.**

100: Past Fragment: No Planet for Old Men

November 20th, 2004, Vatican City.

An atheist had once told him that though he never believed in God Almighty, the Chapel Sistine made him doubt.

How could anyone question the existence of God in this room? Cardinal Andreas Torque had seen many sinners repent in tears the moment they raised their head at the ceiling, to witness the glorious work of Michelangelo. No man's heart could remain unmoved at this architectural and visual perfection. Most only remembered the *Creation of Adam* part of the frescos, but Michelangelo had painted many more stories, each marvelous in their own way. The Cardinal could spend hours marveling at this divine feast for the senses; and the sight of tourists taking pictures of this wonder without appreciating it made him weep inside.

But these were not the opening hours of the Vatican Museums. Only a single man's footsteps echoed in the chapel to join his superior, as the clock struck midnight.

"Father Torque," Inquisitor Ambrosio greeted the Cardinal, dressed in the black garments of the Roman Catholic Church. Ambrosio was more than twenty years Andreas' senior, his head balding, his golden beard falling off at the edges. Yet his green eyes shone with the same witch pyre that warmed Andreas' heart.

Andreas Torque was one of the youngest Cardinals in the Catholic Church, by decree of His Holiness Jean-Paul II; he had not yet reached forty. Many had questioned his appointment, his virtue, and his achievements. He had no great deed to his name, and he liked it this way.

His work was best done in the shadows.

The *Malleus Maleficarum*, the Vatican's secret service, did not exist, even to most of its members. The Church was officially neutral in world affairs, and only worked through its extensive diplomacy network.

It was a lie, of course. The Catholic Church had many enemies, and needed fiery swords as much as quills. The *Malleus Maleficarum*'s purpose was to keep His Holiness aware of all dangers threatening the true faith, and to advance the Catholics' interests across the world.

When Andreas had joined the service, he had been nothing more than an Inquisitor, the lowest rank of this secret fraternity. The future Cardinal had spent most of his career undermining the communist plague that had infected Eastern Europe, and revitalizing the Church's influence in the broken USSR's regions. When he eventually became the organization's Inquisitor-General seven years ago, Andreas Torque had worked on His Holiness' behalf to check the influence of terrorist groups in the Middle East. Even though Jean-Paul II was on his deathbed, surrounded by scheming Cardinals, the *Malleus Maleficarum* worked tirelessly to fulfill the Pope's wish of universal peace.

In short, Andreas Torque was used to fighting human evil.

But the horrors they were facing nowadays... were something else entirely.

Something *unnatural*.

The two priests sat on a bench, with Ambrosio giving his superior a twenty-five page long file. Only two words were written on the cover.

'Stanford Incident.'

Andreas' eyebrows furrowed deeper with each line he read, and the priest outright scowled when he reached the first picture. "Who else knows?" Torque asked.

"Only the Americans for now. And us." Father Ambrosio joined his hands, a thoughtful frown on his face. "But a video already made its way on the internet. It's only a matter of time before MI6 and the Russians find out too."

The internet made keeping secrets from the world harder than ever. The Cardinal was surprised the Americans could keep something that big under wraps, but he wondered for how long.

They could hide a village's destruction, but not a roaming monster.

The photo showed an abomination straight out of the deepest pits of Hell. A white-skinned, faceless beast lifting a car as easily as a chair. The arms were abnormally long, and a luminous light glowed where the face should have been. Considering the height difference with the man it crushed underfoot, the monster had to be six meters tall at the very least. A shroud of blue mist surrounded it like swirling winds.

All his life Andreas had only ever seen the hand of man at work. But that thing... what could it be but a true demon of flesh and blood, as described in the Holy Scriptures?

"This is Satan's work," Andreas declared firmly. "A demon."

"This was a man, Father," Ambrosio replied grimly, sending shivers down the Cardinal's spine. "Keep reading."

Andreas skimmed the report's content, summarizing it out loud. It helped him memorize information. "Stanford, Nevada, two-hundred and two inhabitants. On its way to becoming a ghost town since their iron mine dried up. Half of them are dead or missing, and the other half in government custody."

The event happened on November 14th, six days before the report reached the Cardinal. According to survivors, the monster had burst out of the local clinic at around seven and a half in the evening, and gone on a rampage. The beast tore men apart with its bare hands, and breathing the mist that followed in its wake turned people feral. By the time survivors managed to contact the authorities and the government quarantined the area, the monster had escaped into the Mojave Desert.

The lack of internet and telephone coverage had made it hard for the government to respond quickly, but easy to cover it up afterward. Always the same pattern.

"All the previous incidents took place in similarly isolated areas," the Cardinal noted.

"But never with such deadly consequences," Ambrosio replied. "The monster is out there, and the USA's government hasn't caught it yet. It won't stay hidden forever."

"No, it won't." Whoever was responsible was getting bolder, more reckless. Andreas flipped the page, until he found the picture of a thuggish-looking man so skinny, that the

Cardinal wondered if he suffered from malnutrition. “James Poole?”

“Some dirt poor repairman,” Ambrosio said. “He was due to receive a second shot of Tetanus vaccine, after the first was found to be a placebo. The town’s doctor, Jason Hopfield, was supposed to receive him at seven and thirty.”

The report indicated that the doctor’s body had been found in the wreckage, gutted chin to groin like a fish.

“Both the vaccines came from a private company called *New H*,” Ambrosio continued. “You know the Americans, they always mistrust their healthcare. Some think their government puts microchips in them, and so they look for ‘alternative’ sources.”

A microchip would have been a kinder fate than turning into a monster. Andreas offered a prayer to both the doctor and patient. “What do we know of this company?”

“Little, except that that paper trail leads nowhere.”

The Cardinal grit his teeth. “So it’s another dead end?”

“Not quite,” Ambrosio said, as his superior flipped the report’s pages. “The town’s sheriff took a picture of the vaccine’s deliverer. Something about her behavior unsettled him.”

Her.

That woman again.

Andreas quickly found her photo, and scowled. It was her, short black hair, blue eyes, eminently plain, thirty-something. She had worn a cap when she made that

delivery, but it was the clearest picture of her that the *Malleus Maleficarum* had found so far.

November 14th, November 14th... A doubt wormed its way into the Cardinal's mind. "At which hour was this photo taken?" he asked his fellow priest. "Universal Time Coordinated?"

"One AM UTC, I think."

Torque closed the file, clenching his jaw. "Inquisitor Silus sighted her near an illegal laboratory in an Uzbekistan frontier town at two AM UTC, before he went silent."

They hadn't yet recovered the body, but though the Cardinal prayed for his agent's survival, he knew better than to expect it. The laboratory had turned into a smoking ruin by the time reinforcements arrived, with Silus nowhere to be found.

Ambrosio registered the words and frowned. "Are you sure it was her?"

"Silus' description matched that photo." The agent had been tracking that individual down for a year, since she had been sighted during the *Burning Woman* incident in Tajikistan.

"How can a woman move between two sides of the Earth within an hour?"

"Or she was in two places at once." Who was that woman? What was that woman? Some kind of witch or demon? "Have you used our facial recognition software on the photo?"

"Yes, and it came up with a name," Ambrosio replied. Though most priests were too old to understand new technology, the *Malleus Maleficarum* had invested heavily in them, to always keep an advantage. "Combined with the previous sketches, the program came up with a name: Eva Fabre."

Eva Fabre, Eva Fabre... The name sounded familiar. Thankfully, Andreas had a prodigious memory, and he quickly remembered where it came from. "The GEIPAN French files," he said. "The Antarctica mass-suicide of 1992."

The French kept a not-so-secret archive about UFO sightings, and Andreas heard rumors that they intended to make a few of the files public... but none of the truly interesting ones, of course.

France might have split from the Catholic Church a century ago, but the Faith still had friends in high places. A French general had shared with the *Malleus Maleficarum* a copy of the GEIPAN files, some of them were quite disturbing.

Much like many countries in the world, the French maintained a presence in Antarctica. They had an official research station there, studying penguins... but Torque knew for a fact that France once had a second, secret laboratory deeper inland called *Station Orpheon*. Secret, because the station had been dedicated to studying bacteriological weapons away from civilization. Eva Fabre had been the base's lead geneticist.

"On the night of December 12th, 1992, Station Orpheon contacted the French *Ministère de la Défense* to inform them of a peculiar event," Andreas whispered. "The scientists saw a flash of purple light in the skies, and then an unidentified

object crashing in a glacier nearby. The French authorities had lost contact with the station two days afterward. When French soldiers reached the station to investigate, they found twenty-two of the twenty-three researchers dead."

An experimental, deadly bacteria had escaped and infected the staff. The soldiers thought it had been an accident, until they checked the radios and found them sabotaged. Though almost all the researchers had been accounted for, Eva Fabre's body was never found.

The French government quietly covered up the incident, and after five years of searching for the missing scientist, closed the file. Eva Fabre had probably caused the outbreak before killing herself, they figured. Isolation drove men and women mad. Neither had the investigators found any trace of a meteorite impact, not even with satellite surveillance. The event had joined the other strange tales of the GEIPAN files, and been forgotten.

Ambrosio searched inside his garment for a photo, which he handed to his superior. Torque raised an eyebrow, before comparing it to the sheriff's snapshot.

Not only could Eva Fabre teleport, but she hadn't aged in nearly twelve years either.

Somehow, the Cardinal wasn't even surprised.

"How cold?" Andreas asked, after putting all the pictures inside the file and closing it. "The New H lead, I mean?"

"The Americans couldn't find anyone employed by this company, but my informers had more luck with the vehicle used for the delivery," Ambrosio explained. "It was purchased through an American shell company, owned by a Swiss bank."

Probably the same bank that funded the illegal lab in Uzbekistan. “Find someone and make them talk,” Andreas ordered. “These incidents are escalating in severity, which means they’re building up to *something*.”

“A confessor informed me that one of the bank’s administrators could be... open to collaborating with the Church’s investigation.”

“For the sake of his soul?”

“For the sake of his bank account.”

In this era of greed, Mammon ruled absolute. “How much?” The Cardinal asked, and scowled deeply when his agent told him the amount. “That’s a hefty price. Even Judas only asked for thirty silver coins.”

“Traitors are more expensive than ever nowadays, Father Torque. Supply and demand.”

“I will have to ask for *his* help then.” Thankfully, he was the next appointment. “I will wire the money to the usual account. Do not fail.”

Ambrosio took a deep breath. “If I may ask, Inquisitor-General... what are we investigating?”

“I don’t know,” the Cardinal admitted, “and that’s what I’m afraid of. Communists, terrorists, they’re all humans in the end. But that woman, and these abominations... they’re something else.”

“You think time is running out?”

“How can you doubt it now?” the Cardinal asked. “If this snapshot made it to us, then it means she isn’t hiding

anymore. His Holiness will perish soon, and then there will be a time of crisis. The Church must act now, before it is too late."

"May the Lord be with us," Ambrosio prayed before taking his leave, leaving the Cardinal alone in the chapel.

Andreas' eyes wandered to the ceiling, to the sight of God's hand reaching for the first man. He pondered how events had progressed to today, inexorably.

A string of disappearances in early 2002, all in the southern hemisphere. Brazil, South Africa, Australia, Tanzania... hundreds had vanished without a trace with nothing to tie them together. Nothing, except the fact they happened in isolated areas, and the same woman had been sighted in three of the cases. Then people started vanishing in the northern hemisphere too.

2003. A woman spontaneously caught fire in Tajikistan, killing fourteen. A laboratory was discovered in Siberia, with human test subjects found inside. Some had extra organs, or limbs, and all were missing people from last year. A scaled *thing* capable of turning invisible was caught on tape in Utah.

As for 2004... A man had shot a Serbian war criminal in his own home, only for authorities to learn that the killer had been made of bolts and wires. Sarajevo suffered from unexplained earthquakes, people swearing that they heard gears moving below the earth.

And now this?

Andreas Torque was finally starting to see the bigger picture, the trend that united all these events into a

coherent narrative. It clicked when he had heard the word ‘vaccine.’

Tests.

Eva Fabre was testing *something* on people, turning them into monsters. That was the only explanation that made sense to Andreas Torque, though he couldn’t understand whatever science or sorcery made it possible.

Whatever the case, this wicked woman was a threat to the world’s natural order, and she had to go.

The Cardinal would find Eva Fabre before she claimed more victims. He would listen to her tale, let her confess her sins so that she might earn absolution from the Lord. And then he would burn her like a witch.

Andreas looked away from the ceiling, as he heard new footsteps. Ambrosio’s had been soft, careful; these ones were firm, heavy with power and purpose. The man that walked in the chapel was in his mid-fifties, a veteran of half a dozen mob wars, a titan in a red suit bought with drug money. The Cardinal could almost hear the blood dripping from his hands, though they looked clean. His cold, heartless eyes didn’t hide anything. One couldn’t see this man and not doubt for a second about his true nature.

“Janus,” the Cardinal said.

“Andreas,” the man answered with a shark-like glint in his eyes. “You look concerned.”

“I am. We live in strange, dangerous times.” The Cardinal invited the mafioso to sit down, but he declined. “The bench is warm.”

"I would prefer we meet in the classical art gallery," the mob boss replied. Unlike any sensible soul, he didn't even bother looking at the ceiling.

Janus Augusti was a godless man, but he served the Lord all the same.

"What is on your mind, my friend?" Janus asked, looking down on the seated priest. Though many men would have shaken in dread at this man's presence, Andreas Torque remained serene. "I assume this must be urgent to organize this meeting so late."

"I will go straight to the point." The Cardinal took a deep breath, having hoped not to resort to this. "I need millions."

"You will have your funds. If you clean them."

Of course. Some officials in the Vatican Bank laundered mafia money to fill their pockets, but Andreas Torque did it for a higher cause. The *Malleus Maleficarum* needed a black budget, independent from the Holy City's finances to maintain plausible deniability. It was a dirty job, but all was forgiven if done in the Lord's service.

Janus was no member of the *Malleus Maleficarum* though, and the less he knew about the Vatican's secret activities the better. Andreas could tell that if he let this man sink his claws into the organization, he would corrupt it as he did with many others. His influence over the Neapolitan Camorra was almost unmatched, and from what Andreas had heard, he intended to expand. Nobody was able to resist him for long.

Unfortunately, Janus Augusti smelled weakness like how a shark could detect blood from miles away. "The situation must be dire for you to ask for so much," he said, examining

the priest suspiciously. “If you need my protection, you only need to ask.”

“The Lord protects me.”

“He would not protect you from me, if I wished you harm.” A blasphemous boast, but the man was not to be underestimated. He had filled entire cemeteries, cementing his empire of sin with blood and tears. “But I am genuine. You are almost a friend now, and I need men with your talents.”

“I may serve as your wife’s confessor, but you are a necessary evil as far as I am concerned, Janus,” the Cardinal replied. “Let’s keep it that way.”

The mob boss chuckled. “A necessary evil you say? I suppose it is appropriate. I do separate the worthy from the unworthy. Truly good and strong men wouldn’t need my services.”

Andreas didn’t miss the not-so-subtle taunt. “Do you think of me as evil, or weak?”

“There is no good or evil, Andreas, but I do wonder what your pope would think upon seeing us together. Somehow I doubt he would approve of your work.”

“What His Holiness does not know cannot harm him,” the Cardinal replied, though his resolve was slightly shaken. “I do the dirty work needed to keep his hands clean. For the greater good.”

Janus clearly didn’t believe him, if the amused look on his face was any indication. “No matter,” he said. “So long as you clean the blood off my family’s money so I may pay for

my daughter's birthdays, I will let you cling to your delusions."

Andreas ignored the taunt, remaining dignified. "How is little Livia?"

The mob boss' face softened. "She asked me for a pony."

The Cardinal couldn't help but smile. "She is wise beyond her years, but still a child in the end."

"My wife says that I'm spoiling her rotten. What would you have me do, Father? Is it a sin to indulge a child?"

"I cannot say. I never had one."

Janus searched inside his suit. "Speaking of gifts, I have one for you."

He threw a small bag full of colored crystals at the priest, who caught it on instinct and immediately frowned in disgust. "What is this?"

"Our new product," the mob boss replied with a smile. "I heard you were interested in... mind-opening experiments."

Andreas flinched, and a smile appeared at the edge of Janus' lips.

Many cultures used drugs in an attempt to contact the higher realms of existence, and the Cardinal had wondered if perhaps they had stumbled on to something. He had never dared to test his theory on himself, since it would have been a sin, but he couldn't suppress his curiosity.

How did Augustus know though? Did he have the Cardinal under surveillance?

"Take it back," Andreas said. It was all a power game of some kind. "I don't need it."

"Is that so? In that case, you can simply toss it in the nearest trash can. If you truly are the good man you believe yourself to be, you will." His smirk widened. "But if I am correct about your true self... then when you are ready to accept your true nature, I will welcome you with open arms."

Augustus walked away, leaving Andreas alone with his poison.

March 27th, 2005.

Last Easter.

They were inside the Vatican, looking for him.

He could hear them behind the chapel's doors, which Andreas had barricaded with benches. They would get through, he knew. None of his agents had been able to evade them for long, and they had kept the Cardinal for last.

He had failed, and the world had gone mad. The world didn't know it yet, but iron pillars had risen from beneath Sarajevo and half a dozen other cities in the Balkans, pouring out metal men and drones. Other human monsters she had released in the wild. The prototypes, the early test subjects, those who kept their wits.

His Holiness had died of natural causes. The Lord had mercifully recalled him to spare him the horror ahead. Father Ambrosio had perished too, but his demise had been less kind. Eva Fabre had him shot, alongside his Swiss

informer. But before he died, he had sent Andreas enough information to start figuring it all out.

But he had never imagined. Couldn't imagine, just how deep it went.

So they had started hunting him. They had wiped out the *Malleus Maleficarum* in days, before the Church could stop the worldwide distribution. They had known. They had known *all along* and never cared.

Even six months ago, Andreas Torque was already too late.

Now, the Cardinal understood why he could never find a lead. It was an organization, yes, but an organization of *one*. They were legion, for they were many. The others were catspaws, dupes, tools to provide her with money and equipment, but never trusted, never knowing anything. She had hired hundreds of companies to make the deliveries, none of them aware that they carried bottled poison to millions across the world. He had tried to warn others, but she was everywhere, always getting in his way. Intercepting his messages, making him fear for his life. Anyone he confided in vanished without a trace.

She was not human anymore.

Was she ever?

He should have gone to Augustus. It all made sense now. Who better than a fiend in human skin to ward away demons?

His hand reached for the gun beneath his black garment, and he pointed it at the barred door. The noise on the other side stopped. Had they heard him? Did they *know*?

Andreas Torque saw the flash of blue light behind him, and turned around in panic.

There were dozens of them in the chapel. Women in blue suits with strange weapons that looked like rifles made of both flesh and metal. They all were her, but not exactly the same either. Some had eyes of a different color, others different hairstyles. It was her, but in countless variations.

“Eva Fabre.” Andreas Torque tried to hide the fear in his voice, but didn’t quite succeed.

They all smiled, but only one of them spoke. “That was my name once,” she said, her voice so deceptively banal. “But I go by the Alchemist nowadays.”

He heard them break the barred door and surround him. “Satan would have been more appropriate,” the priest replied, trying to keep the legion at bay by threatening them with his gun. But there were dozens, maybe a hundred, and he had only five shots.

“I was as human as you are once, but you are onto something. There are demons out there, Father. But they are not below our feet.” Some of them looked at the ceiling. “They are above our heads, in the grim darkness of space.”

“One day they will come for us,” another Eva said, with burns on the left side of her face. “In other worlds, they already did.”

Other worlds? What was this madness? “Stay back!” Andreas warned, his finger nearly pulling the trigger. “Stay back!”

But the circle grew tighter. “To take its rightful place as the universal master race, mankind must evolve,” one of the

mad women said, so close he could almost feel her breath. “Surpass the theory of natural selection, and enter the realm of intelligent design.”

“Our design,” another Eva Fabre added, her voice masculine.

Torque pulled the trigger, and shot one in the head.

She collapsed into blue particles, as if she had never existed.

The others were onto him immediately afterward. He thrashed and shot and raged, but in the end, they forced him to his knees and disarmed him. They searched his garment for hidden weapons, and only found the drug Augustus gave him months ago.

“What is this?” Eva Fabre asked while they examined the substance, though Torque couldn’t tell which one.
“Hallucinogenic drugs?”

He... he had kept the substance yes, but only to study it. Never to use it on himself, no.

The madwomen started arguing. “Did we try that during the bonding process?”

“I don’t think so.”

“We should have.”

“We can still. Results should be interesting.”

Andreas Torque furiously tried to think of a way out. Why hadn’t they killed him yet, like the others? Why did they keep him alive instead of slicing his throat?

But then they brought the blue syringe, and he understood.

"No," Andreas pleaded, his voice dying his throat. The fluid swirled inside its container, as if alive and hungry. "No, please. Just kill me. Don't make me... don't make me one of those things..."

"This is a blessing," one said, forcing Augustus' drug through his mouth. It tasted of salt and mushrooms and chemicals.

"A reward for your persistence," another added, rolling up his sleeve.

"We should have buried you with your secrets," a third said, stabbing him with the syringe. "But killing you would be a waste."

"Your mind will shatter," a fourth declared. "But you will live."

The world turned blue as the Blue Elixir entered his veins, and Andreas Torque screamed.

His mind was on fire. The drug and the blue substance in his body reacted together, reality crumbling around him. The chapel's ceiling swirled like an azure whirlpool, shapes collapsing. Colors danced at the edge of his eyes, and the pictures of angels started to whisper to him.

Hallucinations. These were hallucinations, nothing more. A dream.

But... he sensed something else. Something different, something... something wriggling inside his brain and neurons. The Alchemist's poison traveled through his nerves, infecting him like a plague. His whole body seemed

to have caught fire, his skin flayed to expose the raw flesh underneath.

The pain was excruciating, maddening!

“Please!” he shouted, and the hallucination of angels answered with a screaming chorus. “Make it stop!”

And *something* listened.

His spirit left his kneeling flesh, his mind free of the shackles of a body. His immortal soul was dragged into a great blue vortex, into a place unlike anything he had ever seen. He couldn’t see with eyes, no, but... but images filled his mind. The pain was gone, replaced with ethereal numbness.

He had become a thought, an ascending consciousness entering a bright blue world.

A realm of numbers and letters, an organized archive of smells and scents and sounds. Books without pages, drives of stray thoughts. A mental world without flesh or blood, where minds were no longer constrained by the storage limits of neurons.

This strange dimension had a powerful force at its center, ruling from a throne of information. Andreas’ disembodied mind couldn’t make sense out of it. It was so large, so big, so complex. Geometric shapes and equations and swirling sentences unified into a single, divine whole.

“Lord?” the Cardinal asked, and though he had no mouth to speak with, words came out nonetheless.

No.

It was God, but not the Lord of the scriptures. It was neither male nor female. It hadn't created man in its image, for there was *nothing* human about it. It was a sentient thought, a divine mind without a body, knowledge without a container. A being of pure blue, a psionic force of the cosmos. All the universe's information, focused into a singularity.

The entity noticed Andreas.

And *studied* him.

Andreas screamed, as the entity ripped his mind open with a stray thought. It shattered the Cardinal's brain into a million tiny thoughts, flipped through the man's memories like a child through a book. There was no pain, but no comfort either. For the being, this Ultimate One, felt neither love nor hate.

Only curiosity.

It disassembled Andreas Torque down to his molecules, to figure out the way he worked. Why did it need a heart? Why a brain? How did it fit together? What did Andreas fear? Why did he prefer apples over cheese? Why did he live? What was the underlying logic?

Why, how, what?

It asked all the questions, and got all the answers.

The entity recorded every thought that ever crossed the Cardinal's mind, every sensation he ever felt. It broke down his existence to its foundations, to figure out how it all fit together. Andreas Torque didn't know how long it took, perhaps centuries or minutes, but in the end, the Ultimate

One understood him more than the human ever knew himself.

And then, it cobbled Andreas Torque's mind together.

But instead of shoving it back into the human's tiny brain, the Ultimate One shared back.

Mysteries of the stars and cosmic principles were revealed to the priest. His questions about man's origins and purpose were answered. The entity taught him the true history of the saints and the prophets he had worshiped all his life. And when it found that the priest wanted more, It taught him mathematics, botany, and chemistry. The knowledge was imprinted into the Cardinal's neurons like burning letters.

There was no word to describe the experience. It was an unimaginable pleasure, a rapture. Andreas' small, weak human mind briefly melded with the divine consciousness of the supreme entity, basking in its limitless knowledge. For a moment, the human felt *whole*, truly whole, stripped of all his doubts and fears. He was one with something greater than himself, his sense of self dissolving like a droplet in the ocean.

This...

This was Heaven.

This was God. This was the entity that Andreas had yearned to serve all his life. This was the afterlife he desired, for his mind to meld into this divine consciousness, to become a new neuron in a universe-sized brain.

And then it ended, as abruptly as it had begun.

The mental connection with the Ultimate One collapsed. His brain was cast down to Earth, back into his limited brain, back into his flesh, back into this ***prison***. He was cast out of Eden, the bliss of perfection replaced with the cold sensation of the chapel's floor.

Andreas didn't know how long he remained on the floor, crushed and destroyed. He felt numb. He felt numb inside.

He was breathing, but he felt *dead*.

Eva Fabre was long gone, but he wouldn't have cared even if she had remained behind. His eyes wandered to the Sistine Chapel's ceiling, but all he saw were the human imperfections now. The slight, nearly invisible mistakes in the design, the errors, the ugliness. The work of Michelangelo now looked as crass and disordered as horseshit.

Andreas Torque had tasted Heaven, and now he found Earth *hideous*.

He rose back to his feet, his gun laying on the ground next to the empty drug bag. "No!" His fingers immediately grabbed the container, his tongue licking the plastic in search for a taste, just a *taste* of paradise. "Send me back! Send me back!"

He tore the empty bag apart in his despair, and scratched his skull with his fingers. He felt his mind struggling against this bone-shaped prison, trying to escape, trying to ascend, trying to go *back*. By the end, he felt the blood dripping on his fingernails.

He breathed heavily, in despair and tiredness.

His mind was clear as water, possessed by one single purpose.

His thoughts were no longer splintered, pulling in all directions. Now, he could only think of one thing.

Going back.

Andreas Torque stumbled out of the chapel, his eyes unblinking, his senses assaulted by the disordered universe around him. The Vatican, the Holy City, was trembling, crumbling. But he didn't care. He didn't care anymore about the Church, the world of suffering, or Eva Fabre. He had to go back to the Blue World, back to his new God, back to this blissful afterlife.

He walked outside, into the Vatican's gardens, and looked at Rome. It was night, though he couldn't tell if it was still March 27th, or some other night. Whatever the case, he could tell that the Alchemist's plan had gone off without a hitch. Everywhere he looked, he saw the signs. Flames spreading out of Saint Peter's Basilica; giant mushrooms growing out of the old historical district; the ICBMs flying through the sky north, towards the Balkans and Sarajevo.

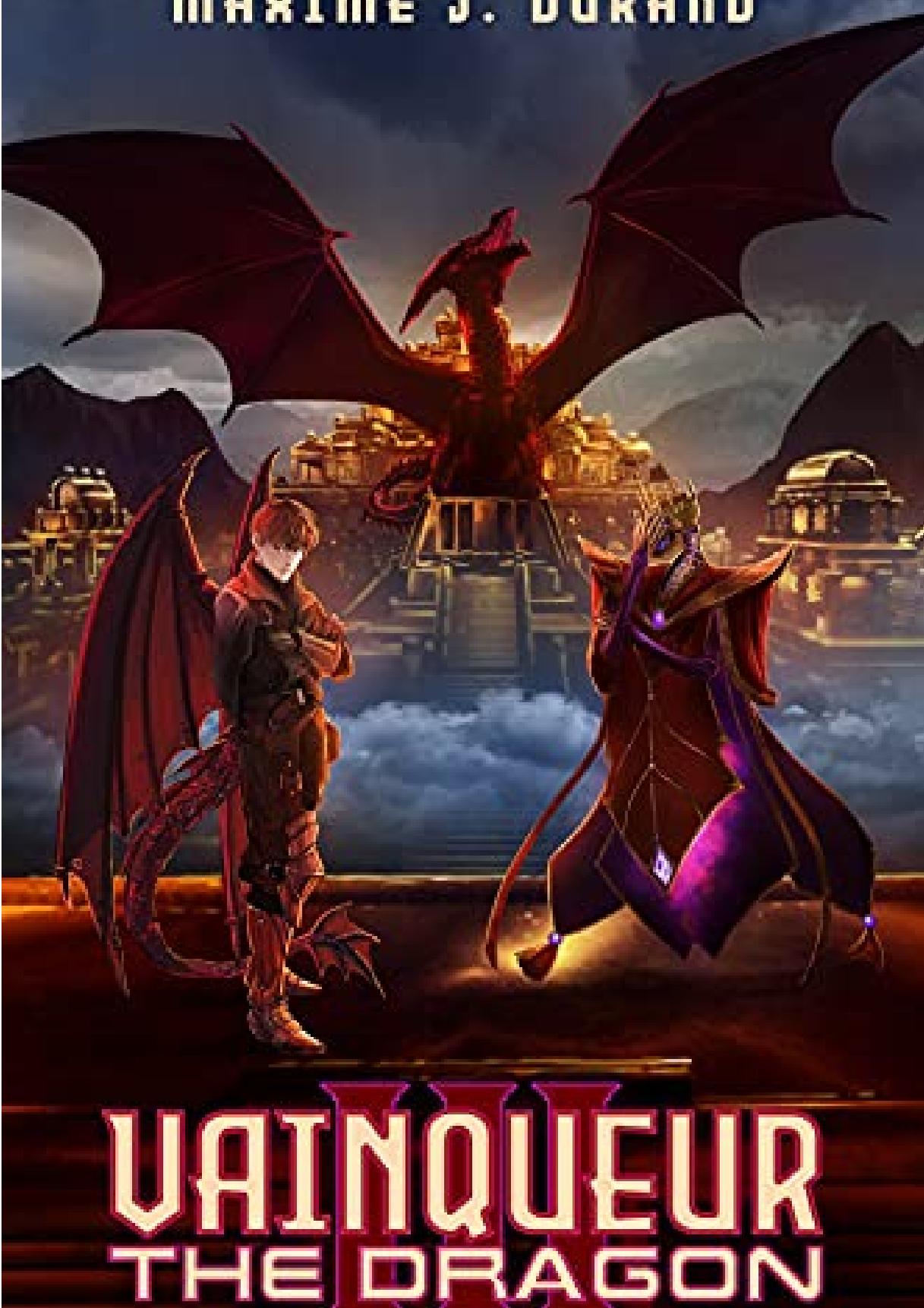
The old world was ablaze, and a new world would rise from the ashes.

And Andreas Torque couldn't care less.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

A non-Perfect Run news, but the third volume of **Vainqueur the Dragon** is now on Kindle! I would be thankful if you could spread the word or add a review.

MARLINE J. DURAND




Link: <https://www.royalroad.com/amazon/B098JYS959>

Additionally, I received a tentative release date for the **Vainqueur Webtoon**, namely around *January 2022*. Yeah, unfortunately it won't be out this year, but I think you will love it; five episodes out of fifty have been colored so far, and they're awesome ;)

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Thanks to my patrons on Patreon:

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101: Lover's Breath

Lightning Butt's burns ached on Ryan's chest, as he parked the Plymouth Fury west of New Rome.

Triton's Resort was a large complex on a small hill, built between the infamous Colosseum Maximus and Little Lilith, the city's red-light district. Glass domes and tall white spires coexisted with elevated pleasure gardens, tennis courts, and thermal pools, while the wealthiest clients could enjoy an unbeatable view of New Rome's coast. Like almost all properties owned by the Augusti, it embraced a Roman architectural style. Statues of Venus and Mars—the gods, not the Genomes—made love on a fountain, right next to the parking lot. Clients walked in through different entrances, based on their status; most of the clientele walked through a large yet elegant stone archway, while VIPs used a glass elevator to skip straight to the higher floors.

Ryan had traded his bathrobe for his usual clothes, though he wore no mask or hat for once. Livia sat at his side, wearing a blue skirt dress that left her legs and back exposed. A silver necklace glittered around her neck, and a white rose ribbon kept her hair bound. She looked great, but Ryan thought she could wear anything and still dazzle him.

"I should come over to your place from now on," she said out of the blue.

No kidding. "I could get used to the shock treatment," Ryan mused, but it didn't make her smile. "Or how about we rent something and move in?"

"We should wait a few months to go down that step, yes?" She giggled. "Ryan, if you think you have seen my father angry, then imagine him with empty nest syndrome. It's better I go home after our dates from now on."

"What was your dad even doing standing motionless in the kitchen? Asserting his dominance over the pastries?"

Her gaze turned distant. "Dad is... not well. Sometimes he doesn't move for hours."

"Because of his tumor?" She nodded sadly. "That's why he rarely leaves his house anymore, am I right?"

"I... I would rather not talk about this right now. I would rather talk about us." Livia sheepishly joined her fingers, hesitating a few seconds before asking a question. "What will we be, Ryan?"

"Someone asked me that before," he replied, thinking of Jasmine with nostalgia. "Back then, I answered a summer fling."

Livia frowned at him. "I don't want us to be a summer fling."

"Me neither."

Once, Ryan had been afraid of intimate romantic relationships, and the commitment that came with them. The pain that followed their destruction each time he reset cut deep. But for the first time since he had gained his power, he had a partner that would remember him. Someone with whom he could build a relationship lasting

through several loops. It was... exhilarating in its newness. Frightening, even.

He carefully took her hand into his own, and lost himself in her beautiful blue eyes. "Livia, do you want to be my girlfriend, until time tears us apart?"

A pinkish blush spread below her eyes. "You should have asked me that before we slept together, no? You skipped a lot of steps."

"And now I'm doing things by the book."

It pleased the princess, he could tell, but her response wasn't what he had expected. "My answer is no, Ryan."

The courier opened his mouth in shock. "Come again?"

"I want to be your girlfriend until we decide to break up, if we ever choose to," Livia declared, her face turning stubborn even though her words were music to Ryan's ears. "Not until your power resets everything. I want a serious relationship."

"Livia, you know I will have to reset again? What if I die early, or we can't transfer your mind back easily?" Ryan cleared his throat. "I want something that lasts too, but... well, there's always the possibility an unforeseen death ruins it all."

"People risk dying all the time, and yet they still make plans for the future, Ryan. Our relationship might need more work, logistics-wise, but we will find a way to strengthen it. I am sure of it."

Ryan could tell that she wouldn't budge on the matter, so he did it right this time. "Livia Augusti, do you want to be my

girlfriend?"

"There, you have it," she said with a beautiful, heartwarming smile. "Yes I do, Ryan."

And so, Quicksave was no longer single.

"This changes everything," Ryan said, breaking the hand contact to search for a notebook and a pen he hid in his coat.

"What is this?" Livia asked, as he opened the notebook.

"My to-do list of objectives before I achieve my Perfect Run. After my last presidential mandate, I thought I should write down all my campaign promises to keep track of them."

Ryan scratched the 'Fuck the Sun' line, right between the 'Kill Psypsy' and 'Marry Yuki' ones. "I'm updating the list to account for my newfound monogamy."

Curious like a cat, Livia tried to look at the content, but her boyfriend kept the notebook out of reach. "Give it to me, I want to know!"

"No, that's private!"

"Give it to me, Ryan," she insisted.

"No!" He felt a chill going down his spine. "No, no don't you dar—"

Livia skipped time forward, and when Ryan regained consciousness, she had stolen the list and his pen. "So that's how it feels when I mess with people in frozen time, uh," he complained. "Are you happy now?"

"A good boyfriend doesn't keep anything from his partner," she replied, before frowning at what she read. "*'Marry Jamie and Ki-jung?*"

"I only planned to marry Jamie at first, but since he's going to propose to Ki-jung soon, I thought bigamy was the only sensible solution."

It seemed to make sense to her, but then the next item on the list made Livia glare at him. "*'Fuck the Vamp and live through it? Seriously?*"

"I have a revenge to take."

"She isn't that good." Livia was at her cutest when she was jealous.

"How do you know that?" Ryan asked while squinting.

"Because I do," his girlfriend replied before removing that plan from the list, the way a dictator signed an execution order. In fact, she barred all the 'Fuck' and 'Marry' goals of the list, except those involving her. A couple's life was made of sacrifices.

"You truly made a plan for your final loop," Livia said, as she kept reading. "Though I'm a bit worried by the 'Kill' list."

"Well, at first I only wanted to find Len, but I kept adding new objectives," Ryan admitted. "It's not my fault if this city crawls with assholes who need to be put down."

"Mmm... '*Bully Luigi*,' '*Save New Rome*,' '*Take over the Meta-gang*,' '*Cure the Psycho condition*,' '*Blow up the Bliss Factory*'..." She frowned. "*'Prevent the Leporimachia?*" Is that even a real word?"

“I’m working on that one.”

Livia waited for him to elaborate, but skipped to the next objective when he didn’t. She grinned ear to ear. “*‘Reconcile Wyvern and Vulcan?’* Now, you’re asking for the impossible.”

“It happened once, though it took the city’s destruction for it.” Ryan thought that though he couldn’t date Vulcan due to his promise to Jasmine, he could at least help the Genius turn her life around.

“We can’t let things progress that far,” Livia replied. “I’m kidding, they can reconcile.”

“You’ve seen it happen?”

“All it takes is Wyvern approaching Vulcan and ‘apologizing’ to her former partner. She does so after rethinking her choices, usually after Dynamis collapses.”

“So, we can steal two cashmere suits with one gun?”

She frowned at him, suddenly interested. “Does Dynamis have a red suit in storage?”

“You will look great in it.”

“I think so too.” Livia skimmed through the list, from the *‘Free Len from her father’s shadow’* to *‘Bury my daddy issues,’* before frowning. “*‘Find the Alchemist’s base in Antarctica?’*”

“I saw it in the Purple World, but I don’t know where exactly,” Ryan said. Truth be told, he had wondered if this vision had been a coincidence. The Violet Ultimate One had left hints to help the courier, so perhaps it wanted the time-

traveler to visit this base for some unknown purpose. “Some kind of fortress buried in snow and ice.”

Livia considered the matter thoughtfully. “Now that I think of it...” she whispered to herself. “Could it be Station Orpheon?”

“Station Orpheon?”

“A story Bacchus told me about the Alchemist,” Livia replied, before dropping a bomb. “He was investigating her before Last Easter, and she twisted him.”

“Her?” The Alchemist was a girl? And here Ryan thought she might have been a lizardman, or a grey martian! “You know a guy who met the Alchemist, and you never told me?”

“I didn’t think it was important?” she replied, a little embarrassed. “Thing is, Ryan, my power cannot look into the Alchemist. I’ve tried before, but I can’t find a world where I have interacted with her... if she’s even a human woman at all.”

“She could have a power similar to mine.”

“Maybe. I’m sorry, I’m blind here. Dad wanted to track her down too, but eventually abandoned that plan after years of fruitless investigation. Bacchus himself wasn’t much help either. All he cares about is Bliss and contacting his ‘God’... whose nature I now understand better, thanks to you.”

“An Ultimate One?” Ryan had reached the same conclusion after his talk with Darkling. Bacchus had called God ‘it’ and thought psychotropics capable of affecting even Genomes could help make contact with it. It didn’t take a Genius to figure it out. “What do you mean by ‘she twisted him’?”

“He wasn’t always...” Livia struggled to find the word.

“Obsessive?” Ryan suggested.

“Deranged, though he hides it well. According to Dad, he used to be well-adjusted before the Alchemist got to him. Afterward, hallucinogens and later Bliss became his life.” His girlfriend shook her head. “Even the tales he says are quite confusing.”

“Will he tell them to me too, if I confess my sins? For my heart is full of wicked deeds.”

“No, I don’t think so, but you could compare notes and find out.” Livia smiled. “I have never been to Antarctica. It must be a beautiful place.”

“Wanna make it our next stop for our winter vacations?”

“Now you think like a true boyfriend.” She flipped the notebook’s page, before blushing upon finding the last objective on the to-do list.

‘Make Livia happy.’

Livia looked at Ryan with a pleased face, adjusting her hair. “What, are you surprised?” the courier asked his girlfriend, his fingers brushing against her red cheek. “You’re part of my Perfect Run too.”

“It’s a good list, Ryan,” she said, before hastily scribbling a new line. “But you forgot one task.”

Ryan frowned, as she gave him back the notebook and the pen with a new objective.

Be happy too.

"I thought it would come naturally," he said while putting his items back inside his trench coat.

"Ryan, almost all the objectives in the list are about helping other people, but never yourself," Livia said. "That's very noble of you, but you have to take your happiness into account too. No more suicides will be a start."

"What? But a glorious death is half the fun of a loop!" Ryan protested. "Do you realize how many people fail their lives, but make a success of their death?"

"If you reload by dying, then it makes you value your life less. We'll find a better, painless way for you to turn back time. Also, no more drugs. I've seen the stuff you keep in your car, and it has to go."

"But—"

"No more drugs," his girlfriend insisted. "I'm going to clean up your life, whether you want it or not. You will embrace a healthier lifestyle."

"If you try to make me a vegetarian, I'm dumping you."

She raised an eyebrow in a way that Ryan found positively obscene. "You are welcome to taste my flesh anytime."

"I don't taste," he answered, breathing on her neck. "I bite."

She turned scarlet at his insolence. "You have gone too far, Ryan," Livia said, unable to hide her embarrassment. "I have to punish you."

"Mistress is welcome to whip me anytime."

"I had something else in mind."

Her lips shyly brushed against his own, the contact so brief it might have been a dream. It tasted of strawberry, of her perfume and summer. She quickly pulled back, red as if she had never kissed a boy before.

“You stole my first kiss!” Ryan responded with false shock. “I was saving myself for Felix!”

She exploded into laughter, and Ryan had never heard a more wonderful sound. He put his hand in her hair, and the other on her waist as he pulled her closer.

He let Livia steal his second kiss, and then his third and fourth. Afterward, the burn on his chest ached, and she put a finger on his lips. “We will take a bath together after patching you up,” she said, her forehead against his own. “I have a private spot in the resort. You will love it.”

“Braindead should arrive today,” Ryan pointed out. The plan was to torch the Junkyard and bury the bunker’s open entrance after the Genius arrived, to make it look as if the Meta-Gang had fled the city.

“He will, but in the evening,” Livia said, her voice soft and soothing. “Until then, you are mine.”

He couldn’t tell his lady no.

Ryan offered Livia his arm as they exited the car, his girlfriend squeezed it tight. The mafia princess liked it very much when he played the gentleman. They bypassed the bouncers and took the elevator, Livia resting her head on her boyfriend’s shoulder as they moved up the floors.

After passing by marble corridors, the couple made their way into a mix between a parlor and a doctor’s waiting room. Overstuffed, comfy leather chairs allowed one to rest

while watching colorful tapestries and portraits of celebrities new and old. In fact, the staff included copies of Scarlett Johansson, Brad Pitt, and Leonardo DiCaprio, but though they had the actors' faces, they had none of the natural, easy charm.

A tall man greeted them, an Italian George Clooney with familiar blue eyes and a white beard. "Livia," he said, wearing a black suit more expensive than most houses. Ryan immediately identified his voice as Mars', Atom Kitty and Fortuna's father. "Who is this young, gallant man with you?"

"Luca, this is my boyfriend, Ryan," Livia paraded the courier. "Ryan, this is Luca Veran, Fortuna's father."

"My condolences," the courier said. "I admire your bravery, to have raised her without going mad."

"My wife bears the lion's share of the blame, as far as her education goes." If Mars was bothered to see his son's ex-girlfriend with another man, he didn't show it. In fact, he warmly shook Ryan's hand as if he were an old friend. "Does Janus know?"

Instead of answering, Ryan lifted his shirt to show the burns beneath, causing Mars to explode into laughter. "That's what I expected," he said. "I assume you came to see my wife to remove the scars?"

"Her, and Fortuna, if she's here," Livia said.

"No, she said she's spending time with that mystery boyfriend of hers." Mars frowned at the couple. "Do you know if he has powers?"

He didn't sound so friendly anymore. "He can disappear at will," Ryan said. "Though pigeons are his kryptonite."

"Oh, good," Mars said, sounding greatly relieved. "Fortuna seems to be taking this relationship seriously, and I was worried that she might frequent the wrong kind of person."

Livia answered with a forced smile. "I am not sure if he is the right person for her, but you know Fortuna, she does as she wills."

"Like her brother," Mars said with a chuckle. "I wonder how Narcinia managed to turn out so dutiful with such unruly siblings."

Because you murdered her parents and abducted her as a babe, Ryan thought, Livia's arm tightening around his own. She had sensed his unease. "When is Narcinia returning from Ischia island?" the princess asked Mars with courtesy. She probably already knew the answer with her power, but pretended not to for the sake of conversation. "It has been a long time since I met her."

"She will return on the fourteenth, to attend the meeting scheduled on the fifteenth." Mars glanced at Ryan, frowning upon realizing he knew what they were talking about. "Are you... you know, one of *us*?"

"I cut horse heads for a living," the courier said, and to his joy Mars seemed to understand the reference. "They never run fast enough."

"Will you make me an offer I cannot refuse?" Mars replied with a warm smile. "Perhaps we could invite you two for dinner, when Narcinia returns? She needs new friends closer to her age, and I think she will become fond of you, Ryan."

"With pleasure," Livia replied with a smile, though her grip on Ryan's arm tightened.

Mars took his leave afterward, pretending that he needed to attend to other business. Ryan on the comfy chair, and Livia on his lap. "Is this place bugged?" he whispered into his girlfriend's ear.

"Yes, but not my suite," she replied with the same low tone.
"Wait a little."

Andrea Julani-Veran, alias Venus, received them afterward in an immaculate surgery room. She was a beautiful woman in her early forties, and a grown-up version of her daughter Fortuna. Clad in a regal white dress and keeping her golden hair braided, she wouldn't have looked out of place on a *Playboy Magazine*'s cover.

Ryan noticed that she didn't have an operation table, simply a warm bed where the courier laid while the fashion model raised his shirt. Venus touched his chest with her thumb, and the burns vanished as if they had never existed in a green flash of light.

"Done," Venus said with a professional smile.

"I have a scar on my left butt cheek, can you remove it too?" Ryan asked.

"No, I like it," Livia said coyly, "I like the noise you make when I pinch it."

Venus looked between the two of them, and unlike her husband, didn't hide her displeasure. "Do you have news of *Felix*?" she asked Livia, emphasizing the name.

"No," Livia replied dryly, as Ryan put his shirt back on and returned to her side. "He will not come back."

"Maybe he will," Venus said, eyeing Ryan warily. He could tell she would have preferred to have her own blood date Augustus' heir, but she had no second son to offer. "Or if not, we will take him back. When will your father give the order to destroy the Manada clan once and for all?"

"I do not know," Livia replied evasively, though Ryan knew she meant: *never, if I have my way.* "But we can discuss that on the fifteenth."

"Certainly," Venus replied with a smile Ryan found rather disturbing. "Will you take the lovers' suite, as usual?"

"Yes, of course," Livia said, to the older woman's displeasure. Venus gave them a keycard, and watched them leave the parlor in silence. Ryan could feel her glare on his back, and no doubt she already plotted to have him removed for 'usurping' her son's position. Clearly, she was deadlier than her husband, but the courier had survived far worse.

Livia led him to a VIP suite on the fifth floor of the resort, a tastefully decorated apartment with its own private Jacuzzi bath. The floor and walls were made of wood, but sleek, modern appliances were cleverly hidden in sliding compartments. Stained glass picture windows provided a marvelous view of New Rome's beaches and the sea beyond, while some of Livia's paintings adorned the walls.

Though Livia insisted the place was safe, Ryan still took a moment to check the room for traps and bugs, but didn't find any. The Jacuzzi's waters were warm when he slid naked inside them, his partner joining afterward.

"I have the feeling we will end up glued together," Ryan said, when she sat between his legs, her back against his chest. She had kept the silver necklace on, which glittered with the sunlight outside. "Is it safe though? Venus might have infected me with a plague or something."

"That's not how her power works," Livia replied while bubbles rose to the water surface. Ryan had to admit it worked wonders to ease his sore muscles, after the beating he took from Augustus. "She is limited to superficial, aesthetic surgery modifications. She can reshape the skin, the eye colors, the hair, but not scramble your organs."

"But she could transform my lips and nose into a patch of skin, and asphyxiate me."

"She could," she admitted, grinning at him. "But only if she maintains physical contact."

"Good to know."

"I don't want to go to that dinner," Livia admitted, her head resting on Ryan's shoulder. "I adore Fortuna and Narcinia, don't get me wrong, but Venus will try to break us up and Mars will make racist remarks towards normies. You'll see."

"Why accept the offer then? You don't need the parents." Fortuna couldn't stand her mother in particular, and Narcinia would probably follow suit upon learning the truth of her parentage. "I mean, we could organize a party at Jamie's place and invite the Veran sisters there."

"I have to keep up appearances, if I am to inherit the organization and reform it," Livia replied. "Mars and Venus are my father's followers, but I fear I pushed him hard enough as it is. A few smiles will buy us peace of mind."

Ryan looked at her closely, and put his arms around her waist. He could tell she was thankful for the comfort.

"Is this place a brothel, besides a luxury resort?" he asked her.

Ryan had noticed copycats of actors chatting with clients in a way that seemed... dubious.

"This is the epicenter of New Rome's prostitution business, yes," Livia said with a saddened frown. "Venus uses her powers to reshape faces and bodies, to cater to all tastes. Some people are willing to pay fortunes to sleep with their favorite actors... or heroes. I heard the Wyvern double is very popular."

"Does Vulcan visit her often?" Livia chuckled in response, but didn't answer. "Do you want me to destroy this place, like the Bliss Factory?"

Her fingers brushed against her silver necklace, her face thoughtful. "Would you do it, if I asked?"

"Yes." He nuzzled her cheek gently. "Livia, I don't want you to wear a mask, not even at dinner. If this place and the people that run it make you unhappy, I can tear it down and free you from them."

"Could you do that bloodlessly?" she asked, her gaze distant.

"I can do anything, given time."

"But not without sacrifices from your part, and as I told you before... I won't have you martyr yourself for my sake." Livia played with her hair. "Truth be told, I'm not sure what to do about this place. Evil things happen here, but most of

the resort's activities are legitimate. What am I to do with the employees that work in the resort for an honest living? I don't want innocent people to lose their livelihood, Ryan."

"And what blood sacrifices take place behind closed doors?"

"I know Venus and her husband use the place to get clients addicted to Bliss, for a start," Livia said grimly. "Or produce dirt and blackmail material."

"I have a cure for Bliss addiction." Ryan had been considering introducing it to Ki-jung, since she seemed to still struggle with the temptation.

"You do?" Livia asked, her eyes widening.

"Endorphin blockers," Ryan said with a shrug. It was the solution he had found back when he ended up addicted to the stuff, back in an old loop. "It's pretty easy to manufacture with the right equipment. You could create a rehab clinic."

"That's an interesting idea, but one that my father won't like one bit," Livia said with a frown. "But I will keep it in mind. For now, we can focus on Narcinia's future."

In the end, much like with Len, it all came down to her father.

No matter the good Livia wanted to do, as long as Augustus lived, her family's honest activities would only be a smokescreen for Lightning Butt's insidious, insane goals. Much like how Bloodstream's embers of humanity had only served to hide the monster he had transformed into.

There would come a time where Ryan would drag Mob Zeus and his so-called Olympians down from their mountain, to

make sure they could no longer threaten anyone.

For her sake.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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Petrucci Ryan Allen Garrett Hazard Justin Firestone
Nicolas Grundmann Houston Shockley BrokenStorm
Ava Torin Smith isaiah llwast Ben Hunter Bob Dorian
celeste Hong Yee Kiat Nicholas Dynami Exypnada
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Musicarna Kyle Pemberton John Brodrick Mi Boltaruas
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Peebles James Mullen Alexander Rodriguez
skewness7 Enzo Elacqua Chaos' Crowl Kanigami
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Matthew Lewis Worthington Tom RandomAnkle
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William Martinez Gimro Thrackie Gregory Douglas
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**AsianEyezQ Barry Pritchard Zebidizy Ben Passos Ho
Jak Noah Jon Morehouse Will H Jonathan Gooch Ursae
Ganskvis nathaniel everett Dirkk Diggler Sandworm
Blorcyn Alexander Goldfarb campbell tyson Patrick
Erdmann Jannik UnluckyDeath Domini andy
Kierindoongo Ab9999 Eugene Chick Pea Mathew
Moran Rageflare Sterban Friz grinning panda
DHNightshadow Jeppe Lund Conor King kyle hirshson
Robert Garrett daz Sebastian Larsen Tim C Argivian
Gary Ethan Brendan Roberts Trucinox Karolingia Sahil
Gavin Turlock Box Slayer Jacob Andrew Jake Warren
Warior1411 Håvard Betten Impetusin Luke Boughan
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Sharkmanwolf HeavenDragon John Test Dominic
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Ryan Brudnicki King Lokajad Mhark Dichos Mortal
Complex Username Jonathan Hemlin Bob Reid POWA
SlaveToMyWhims Jarrod Young Sir Sloth John
McCarter Lee Moffat GuGuy Anton Lupanov Nikon
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Malaysian Sabala Anthony L Joshua Donahue Garasou
Deepsealife Kristian Huse Saaski mikeju Sam Miller
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Joe Dardy Noongar Joe Giannuzzi Stuart Dye
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Ghiribelli Jay Eskew David Alexander Dupree Josh
Delgado42 Domenic Stritzl Not N. Octopus Hoobie
Gomez Messe Paul Rettig Jacob Goodwin Kristian
Oinonen Mikołaj Wiszniewski Phillip Ingram lione
pouet Nicolas Marty Young Youghurt ScottDR Kyle
Wong Aqua Ivan Delgado Ploxzer Geffery Dopp
Christian Matthew Marcus Österberg Alex Michael
Frankford Athur3s Brent Slimreaper Dorian Lee Orion
BB King Marcus Hollowice Blah64 Hamis TipTop
Brenden Adrian Engel Bieu Massgamer afgasd
adgasd Harrison Russell Finn Ryan Nicolas Jensen T T
Deinos AlthePal Dylan Rectum Amaury michele
calderoni Kirvin James Deziel Magnus Steffen
Nørregaard focus2x Marcus Pehan Enzo Morvan
Art238 Bon Bon crownfall Richard Barboza Alexander
Charlie John Smith Doom maltmana JT shawn Daniel
Hernandez war doggle martin Cole Rosenhein
WowIExist Steven Thomsen Edwin Jose Andrew
Wilson Pooya Daravi Sunerl Steven Lindsay Tyler
Chesney Hazza Vanderbyl Kyle J Smith Rommelfanger
Bob Davvy chappie Branden Bryan Alex Nimmer
Jordan McDonald JJ B Andrew Odom Danielle Warvel
Ivan Kal AdAstridPerAspera Thundabear95 Saysca
Nate Bunny Waffles John Johnson Helsgarde Harry
Williams Alex Canavan Hobold the kobold Jacob Ellis
Adam Johnston Daniel Aguirre Zach Hoeken Chip
Twothousandone KatarnK N0T0B0K Gavin Olsen

**Richard Davis II Heikki Aitakangas Jake
OccultOwlbear Eric jian TheBreaker Localthiccboi
Jonathan Caselli John Richard Lee Pariah PJ LeBlanc
Slade Schlaudecker Erik Sjöström Kelzennak Robert H
Kruppa MaliMi Aleksander Z Michael Forrester
BadSnake971 ZRhulad joshua Miller Cole Mathews
Ethan Scott Bosse sean m. Dietz Thomas Gamble
James J Nonnuvya Bizniz John Bush Kasan Kite7
Dargon Subliminary Jordan Antti Huovilainen Minow
Michael S. evilperson41 Actaeix Deathburn edmuck
Gally George Ive Robert Dalton Cade Spence altus
Svend Mohammed Hajjaj Cosimo Yap Cliint Konrad2
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KilledbyBooks David Cox NLRUmbra hippityhoppity
Wancek Jonathan Kutz Weirdisaac Guy Incognito
Thelon TaoBio Iudi Wilhelm bengtsson Gaëtan Hillion
X4D8 Bernice0311 Scipio Brody Brown Andrew
Rutherford Butler Aeon Sharath brett thomas Thiago
Ruiz Imran Caldrick Comedy knight Gerrant Jacob
Sharman Anonmily William Brayer Cole Calderon Aehs
Conor lennon sedael Darien Benner Ligma Daniel
Spencer Vargas Spartanstoryteller BedlamBlade
MasterofNova Walter Patrick Sylvester-Jose Philip
Jones Goggy123 Escalatus Erostan Clemens
Hochstädter Brandon Stiles mars kiyu Jacob Barger
Sam Paley Aymeric Penven Dantalian11 Harold
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mulukutla glare31337 Winson Chan Slipperyfish
Overlord_Grimm agoniste Olivier Edery Brycen**

**Legler Jonathan Spaulding Erriballon Sævar
Valdimarsson Rolf Bork H. Scott Sanjay Taylor Tilbury
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Trades Seadrake Saul Kurzman Marc Claude Louis
Durand Rhodri Thornber Drekin Dax Sam**

102: Moving On

The conquest of Mechron's mainframe could be summed up in one sentence.

They came, they saw, they lucked out.

"That's painful to watch," Bianca said, as Ryan played a movie montage in the recreational area. He had set up a large screen TV near the bar, allowing Sarin, Eugène-Henry, and the orphaned children to watch '*The Adventures of Lucky Girl*' in high definition. Shroud also talked to Fortuna away from the group, or rather *at* her; the Augusti scowled while petting a cleaned up Henriette between the ears, and spoke one word for ten of her boyfriend's.

As Ryan had expected, the living lucky charm had tremendously helped in accessing the bunker's mainframe. The time-traveler's presidential coalition had raided it as soon as Alchemo and his daughter arrived, with cameras catching everything. In the end, Ryan compiled the best bits for posterity.

And what a collection it was! From laser guns blowing up in robots' faces, to friendly fire and the ceiling miraculously collapsing, this movie had it all; the children couldn't stop laughing.

"And now this is the best part," Ryan said, zooming at his favorite scene. Two one-eyed robots threatened Fortuna with a cannon weapon larger than they were inside a metal

hall, the distance between the machines and the Genome no more than five meters. “This is a Gauss Railgun. Mechron invented them to destroy aircrafts and battleships.”

The scene unfolded in slow motion, an electromagnetically-accelerated 300 mm round surging through the air at a helpless Fortuna.

Mechron’s robots had used a weapon meant for battleships on a human being.

And they *missed*.

The projectile had curved in the air, and pierced the wall behind Fortuna. Although the impact threw metal splinters in all directions, they miraculously avoided Lucky Girl and turned her attackers to scraps. It had been the high point of Fortuna’s luck streak.

Afterward, though, Mechron’s robots had figured out that *one*, her power only affected events within a short range—less than a ten meters radius, from what the courier had gathered so far—and *two*, couldn’t negate other Genomes’ powers. True, it could alter probabilities to make bullets miss, but it couldn’t prevent Atom Cat’s explosions for example.

Ryan figured that Fortuna’s power was the opposite of Pluto, altering this reality’s causality to work in her favor instead of cursing a foe; with the keyword being *this* reality. Lucky Girl’s divine protection couldn’t interfere with powers from other Colored Worlds, only with their indirect consequences. Long-distance abilities could harm her.

So instead of using submachine guns and normal weapons, the robots sent the telekinetic machine that splattered the Reptilian during Ryan’s first presidential mandate. The

creature would have crushed Fortuna into mincemeat from a safe distance had the courier and the Panda not intervened. And as it turned out, Mechron's bunker had more than one of such machines to throw at invaders.

Though Ryan's group included heavy hitters such as Livia, Shroud, the Panda, and other allies, it had been a close call in the end.

"This is disgusting," Sarin said at the scene. "Just disgusting. I'm afraid of scissors, and that girl... she just gets everything handed to her." She turned to face Fortuna. "How does it feel to have it all so easy?"

"Oh?" Fortuna raised her reddened eyes in confusion. She clearly hadn't slept in a while. "It's nice."

"Fortuna—" her boyfriend tried to speak.

"Don't say a word to me," Fortuna's rebuke made Shroud flinch, which Ryan found very, very wrong. She had been in a foul mood even before the raid, but he had yet to see her truly angry. Henriette licked her hand, as the young woman petted the dog behind the ears. "At least *you* care..."

It seemed that Fortuna not only gave the cold shoulder to her 'one true love,' but also transferred her affection to Henriette instead. She had cleaned the dirty dog and more or less adopted her.

Ryan was tempted to question Livia about this, but his girlfriend had left to return to her father after providing Alchemeo with the brain-maps. The Genius had accepted Ryan's story of time-travel after analyzing his own memory map, and eagerly proceeded to operate on his daughter and Len both. He had said he could even improve the process further, though the courier didn't see how.

"Could I see you for a minute?" Ryan gestured at Shroud, before grabbing Eugène-Henry. "No invisibility please."

The vigilante followed with a condemned man's enthusiasm, as Ryan led him into his bunker bedroom. "So, your luck has run out?" he asked his transparent friend, with Eugène-Henry resting in the courier's arms.

"We're having a bad time."

No kidding, a blind man could see it. "Thankfully, I have a long experience as a relationship counselor," Ryan said. "In the end, it's all about mommy issues, you'll see. Was your mother a blue-eyed blonde too, like your girlfriend?"

The vigilante marked a short pause, before reluctantly answering, "Yes."

"See, in the end, it's always about sleeping with your mother."

"But they're nothing alike personality-wise."

"You tried to find the right balance between familiarity and newness, but we can explore the Freudian undertones later." Ryan introduced his favorite windshield to his bedroom. There was a small hole in the wall where the plushie had opened fire with the gravity gun. The inactive rabbit in question sat on a desk, surrounded by half-empty alcohol bottles and antidepressants; Ryan thought the sight would help with the counseling session. "Take the cat, and lay down on the bed."

Shroud sounded highly skeptical of Ryan's credentials. "Why the cat?"

“It’s an integral part of the healing process,” Ryan said before all but shoving Eugène-Henry in his ally’s arms. Shroud looked at the furball, who meowed in response, and couldn’t resist. He laid down on the bed, the cat taking over his chest while Ryan sat on a nearby chair. “So, about that relationship.”

“She...” Shroud marked a short pause while Ryan remained silent. Nobody could resist trying to fill an embarrassing silence. “Promise me you will not crack a joke.”

“No more than three,” Ryan haggled.

“I hate you.” The patient sighed. “Fortuna and I had a date.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.”

“She invited me to her apartment. To show me her statue collection.”

“She wanted to sculpt you like her French boys?” A worrying thought crossed Ryan’s mind. “Wait, are you naked beneath your glass costume? Would that mean you are technically flashing my cat right now?”

Shroud marked a short pause, Eugène-Henry sleeping peacefully on his chest. “I wear clothes beneath my costume.”

Ryan sighed. “Disappointing.”

“In any case, Fortuna, how to say this...?”

“She needed a plumber, so you played *Super Mario Party*?” Ryan asked. “Did you get past the tutorial?”

"No, no, I..." The vigilante's embarrassment told Ryan that he had nailed it. "We kissed but, when she started removing my clothes, I... I couldn't. I mean, yes, I was attracted to her, but... not like this."

"Not by lying?" the courier asked, sympathetic. There was a joke to make here, but he had enough respect for the couple to hold his tongue. Still, Shroud was okay with assassinating people, but not lying to the girl he was sleeping with? Where was the logic in that?

"I..." Mr. Safelite let out a sigh. "I confessed."

"Everything?"

"No, of course not," Shroud replied angrily. "That would have been unprofessional."

"Transparency is key to a successful relationship."

"I'm sure this cleared things up about where we stood," the vigilante deadpanned. "I told her that I came to New Rome to strike at the Augusti syndicate, and that... that I was always around to accidentally protect her from dangers because I caused them in the first place."

Ryan couldn't fault Fortuna for giving her boyfriend the cold shoulder, after learning he had attempted to assassinate her and others. "She hasn't blown the whistle on you, though?"

"I told her that I thought she was a merciless killer like her teammates, before seeing her in action changed my mind, and that I put a halt to the sabotage campaign," Shroud replied. "She started defending the Augusti, and when I listed all the people her father Mars had murdered over his career, she denied everything and told me to storm off. I

almost did, but the door and curtains wouldn't open. In the end, I slept on the couch, and she has given me the cold shoulder ever since."

"If her power is still trying to set up romantic situations, then this ship hasn't sunk yet."

"Shouldn't it?" Shroud asked with a sigh. "I mean, I'm starting to grow fond of her, against my better judgement, but she's in complete denial about her organization's true nature. I should have pushed her away more firmly and focused on the missio—"

"Stop right here, Sasuke, you're parking in a no-emo zone," Ryan interrupted him. "If you go on about how you should have '*dedicated your heart to darkness*' or '*put the mission above everything*' I'm kicking you off of this team."

"But what if she tells her parents?" Shroud snapped back. "What if she blows the whistle about this place, about us? I'm not even sure why she hasn't already."

"Because her brother told her similar things when he left, and it's eating away at her." Ryan suspected that deep down, Fortuna had some doubts about her parents' true nature and that of her associates; but it would take a shock like Pluto ordering a hit on her brother to wake her up. "Did you tell her the truth about her sister?"

"No. Maybe I should."

"Too much, too soon," Ryan said. "I'll consult Livia." Lucky Girl would react better to the truth if it came from her best friend's mouth.

The vigilante sighed in defeat. "I should take the hint and break it off. Her power has a shorter range than mine, it

can't force us to spend time together if I stay away. I knew that from the start, and I shouldn't have let it progress this far."

"Livia and I threatened each other the first time we had a heartfelt conversation, and I think we are building something solid now," Ryan replied with a shrug. "Give Fortuna time to digest the truth and this relationship another chance. Her guardian angel wouldn't work so hard to keep you two together if it didn't feel you would make a good couple. And I don't think you would have stayed with that walking rabbit's foot if a part of you didn't like her."

Shroud scoffed, Eugène-Henry snoring on his chest. "I like her, Quicksave, but not enough to let her parents get away with their crimes."

"There was a loop where she understood their true nature," Ryan said, though he had no wish to repeat that one. The sight of Fortuna bleeding to death in her brother's arms still haunted him. "Maybe she will get it this time around too. It's too early to choose yet my translucent friend. Once things are clearer, you can decide for yourself whether you want to pursue her or call it off."

Shroud petted the cat. "You aren't half bad as a therapist."

"Do you want to talk about your daddy issues while we're at it? I'm on a streak lately."

"I'll pass."

Getting his feelings off his chest made Shroud relax, so the two Genomes left Eugène-Henry to sleep and moved to the laboratories below. By the time they reached the infirmary, Alchemeo had finished Len's memory transfer. The

communist genius was talking with the Doll, while Alchemo and the Panda conversed with Stitch.

The Carnival's Genius had arrived roughly at the same time as Braindead and his daughter, to remove the Bloodstream strain inside Len and work on a vaccine. With access to Mechron's database and laboratories, Ryan had put Dr. Tyrano and Stitch in contact, and the two had hit it off well from what he had heard. Of course, the Carnival doctor hadn't been happy to work with someone responsible for infecting New Rome with a sleeping bloody plague, but decided to make the most of the situation.

"Three Geniuses and a half in one room," Ryan said as he and Shroud joined the group. "You should form a Think Tank."

"Am I the half, Sifu?" The Panda asked.

"Truthfully, you might become a *de facto* Genius in time," Stitch replied, scribbling notes in a journal. Ryan had learned the plague doctor usually preferred to work on paper rather than computers, for reasons the courier couldn't explain. "Since our science can be replicated."

In the span of two days, Ryan's pandawan had learned the equivalent of two Doctorates in medical science and chemistry, five Masters' degrees, and eight languages; including Chinese, Basque, Inuit, and even the Braille writing system. Though he was no true Genius, he could serve as a very effective lab assistant.

"Are you alright, Shortie?" Ryan asked his old friend.

"I'm... I'm fine." Len scratched her head. "It's... strange. I remember some days happening in two different ways,

rather than one. I am not sure which of them is the correct one. Is that always the case for you?"

Yes, but usually with thousands of variations instead of one. Sometimes the time-traveler forgot which one he validated for his Perfect Run. "Was that what you meant about improving the memory transfer?" Ryan asked Alchemo.

"Yes, memories coexisting rather than a straight override," the Genius shrugged. "I struggle to find a workaround for your pet Psycho Sarin though. I work best with nerves, not gaseous molecules."

Shroud crossed his arms, appraising Alchemo closely. "According to Quicksave, you are a brain Genius," he said, his voice hesitant. Ryan could tell he had been through many false hopes, and thus remained cautious. "Could you heal a woman with severe brain damage?"

"That depends," Alchemo said, ever the opportunist. "How much is she worth?"

The Doll pinched the Genius' metal arm. "Dad, we spoke about this before."

"Ugh, you will be the death of me," Braindead complained, but gave in quickly. He could never say no to his daughter. "I can treat dementia, Alzheimer's, all sorts of brain damage. Give me that woman's medical data, and I shall see what I can do."

Shroud bowed in deep gratitude. "You have my most sincere thanks."

"Don't thank me, thank my naive daughter and her bleeding heart."

The Doll smiled in response. “Dad, one day you will understand that helping others is a reward in itself.”

“Can you eat happiness?” Alchemo replied with a cranky tone. “Or sell it?”

“I would be interested in cooperating with you in the long-term,” Stitch said. “We Geniuses have extensive knowledge, but only in a narrow field. I believe we could achieve greater things together than separately. We complete parts of a larger sequence.”

Indeed, Ryan had had the same idea with Nora. He could already see the synergies she would form with Shortie to develop underwater cities. “About cooperation, how is our vaccination campaign going?” the courier asked, Len looking away.

“I already created a formula based on the information you and this... strange scaled doctor provided,” Stitch answered, showing Ryan his notes. “Once distributed in the population through airborne means, it should spread through New Rome in days and Europe in weeks.”

Good. “And Bliss?”

“I have studied your proposed cure, and I believe I could develop a viral version, yes. A nervous system suppressant alongside endorphin blockers would prevent the physiological and psychological addiction.”

“Nothing revolutionary,” Alchemo complained, slightly jealous Ryan had achieved something in his domain of expertise. “I could make something similar.”

“Even solve the fertility issues?” Ryan deadpanned.

“Pff, if you ask me it’s an improvement.”

“But so long as the Augusti possess a superlab, they can make new Bliss strains,” Shroud pointed out grimly. “A cure will cripple their business in the short-term, but not forever.”

Indeed, Lightning Butt and Bacchus had the resources to create new drugs, given time. Ryan doubted the superlab’s destruction would stop them either. The loss of Bliss would be a heavy blow to the Augusti’s crime empire, but not a fatal one. They needed to take out the key figures in the criminal syndicate, to clear the way for Livia to reform it.

The courier quickly noticed Len’s unease, and changed the subject. “Shortie, can I talk to you for a second?”

His best friend answered with a short nod, and they walked away to a more private room. The same one where Big Fat Adam had once interrogated Ryan, in fact. “How do you feel?” the time-traveler asked, before adding with more hesitation. “About your father.”

“I feel the same,” she answered grimly. “Nothing’s changed.”

As Ryan had worried. He would have hoped that whatever bloodstain her father left in Len’s body had brainwashed her, forcing his daughter to love him. It would have made everything so much easier. “Since you have the memories of both this loop and the previous one, then you understand what happened.”

“He killed me.” Len didn’t cry, though her voice was bitter and sad. “Ryan, you’ve seen him. Is there... is there any hope for him?”

"I don't think so," Ryan admitted. "He's closer to a virus than a man now, and I don't think he's even self-aware anymore. Killing him would be mercy."

"I..." She took a long, deep breath. "That day, the reason I didn't run away with you was... because there was a chance he could improve. No matter how slim. If..."

Len struggled to articulate her thoughts, and Ryan waited patiently.

"If... I can only agree to do this if my father... my real father is already dead, truly dead." Len crossed her arms and looked down at the cold steel floor. "If there is still a chance we can cure him, bring the human out..."

There wasn't any, but Ryan knew Len needed more time to accept it. She hadn't witnessed her father's state personally, as her memory map had been recorded before the Dynamis raid.

"Shortie, a long, long time ago, I made a decision for the both of us, and I've paid the price ever since," the courier declared. "You know where I stand as far as your father is concerned, but the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results. This time... this time, we'll make the decision together."

"Not now, Riri," she said upon raising her eyes, her face pleading. "Not now. I... I need more time. It's too big a decision to make now."

"I understand," he replied. "We can delay the Dynamis raid for later. We'll use this loop to test the vaccine, gather information, and find a cure for the Psycho condition."

"So what's the plan? This place won't stay hidden forever, Riri. Someone will talk."

"After we deal with the Bliss Factory, we'll have to skip town to avoid Lightning Butt's retaliations. We'll blow up the bunker on our way out, and move to the one place where we could find the cure for the Psycho condition. Its source."

With the bunker's mainframe under their control, Ryan could also now recreate the Saturn armor, and finally get to the bottom of his new ability.

Len nodded. "Antarctica."

"We'll make a stop near Monaco on the way," Ryan said with a grin. "There are people there that I haven't visited in a while. It would make for a nice holiday."

A smile appeared at the edge of Len's lip, but it was soon drowned by sadness.

"Shortie?"

"I... I heard you talk with Livia through the chronoradio." Len bit her lower lip. "You're dating her."

It was more of a statement than a question.

"She's... she's good for me. I can't explain it." Ryan scratched the back of his neck. "Like, she confiscated all the combat drugs I kept in my car. When I said I only used them for suicide runs, she replied '*yes, that's the problem. It reinforces your belief that you throw your life away, and that's not good for your mental health.*'"

"She's... she's not wrong."

"Yeah, it made sense in hindsight," Ryan replied. "At one point in time, I didn't care about dying. It was part of the fun, but now... now I do mind."

Ryan didn't want to die anymore. He wanted to spend lifetimes with Livia, with Len, with the friends he had made along the way. Short, adrenaline-rushed loops were fun, but they were like drug injections. They only served to dull the pain.

They were a crutch, and wouldn't help him heal.

Eventually, Len nodded to herself. "She's... she's good for you, I agree. I can see that. She's helping you get better, like you do with me."

"But you would have preferred something else."

"I... I said things couldn't go back to how they were, so... so I can't fault you for moving on. It's... we're family now, and... you deserve someone who makes you happy."

"You'll find someone too," Ryan said. "The world is full of wonderful people. Maybe I'm not the right person for you anymore, but somewhere, there is one that fits the bill."

"Perhaps," she replied, and for once she sounded cautiously optimistic. "It's... I've lived in the past for so long, because... because I was scared."

Scared of being hurt again.

"But seeing you happier, and not just with Livia... it gets me thinking." Len smiled. "Maybe there's hope for the world, and me too. I should look forward, not backward."

It was time for both of them to move on.

Together.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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103: Drug Bust

It was May 14th in New Rome, and a handsome secret agent flew above the Mediterranean sea.

The wind brushing against his mask and magician's hat, Ryan peeked over his jetpack to look at Vulcan. The Genius was hot on his trail, piloting her slow, bulky mech. "Come on, you aren't even trying!" the courier taunted his favorite dwarf over the intercom. It was the second round of the race, and she couldn't catch up to him. "Then again, your mom was so slow, it took her nine months to make a joke!"

"The only slow thing will be your death when I catch up to you!" Vulcan snarled back as she accelerated, her mech thrumming like a supercharged car. Both contestants flew so close to the sea level that they blew water in all directions as they passed.

In spite of her threat though, Ryan maintained a decent lead as they toured Ischia Island; iron walls and wind turbines surrounded the radioactive dump, keeping the toxic purple miasma safely contained. Hidden turrets rose from the shoreline and pointed at the flyers, though their maker prevented them from opening fire at Ryan on sight.

"Why doesn't your hat fall off?" Vulcan asked.

"It's magnetized." It came in handy for someone like Ryan, who favored acrobatics and explosions in his fights. "Also, you're so slow, you make the post office look efficient!"

"You're so fast, your girlfriend is always left disappointed."

Ouch, low bow. This meant war.

"Oh look, a wyvern!" Ryan pointed a finger at an empty spot of water on his left.

To his amusement, Vulcan *did* cock her head in that direction. "Where?" she asked, before realizing her mistake. "You bastard, you will die for this!"

Ryan laughed, only for Vulcan to actually open fire with a volley of missiles. The courier had to freeze time to dodge them all. "You bastard, you cheated!" his rival complained when time resumed. "We said only tech!"

"I lied!" Ryan cackled like a maniac. "I lied about everything!"

The two contestants finished their tour of the island and came into view of the Castello Aragonese, that old fortress which Augustus refitted into a Bliss Superlab. The powerful stone fortress's walls oversaw the sea from atop a volcanic islet and a garden of alien plants.

The ghostly skull of Geist appeared for a brief moment above the castle when the racers approached. A tornado of colored dust carried the house-sized apparition, and started strong winds slowing down the contestants.

"Come to see me win?!" Ryan shouted as loud as he could, barely dodging a seagull. Damn bird traffic.

To his surprise, Casper the Ghost apparently listened. "You better," the specter replied with a casual voice, though it somehow carried across the waves. "I bet on you."

Huh, so not only could that flying skull manifest anywhere on the island, but it also had sharp senses and could detect people in the area. This ruined Ryan's original plan, but the courier was nothing if not adaptable.

Geist had bet wisely. For although Vulcan attempted to blast him at the last second with a crimson beam of light, the courier passed over the fortress first.

There was a coming short joke to make, but Ryan was too tall to make it.

"Damn it!" Vulcan snarled. "Damn it, damn it, damn it! Where did you find that jetpack?"

In Mechron's bunker. "In a cave, in a box of scraps."

"The princess' wet cave?"

Damn, news traveled fast.

"I took shelter from a thunderstorm inside," Ryan said, as they began another turn around the island. "Wait, is tomorrow's meeting about my execution?"

Tomorrow was the Olympians meeting, which should end up with Zanbato confirmed as the new Mercury. Jamie hadn't organized a welcome party this time around, perhaps because Ryan had spent most of his time with Livia; and with nothing to distract her, Vulcan had decided to check up on the Bliss Island's defenses today.

It cost the courier an A-bomb and advanced technology to get into her good graces, but the Genius eventually invited him to participate in the inspection.

Truthfully, Ryan suspected Vulcan wanted to impress him with her technology. She wanted him as a lab assistant, but the courier had defended his independence and maintained a professional distance. Sort of. He assumed jetpack races counted as a team-building activity.

“Could be,” Vulcan replied, still sore over her defeat. “How much to spare your pretty head?”

“An A-bomb?” Ryan haggled. “Bloody or extra crispy?”

“Already got one, and prices are up. I guess you’ll die.”

“If they vote yes, can I die buried in pizzas?” Ryan didn’t think he had died that way yet. At least not with four-cheeses. “Or couscous?”

“I can arrange death by waffles,” Vulcan joked back.

Ryan had missed trading jabs with her. He had thought he would find the inspection agonizing, but to his surprise, he could interact with Vulcan without experiencing depressing flashbacks now. Perhaps it was his newfound desire to move on, or his Elixir’s advice finally sinking in.

Ryan would always cherish his Jasmine’s memories, like all the relationships erased by his power, but he no longer lived in its shadow. And neither did the current Vulcan. He could finally befriend her without comparing her to her past self.

“No seriously, I blow you a chef’s kiss,” Vulcan said, her mech mimicking the gesture. “I didn’t think anyone would be mad enough to make a move on Augustus’ daughter. You won’t live long, but I’ll come to your funeral.”

“Eh, going by Casper the Ghost over here, heaven has a revolving door.” Ryan chuckled. “How did you know?”

Vulcan shrugged. “Some of the staff members saw you kiss Minerva at Venus’ resort, and spread the word. I guess Augustus couldn’t kill the leakers fast enough.”

“I thought paparazzi were an extinct species?”

“Not for a lack of trying, no.” The duo reached the Bliss Superlab again, flying over the outer walls and towards a helicopter platform. Vulcan’s mech caused the entire fortress to shake as it landed, while Ryan crossed his arms and did his best to look good as his feet touched the ground.

When they arrived, armored soldiers were busy boarding a group of three armed helicopters and checking up on their weapons. Bacchus oversaw the operation with his hands behind his back, while young Narcinia waited alongside him while holding a flower bouquet.

Ryan couldn’t resist examining it, and he didn’t recognize half of the plants. Some were roses with petals of multiple colors, others fusions of lilies of the valley and yellow daisies. The colors mixed in a tasteful display for the eyes, and the smell was almost divine.

“You like it, Quicksave?” Narcinia asked him shyly, her brown hair flowing with the ocean wind. Her heart-shaped face was so unlike her adopted family, Ryan wondered why Venus didn’t change it. Perhaps Narcinia’s power interfered with her adoptive mother’s? “I made it for Mom and Dad!”

She should have added some hemlock and nightshade then. “It’s delightful,” Ryan said from the bottom of his heart. “But do they sing?”

“Sing?”

"You can make any form of life from what I heard, so why not flowers that can sing?" Ryan asked mirthfully.

"Make them edible, so you have the full sensory package," Vulcan snickered, her armor towering over the duo.

"You can't eat flowers!" Narcinia protested. "But singing flowers... that's a nice idea. I could have them blow colored fumes while they sing too." She turned to Bacchus. "What song would you like, Father Torque?"

Andreas Torque, alias Bacchus, turned his gaunt face at his small protégée. His eyes were as black and lifeless as coal, and Ryan had yet to see him blink. One could almost see the bones beneath his priestly garbs. All in all, the man reminded the courier of a walking corpse. "Gregorian chants, to soothe the soul."

"And Bliss for the fumes, to have a good time?" Vulcan deadpanned. Narcinia bristled a bit at that, clearly not very proud of working on making drugs.

"Don't listen to him, he's behind the times," Ryan told Narcinia. "When in doubt, choose synthwave."

"I don't know that music genre," Narcinia said. The poor naive child.

"I will teach you, and the meaning of life as well," the courier replied.

"This reminds me, I will not be available for Venus' dinner," Bacchus said with his soft, calm voice. "I shall return to Ischia after meeting with our fellow Olympians."

Narcinia didn't hide her disappointment. "My mother won't like it, Father Torque."

"We are on the verge of a breakthrough, Ceres," the priest chided her. "Idleness is the enemy of progress. It is not wise to make God wait."

"Eh, It's probably vibing in its Blue World," Ryan said while testing the waters. "It knows you will reach It in time, like It knows everything else."

That was a pure bluff and speculation, based on the courier's knowledge of the Ultimate Ones, their dimensions, and what Livia had told him. Yet he hit the mark, for the priest's head snapped in Ryan's direction so fast that the courier worried he might break his neck.

"Have you reached Heaven?" Bacchus asked, his black eyes peering into Ryan's soul. The stare's sheer intensity might have made a younger man crumble to his feet in penance, but the courier had faced far worse. Still, the priest's presence made him feel uneasy.

In a way, Bacchus reminded Ryan of Bloodstream. The courier could sense the madness festering beneath the lucidity. "No, but I'm trying to find a way in."

"So am I," the priest stated with a hint of enthusiasm. It must have been gratifying to meet someone who validated his beliefs. "I am close."

"Pray harder," Vulcan snickered. Clearly, she didn't think much of the priest's delusions. "Look, I'm very busy and this security inspection was a waste of my valuable time. Let's escort you back on the mainland and be done with it."

"There is no rush," Bacchus replied calmly, before putting a hand on Narcinia's shoulder. "Go climb in the helicopter, I will be with you in a minute."

"Yes, Father Torque," the young teen nodded, while Vulcan grumbled.

Bacchus took Ryan aside for a short talk, the two walking along the walls of Castle Aragonese. The priest didn't take his eyes off the courier for one second, examining him with a quizzical look. "Your name is Quicksave, correct?"

"I'm immortal, but don't tell anyone."

Andreas Torque observed Ryan without a word, studying him. He was probably trying to remember every tidbit of information he might have had on the courier, but came up short. He would certainly question the other Olympians at the meeting and investigate the time-traveler afterward.

"How did you find your faith?" Bacchus asked. "There must be a fascinating story behind your quest."

"I have been to Hell before, so I figured I should check out the other place," Ryan joked.

"A worthwhile goal, but I require a straight answer."

Ryan could tell this man could smell falsehoods like Luigi, and he didn't even need a power to do so. "Well, Father..." the courier looked around himself as fearing he would be overhead, before whispering into the priest's ears. "I have met a local."

"A local?"

"From these higher dimensions."

Bacchus' eyes seemed to shine for a brief instant. "How?"

"An Elixir opened the gate for a brief moment." That was only half a lie too. "A deity lurked on the other side."

"It seems we shared similar revelations then." Bacchus shivered in pleasure, as if reliving the moment. "I only tasted Heaven once, when I consumed my Elixir, and I have yearned to return to it ever since."

Ryan remembered his brief stay inside the Black World, and what Bloodstream once told him about the 'Green Hell' he had glimpsed in his dreams so many years ago. Back then, the courier had thought it was mere delusions, but now, he understood that his adoptive father had observed the Green World.

From what the time-traveler gathered, the colored dimensions exerted a powerful hold on Genomes. The Ultimate Ones attracted lesser beings to them like a moth to a flame. The priest must have contacted the Blue Ultimate One, which permanently affected his mind.

"I have been investigating these higher realms since, Father," Ryan said, trying to play on the priest's obsession. "When I saw this deity, I... it was bliss beyond words. An ascension to a higher state of being."

"So you understand how I feel." Bacchus nodded slowly. "To be on the verge of becoming something more than human, only to be returned to this sinful, imperfect world... it is maddening."

"So, I have been researching the Alchemist," Ryan said, cutting straight to the chase. "I thought only she might answer my questions. Clearly, she created Elixirs to establish bridges with gods. To make us divine."

"That was Eva Fabre's goal indeed." The shadow of a smile appeared on Bacchus' face. "A true prophet. I mistook her for the devil, but now I see that she was the Lord's tool on Earth. A visionary. I only met her once, but she left quite the mark."

Ryan could see that. "When did you see her?"

"On Last Easter. I had been tracking her for years, back when she was refining the holy Elixirs for the sake of us all. She vanished after enlightening me."

"She's hiding beneath the snow," Ryan said. "I know she has a base in Antarctica."

"Station Orpheon?" Bacchus shook his head. "You are mistaken. We sent people there and they found nothing. The station has been emptied for more than a decade, ever since a violet flash was seen above its skies."

A violet flash? If the Alchemist had access to advanced technology, then she could easily hide a base in a pocket dimension or a similar place. Maybe even hide it in plain sight. The Augusti didn't have the means to detect such an anomaly, but Ryan could probably find an entrance. "Do you have the coordinates of that pilgrimage site, Father?"

He did, and could quote it from memory. Ryan folded it in a corner of his mind. "If you wish, I could involve you in our new Bliss strain's test trials," Bacchus said. "This will let us contact God, I can feel it in my bones. This long tribulation is finally nearing its end."

"I would rather avoid the sterility that comes with it. I thought God said we should be fruitful and multiply?"

"That part is Augustus' will, without which he would not have sponsored the project," Bacchus said, though he clearly had no problem with sterilizing a large part of the population. "God put him on Earth to separate God's chosen from the unworthy. Not everyone may ascend, and Bliss will sort them out."

If Ryan had any hesitation left about destroying that lab, the priest just destroyed them. The courier glanced at the specter of Geist floating above the fortress, his grinning skull watching the sea. How far could he sense invaders? For the operation's sake, Ryan hoped that it wasn't much.

"There is little time left to discuss the matter," Bacchus said, Vulcan gesturing him to climb inside the helicopter. "But once I am done with more secular matters, we will delve into the higher mysteries together. I am sure we can help each other."

Bacchus boarded one of the helicopters at last, the vehicles flying away from the island with Ryan and Vulcan on their tail. The priest and Narcinia never crossed the sea without heavy escort, perhaps in case Wyvern or members of Il Migliore decided to ambush them.

Ryan knew nothing would happen. Though the party at Jamie's place didn't take place this time around, the priest and Narcinia had made their way to the meeting without incident in previous loops. With the Meta-Gang shattered, no one would interfere.

No one but Ryan.

The courier half-considered having the priest perish in a tragic accident, but he traveled in the same helicopter as Narcinia. Besides, slaying a priest wouldn't have been very Catholic.

“Permission to return and laze around at home, Herr General?” Ryan asked Vulcan over the intercom, as they crossed the sea and the helicopters landed safely near the old harbor.

“Permission to get out of my sight granted, minion,” Vulcan said, before adding. “Come check out my lab tomorrow, after the reunion. You’re wasted on the field.”

She wouldn’t give up on that internship offer. “I’ll consider it,” Ryan lied. Vulcan grunted and flew away, back to her base.

Instead of returning home though, the courier deviated from his course the moment he was out of sight. He turned his jetpack towards the sea and Ischia Island, careful to fly low enough to avoid notice by eyes and radars both.

“They’re gone,” Ryan said over the intercom. “Where are you?”

“*Four hundred meters northeast,*” Shortie answered.

The courier quickly reached the meeting point, a solitary rock rising from the sea close to Ischia island. The Mechron submarine’s periscope looked over the water, with part of the tower staying hidden behind the stone. Shortie and Sarin waited on it with an enormous suitcase, while Ryan noticed the edge of Shroud’s glass armor, as sea droplets hit its transparent surface.

“Right on time,” Ryan said as he landed on the submarine’s tower and set aside his jetpack. “It should just be Geist, turrets, and mooks now.”

“Just an invincible ghost and a few hundred men, you mean?” Sarin grumbled angrily. She hadn’t been onboard

with the plan, and went along only because Ryan's Think Tank had made progress on the cure.

"What about the security system?" Shroud asked.

"Vulcan showed me the defensive turrets' location, but she wouldn't let me inside the fortress." The Genius was fond of Ryan, but didn't fully trust him either. "I do have information about what's inside, including a map."

"And all it cost you was sleeping with the enemy?" the invisible vigilante mused. Indeed, it was Livia who provided them. "Unfortunately, even with your girlfriend's intel, I cannot hack into Vulcan's security system, or at least not without alerting her of my attempt. I will need to access terminals inside the fortress."

"We are taking huge risks, Riri," Len said. She trusted him enough to follow his lead, but remained uneasy. "Even without Bacchus, the lab is defended by soldiers in power armor, automated defenses, Genomes..."

And a ghost. One couldn't forget the ghost.

In the end, Geist was the island's true line of defense, a Genome of incredible power that almost nobody could harm, let alone kill. But thankfully, the specter couldn't haunt multiple places at once.

"There won't be a better opportunity," Ryan argued.
"Tomorrow morning, the Augusti's high command will be hours away, too far away to intervene."

"A night is a long time," Sarin said grimly.

"You said you could reform in that time," Len pointed out.

"I should, since these fucking turbines blow gas within the island and condense it," Sarin replied angrily. "But I still hate it. If you don't give me back my suit afterward, I'm killing you myself."

"See the bright side. When you've opened a breach, you'll get your own power armor," Ryan reassured her, before opening the briefcase and looking at his own suit.

The Augusti knew Quicksave... but they didn't know Saturn.

Ryan hoped that Sarin's presence would deceive Mob Zeus, make him believe the Meta-Gang were still active and sabotaging his operations. Livia would help sell her father the lie, giving the group some precious respite before Lightning Butt inevitably tracked them down. After the loss of his superlab, he would stop at nothing to find the responsible party.

Len helped her best friend put on the Saturn armor, Ryan delighting as she draped a cashmere poncho on his shoulder. The courier had used the data gathered in the previous loop to improve on the power armor's design, replacing the chest cannon with a modified variant of Adam's gravity rifle, improving the flight systems, and reinforcing the parts which Lightning Butt had managed to breach. The courier also invested heavily in radiation and heat shielding, in preparation for a new confrontation with Fallout.

He had forgotten to add a proton pack though, which would have come in handy with Geist.

Once the armor was operational, Ryan activated his power. Time froze to a halt, black and purple particles floating around the courier. A violet ghost raced after him, his past self trying to catch up to the present.

Ryan immediately noticed something new.

“There’s more than before.”

One loop ago, the Black Flux particles were nothing but black spots among fireworks of purple. Ryan had to focus to notice them. Now they had turned into a small oil spill on a violet sea.

His Black Power, whatever it was, had grown stronger.

How? Did it leech off some of Fallout’s radioactive energies during their last confrontation? Darkling could remember things across multiple loops, so Black Flux probably ignored the usual rules of Ryan’s time travel. Or perhaps it had fed on the previous loop’s destruction? In this case, each reset should strengthen the ability.

What did it even do? If it could damage Lightning Butt, could it do the same with Geist? Could it kill the unkillable?

“I wish I could have Darkling on speed dial,” Ryan complained as time resumed. “Is everyone ready?”

The plan was for Sarin to infiltrate the island in gaseous form, which would confuse even Geist, and then sabotage key defenses during the night. Ryan and Co would then attack the lab on the next day while Lightning Butt held court, scrambling communications to prevent the Augusti from calling for help.

If all went well, Ryan might repeat the operation in his Perfect Run.

“Almost,” Shroud said, turning visible while looking at the open sea. “A friend insisted on coming when I said we were chasing ghosts.”

A friend? From the Carnival? Ryan didn't hide his skepticism.
"Trust me, if Lightning Butt sees Sunshine anywhere near his mountain, then it will be New Rome's last sunrise."

"Leo is hunting the other Mechron bases as we speak, though the teammate in question is twice as flamboyant."

Flamboyant?

Ryan's heart skipped a beat, as he looked at the sea with hope. Could it be? Could it be?

His maddest prayers were soon answered, as a ray of crimson light racing on the water itself. Only a man capable of stopping time could witness the pure perfection of a human-shaped laser racing across the sea, as fast as light itself.

In the blink of an eye, the newcomer had crossed the sea and stopped within a few inches of the child he had saved many years ago. Unlike Ryan, the man hadn't changed across the centuries, his body a solid wavelength, his suit perfect in its vibrant colors and tasteful elegance.

"Jesus could walk on water," the man said, "but only because he learned that trick from..."

Ryan held his breath, as his favorite superhero put his hands on his waist, showing the purity of his showy, bright cashmere suit.

"Mr. Wave!"

Ryan squeed like a rabid fangirl, much to his team's embarrassment.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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104: Return of the Cashmere

Ryan thought this run would have been an Augusti one. Joining the mafia organization, climbing the ranks, perhaps challenging the Big Thunder Man for his daughter's hand.

But as he prepared to assault the Bliss Factory with a ragtag band of misfits at his back, Ryan understood he had been mistaken. This run was a hidden, yet unexplored route.

The Carnival route.

Ryan and Shroud floated far above the Bliss Factory, hidden inside a cloud; the former carried by his armor's propellers, the other by his own power. Len waited under the waves for an amphibious assault, while Mr. Wave and Sarin would soon fall in position.

"They will know it's us," Shroud complained, barely visible. "The Carnival. I shouldn't have told Mr. Wave about this operation, that weirdo won't listen to reason."

Ryan gently slapped his translucent friend on the helmet, to his surprise. "What was that for?" the vigilante asked.

"You don't diss Mr. Wave in my presence," the courier replied. "If he wishes to strike fear in Lightning Butt's heart, it is his divine right and we shall indulge him."

"Wait, didn't he save your life?" Shroud scoffed. "I should have known he influenced you. The cashmere obsession was a telltale sign."

Ryan loved cashmere like any sensible human being, but Mr. Wave did open his eyes about its splendor. The courier's first loops mostly revolved around the superhero saving him from an explosion, over and over again, shielding the time-traveler from flames with his soft wool suit.

The original plan was to blame the Meta-Gang for the attack, but while Mr. Wave had agreed to change his clothes, he simply traded his flamboyant suit for a black tuxedo and scaled boots. "They will know it's you, Wave," Shroud had complained, somewhat rightly. "You aren't even hiding your face."

"Mr. Wave is wearing an evil suit," his dashing teammate had protested. "It is black, the underclothes were made in China, and the socks were woven with linen."

Ryan had looked at his hero in shock and outrage. "That's a war crime!"

"Indeed. So Mr. Wave surrounded them with tasteful alligator boots, to soften the blow. Like putting a flower on a Kalashnikov's barrel."

"Why are you using the third person?" Len had asked.

"First-person cannot properly contain the power of Mr. Wave's name."

Though Len had giggled, probably because she had grown used to Ryan's own antics, the rest of the team didn't get it. "Is yours always like this?" Shroud had asked Sarin, as she removed her hazmat suit to let her gaseous form out.

She had snickered in response. “You think there’s more of them?”

“I pray not.”

“Wardrobe,” Ryan had said, dashing all their hopes and dreams.

“I’ve heard of this Wardrobe,” Mr. Wave had finished. “Our meeting will be legendary, but Mr. Wave doubts the world will survive it.”

Afterward, Sarin had let her gaseous body flow through the wind turbines surrounding Ischia Island, causing a few dysfunctions. Geist had sensed her presence and left the fortress, but didn’t know what to look for amidst all the toxic gases.

Still, as Ryan observed the golden skull flickering in and out of existence around the island, he wondered how far the Yellow Genome’s powers extended. Casper the Ghost could clearly sense Sarin somewhere on the island, though she had no corporeal body. Did he sense her soul? Did people actually have souls? But if so, why couldn’t he sense Ryan and Shroud in the air?

This reminded Ryan of Monaco. Yellow Genomes usually had conceptual limits, reasoning in terms of abstract laws rather than scientific rules. Perhaps Geist could only detect people who technically set foot on his haunting ground, or something like that.

In any case, with the ghost busy and the Olympians holding their meeting, the Bliss Factory was temporarily without its main defenders. Now was the time to strike.

The assault began with a metal monster rising from the waves and landing on the shore.

With full access to Mechron's armory, Ryan wasn't the only one who upgraded his technology. Len had also exchanged her power armor for a new one, to reduce the risk of being identified. Her second mech was as bulky as Vulcan's, and reminded Ryan of Cthulhu, with inorganic tentacled whips where the face should be. The hands finished with mighty crab pincers, and the armor's blue paint job made it near undetectable in the water. The alien design was unlike anything Len ever built, and took more inspiration from Mechron's own creations.

She immediately opened fire on the fortress with shoulder torpedoes, collapsing huge chunks of the outer walls. Vulcan's turrets, the few which Sarin couldn't sabotage without bringing attention upon herself, immediately opened fire. Ryan blasted them from above with his chest gravity-gun, black spheres collapsing space around them and crushing the weapons. Shroud also discreetly sabotaged the glass and silica components within the machines, causing severe malfunctions.

With the automated defenses down, Augusti guards in riot gear swarmed the walls still standing, while their allies in red, padded steampunk armor emerged from the main gates to intercept Len. Ryan recognized the latter as Vulcan's corp of Pyrokinetic Genomes, their equipment turbocharging their powers. They tossed car-sized fireballs at Len, causing her outer shielding to heat up.

A red blur crossed the sea at blinding speed, hitting an Augusti Genome so hard that he crashed halfway through a stone wall.

"Mr. Wave will set his foot down," Mr. Wave proudly announced his presence, hands raised to the skies, "and it will be in someone's face!"

Ryan couldn't help but fanboy over his idol, and squealed loud enough to cause guards to look up. "You idiot, you alerted them to our position!" Shroud complained before flying away, fully turning invisible and waiting for an opportunity to infiltrate the fortress. Ryan himself shrugged off gunshots. His armor could resist punches from Augustus and Fallout, so bullets easily bounced off.

The chilling, ghostly wind in the air though, was a greater source of concern.

Ryan barely had the time to fly to his left and avoid a rock the size of his car falling on his head. A glittering tornado of colored, supernatural dust manifested in its wake, a ghostly golden skull materializing above the fortress.

"What is all this racket?" Geist asked, though he didn't sound concerned at all. If anything, he sounded bored as he oversaw the battlefield. An automated torpedo flew out of the water and landed on the island, with Sarin's power armor held within. "Who are you guys?"

Ryan almost introduced himself as Saturn, before deciding it wasn't a powerful enough title. "*King* Saturn," he introduced himself, his armor modifying his voice. Time to abandon democracy for the divine right to rule!

"You can't call yourself Saturn," Casper the ghost replied, while telekinetically lifting broken remnants of the fortress' outer wall. "I think my organization has a copyright on Roman names."

“King Saturn!” Ryan activated his chest weapon. “With a capital ‘K’!”

His gravity projectile went harmlessly through Geist, not even fazing him. The specter replied with a rain of stones, each powerful enough to crush a tank. Since the courier was wary of overusing his time-stop lest his fighting style be recognized, he had to make circles around the attacks.

“A ghost?” Mr. Wave asked on the ground, holding an Augusti guard above the ground by the throat. “Are you one of Mr. Wave’s victims?”

“No,” Geist replied, as he telekinetically tossed more projectiles at Ryan. Other chunks he moved back in place to replace the outer walls, dealing with the assault with no more enthusiasm than a middle-manager filling his taxes.

“Give it time, you will be.”

“If I kill you will it count as murder, since you’re already dead?” Ryan mocked the specter before flying through him. He expected to inflict damage like with Augustus, but instead, he harmlessly phased through Geist’s ethereal skull. The specter responded by telekinetically slamming him to the beach below, and Ryan ended face-first buried into the sand.

“Oh, he fell down,” Geist noted, with a hint of amusement.
“Did it hurt?”

This confirmed it. Ryan’s secondary power only worked during the time-stop.

The courier quickly guessed why. His power worked by aligning Earth’s reality with the Purple World, itself a

crossroads between all of space and time; the crossroad through which he could draw energy from the Black World.

A mighty crimson shockwave hit the Bliss Factory while Ryan rose back up, causing the entire castle to shake and a barbican to collapse. Stones crushed Narcinia's flowers near the fortress, and a hole opened to the chambers inside.

"Aw man, Ceres won't like that," Geist commented with a bored tone, while Ryan's heat sensors informed him Shroud used the opportunity to slip inside the fortress. Though the specter hastily repaired the destroyed curtain walls, the invisible vigilante had already slipped in.

The courier looked at the blast's source, a woman in an orange synthetic suit lined with strong crimson metal plates. The helmet resembled a mix between a gas mask and a knight's helmet, while the gauntlets radiated crimson light.

Sarin had put on her own power armor.

Created in Mechron's labs with data harvested over the previous loop, the suit was specifically insulated to resist the wearer's own rusting power. It also spread her shockwave power through her entire body; when guards rained bullets at her chest, they flattened instead of inflicting lethal wounds.

"Not so easy to harm me anymore, eh, jackasses?!" Sarin gloated, before raising her hands and shattering a pyrokinetic Genome in power armor. "It's payback time!"

"Look, I really hate working and I ain't paid for this job," the ghost said with the laziest voice possible, expanding the colored dust supporting his ectoplasmic skull. A glittering storm the size of a tornado soon surrounded the castle, forming an impenetrable wall around it. "Could you just, you

know, go away? Or we could play *Board & Conquest*, if you're up for it."

"If you hate your job, why don't you let us in?" Sarin snarled while sending a shockwave at the colored storm. The blast failed to get past the defense, and Ryan realized that Geist drew the strange substance from the Yellow World. The twisted storm blew sand in all directions, expanding the beach's size.

"Father Torque promised to find a way to exorcise me back to Heaven if I kept the place clean, and I don't know any other priest. I'm kinda bound to that island, so I don't have an active social life." Geist observed each member of Ryan's team in turn. "Is one of you a priest, by any chance?"

"Mr. Wave has a Rabbi license." The Genome in question leaped into the air and transformed into a laser, aiming straight for Geist's ghoulish face. "And he will cut you like Solomon!"

Geist telekinetically stopped Mr. Wave in midair, the red Genome reverting back to his original form. "I'm Christian, so you're out of luck," the ghost said before throwing Mr. Wave into the sea. "Unlife is unfair."

"Don't tell me," Ryan said while returning to the skies.

Geist let out a loud sound that could pass for a shrug, and his skull changed shape. Two ginormous golden bone arms and a rib cage formed below it, supported by the colored tornado protecting the Bliss Factory. The specter had turned into a colossus, and his hands lunged for Ryan.

"Wait, you can shapeshift?" Ryan protested as he did his best to avoid the colossus' hands. "Why didn't you do it against Dynamis?"

“Dynamis?” Geist asked, confused. He attempted to crush the flying courier like a bug with all the motivation of an exhausted desk jockey. “I can do pretty much anything a ghost can, which is surprisingly a lot. I wish it included moving out though.”

That Ghostbusters ad was the Yellow version of Leo Hargraves. Ryan shuddered to think what the specter could do, if he wasn’t limited to his haunting ground and had any motivation whatsoever. If he had any killer instinct, Geist would have realized that he could telekinetically crush people rather than toss them away.

Sarin and Len attempted to support Ryan, the former with shockwaves, the other with torpedoes. Neither seemed any more effective against the colossus’ golden arms than water guns against a statue. Mr. Wave raced back to the island on foot, a crimson dash turning water to steam in his wake. He tried to cross the tornado barrier around the Bliss Factory, only to be thrown back as if he had hit a forcefield.

“Okay, you’ve done it,” Geist said, his tone markedly more annoyed. “Ever watched *The Mummy*?”

“1932 or 1999?” Ryan asked, before realizing what the specter had in mind. “Uh oh, 1999.”

The beach below the flying courier began to shift and twist, forming waves like a raging sea. Len and Sarin were buried beneath them, alongside most of the defeated guards, while Mr. Wave had to run away in laser form.

The beach then started to rise, a sand tsunami forming at Geist’s will. The higher Ryan flew, the taller the wave.

“You know, I never tried to see how high I could raise it up,” Casper the ghost said, amused by Ryan’s attempt to

escape. By now the sand wall had risen higher than the Bliss Factory and emptied the shore of sand. The courier hoped his allies' power armors could shield them from the inevitable impact.

"Alright, Imhotep, I'm sending you back to the nineties!" Ryan swirled around Geist's arms, bypassed them, and then went straight for the skull. "Teeth first!"

"I'm kinda dead already," Geist said, unimpressed. He didn't even bother to cover his skull with his giant hands, so confident was he in his immortality. "Even Cancel and Pluto couldn't put me six feet under for good."

"In that case, you force me to use my full power," Ryan said, raising his fists. "Now I have to use my hands!"

The time traveler froze time right as his gauntlet reached Geist's skull, but only for a split second. A trail of dark particles trailed from his fingers like a falling star's tail as the world turned purple, a black meteor striding across the skies. An unstoppable force hitting an intangible object.

And as Ryan's metal fingers connected with the specter, he felt resistance.

When time resumed, Geist's golden skull flickered, black cracks appearing where Ryan hit him. The tornado of glittering dust that supported it weakened for an instant, and the telekinetic force that raised the sand tsunami failed.

Tons of sand collapsed onto the ground around the fortress in a cataclysmic crash. A cloud of dust spread over the island and the sea, to the point that Ryan couldn't see anything within it. Some of the sand found its way to the fortress, tainting its strong walls yellow.

"You..." Geist's gaze of ghostly light turned to Ryan in shock, his giant arms falling down like a stringless puppet. "You hit me!"

"Vade Retro Satanas!" Ryan said. Below, the dust had died down and Sarin propelled herself out of her sand prison with a shockwave. Mr. Wave reappeared from the island and started moving around the beach at high speed, perhaps looking for the buried Len. "Or you will see the back of my hand again!"

"You harmed me..." A strange colored substance fell from the skull's eye sockets, a liquid version of the glistening dust Geist left in his wake. "You harmed me..."

He was... he was crying? Ryan felt bad for a moment, before realizing there was no sorrow in the ghost's voice.

These were tears of joy.

"Finally!" Geist shapeshifted once more, his arms and rib cage vanishing. The colored tornado that shielded Castle Aragonese vanished, leaving the Bliss Factory defenseless. What guards the team hadn't beaten, the ghost's sand tsunami had crushed. "Go ahead, send me back to heaven! Rip my ectoplasm open, my soul is ready!"

Normally, Ryan had no problem hitting his foes, but something in the specter's voice made him hesitate. He stopped time and lightly slapped the specter's skull, who *moaned* as time resumed. The courier shuddered.

"Why won't you kill me, you selfish tease?" Geist snarled, when his foe didn't dare strike him a third time.

"Stop, you're..." Ryan looked away. "You're making it awkward."

"Do you want to make me beg? Is that what you want?"

"If you take pleasure in it, it robs me of mine," Ryan said, grossed out. "I'm all for euthanasia, but this one feels dirty."

"I have waited fifteen years!" Geist's skull complained while moving in the courier's field of vision, forcing Ryan to acknowledge him. "Fifteen years as a ghost, unable to move on! Can you fathom how boring it is, to keep watch of this toxic dump? Nobody ever visits, except for work!"

The discussion made Ryan uneasy. "Look, I understand the downsides of immortality, more than you think," the courier said, trying to find the right words. "But do you really wish to die for good? It's not a decision to take lightly."

If he truly wished to perish, Ryan would put the ghost to rest in his Perfect Run. But when his Violet Elixir presented him with a similar conundrum, the courier chose life over death. He didn't want to go through with that option unless the poltergeist was absolutely sure of his decision.

"Are you serious right now?" Geist snorted. "Would you want to be a ghost bound to one place, completely intangible?"

"I'm sure there are ways around that limit," Ryan replied. "And you got phenomenal cosmic powers out of the deal. You could probably go toe-to-toe with Augustus if you wished."

Geist remained silent a few seconds, but the courier's words clearly didn't reach him. "What use is power if you can't enjoy life?" he asked. "I can't taste, I can't touch, I can't sleep or dream. I can't have kids and there aren't enough games to fill my time with. I can lift things with my mind, but they don't feel warm. The world is cold to me, tin can. It's unbearable, half a life."

On the ground, Ryan noticed Sarin and Mr. Wave lifting Len from under the sand. His former vice-president listened to the discussion with rapt attention, probably because it struck home.

"I've tasted Heaven and peace, only to be yanked back to Earth," Geist said. "I died years ago, but I can't rest. All I can do is kill time. Unless you can raise me from the dead?"

"That's beyond my power at the moment," Ryan admitted. "But maybe in the future?"

"Yeah, and maybe I'll still be rotting on this island while the sun swallows the Earth. I've waited for Father Torque to find a solution for years, and '*maybe*' stayed '*maybe*.' I'll take my chances. Fifteen years as a ghost were fifteen years too many."

Ryan still hesitated, so Sarin complained from the ground below. "Just finish him off already!" she said. "He ain't strong enough to carry on, let him go."

"Do you want me to fight back?" Geist asked in despair. "Is that what it will take? I don't want to go there, mate, but I will if needed."

"Alright, alright, I will do it!" Ryan said, highly disappointed. He closed his eyes, tightened his fist, and prepared to get on with it. "Don't make a sound."

"Hallelujah," Geist replied, waiting for the end peacefully. "Heaven at long last. Thanks."

Ryan froze time again, and punched the strange ghost with all his might. His blackened fist tore through Geist's intangible body, black particles consuming the ectoplasmic substance like a black hole with stardust.

When time resumed, the blow had split Geist's spectral body in half. The golden skull's substance seemed to lose cohesion, snow melting under the warm sun to turn into droplets. The ghost dissipated, his immortality canceled. Below, Sarin unleashed a sustained shockwave at the castle, destroying the barbican which Geist had repaired a few minutes earlier. Mr. Wave immediately entered through the hole at lightspeed.

As he floated in the skies alone in solemn silence, Ryan remembered his brief stay in the Black World. The time traveler had prayed for an end to his immortality, a way out of his eternal existence... and the Ultimate One had obliged. It had given the time traveler the ability to harm the invulnerable, to kill those who couldn't die.

Even Ryan himself.

In the end, a president's best friend was the oil he mined along the way.

Ryan would have loved to say that after Geist's demise, the Bliss Factory's troops made an epic last stand to protect their drug batches. The courier expected to waste at least an hour to conquer the factory.

It took fourteen minutes.

Shroud, who infiltrated the fortress during the battle, had reached a terminal and hacked into the factory's systems. With the security codes given by Livia, he opened all the doors and scrambled outside communications. Mr. Wave simply toured the factory at the speed of light, and finished piling up two hundred unconscious guards by the time the rest of the group entered.

"Ugh, and here I thought you would leave some for us," Sarin complained.

"You can find a list of Mr. Wave's enemies under the 'extinct species' category," the man boasted, his tuxedo unblemished. "Mr. Wave does not kill, he *exterminates*."

Before such wit, Ryan felt like a student in the presence of a master.

They advanced into the Castle Aragonese's corridors and made their way to the Bliss labs within. In stark contrast with the ancient walls outside, the Augusti had reinforced the inner structure with steel walls and blast doors. Sarin broke down the few that Shroud didn't open for them.

Eventually, the group made its way to the facility's core, and the center of Bliss production. Bacchus developed his beloved drug in underground warehouses below the fortress, and even Ryan found the size of the operation mind-blowing. A vast glass garden housed the plants producing the drug's raw material, strange flowers with light blue petals and yellow cores. A small army of workers in hazmat suits harvested the petals, with the plants regrowing their missing bits in minutes.

Afterward, the petals were drenched in oil, dried, and turned into a blue powder mixed with other chemicals. The resulting substance was routed through automated lines where a small army of robotic arms put Bliss in small canisters and hypodermics, filling entire crates each hour. From the quantity assembled, Ryan estimated the operation produced multiple tons of Bliss per day. Hell, the factory's incinerator worked full time to eliminate the process' waste.

Most of the installation was automated, and Len kept the few remaining workers at torpedo-point, hands behind their

heads. “*What’s happening?*” Ryan heard Vulcan’s voice come out of a computer, while Shroud typed on its keyboard. “*I received an alarm twenty minutes ago.*”

“It was nothing, ma’am,” Shroud replied, disguising his voice. “Psychos tried to raid the factory, but Geist and your security system sent them packing.”

“*Of course they did,*” Vulcan scoffed on the other end of the line, too proud of herself by half. “*I told you an inspection was a waste of time.*”

“It was, ma’am. It was.” Shroud ended the communication and looked up from his panel. “I’ve downloaded the production data and deleted the camera footage. Let’s torch this place.”

“Oh yeah.” Sarin eagerly blasted the glass gardens and the plants within. The vibrations snapped the alien flowers in half, and the Psycho soon moved on to the assembly lines.

“Mr. Wave is quite happy.” His idol patted Ryan in the back as they observed the destruction. “He was worried you would grow up the wrong way, and that he would have to put you down like an old yeller. But you became a man of refined taste and great skill.”

“Thanks to your example.” After saving him so many times, Mr. Wave had left a powerful impression on Ryan.

“What were you up to in all these years?” Mr. Wave asked. “Mr. Wave tried to look for you a few times, but you never seemed to spend long in one place.”

“I conquered Monaco, won a town at a poker competition, and got an alien to autograph my Necronomicon.”

"Nice. In his case, Mr. Wave traveled to Tibet and explored the great mysteries of the cosmos. Did Mr. Wave create the world when he was born, or was the world made for Mr. Wave? Is it possible that the only gravity is the one produced by Mr. Wave's charisma?"

"How can you stand this guy?" Sarin asked Shroud over the sound of her shockwaves.

"Only in small doses," the glass manipulator replied.

"Mr. Wave understands. Prolonged exposure to Mr. Wave can cause a pathological desire to worship him, or near-death experiences. There is no middle ground."

"Instead of standing by, there's something you could help with," Shroud said, after destroying computer parts with his power. "Bacchus has a secret testing area and... you will understand when you see it."

Ryan did, to his horror.

Shroud led him and Mr. Wave deeper inside the facility, into a secret room behind a cold metal corridor. It was dimly lit, with most of the area kept in complete darkness. Ryan walked inside first, his steps echoing on the iron floor. He saw iron bars flickering in the dim light, and his heat sensors sending more than three dozen signatures.

Though his armor's helmet filtered the air, the stench of human filth overwhelmed it.

The livestock pens were so small, that Ryan was certain they had been meant for pigs. They were piled up on each other like a tetris game, but there was nothing amusing about the sight. As his allies remained eerily silent, Ryan

activated his armor's lamps and looked through the nearest iron bars.

Humans.

Three humans shared a cage so small, they couldn't rise up on their feet. They must have crawled inside. The veins and lips of the captives had turned blue from Bliss overdoses, their skin so white and their flesh so thin that the courier could see the bones beneath. Two men and a woman. The cages hadn't been cleaned up in a while, excrement piling up in a corner.

Though he had looped for centuries, Ryan hadn't grown numb to such sights. Examining the captives filled him with revulsion, doubly so as he looked at the other cages, counting the people imprisoned within.

Twenty-three, he thought, stopping at a man whose eyes a swarm of flies had devoured. *One dead.*

"Does Narcinia know?" Ryan asked. "Does Vulcan know?"

"No, I don't think so," Shroud said. "Only Bacchus could access that part of the lab."

The mad priest used these people to test his experimental Bliss strains, destroying people's minds in an insane attempt to contact the Blue Ultimate One. These people were the most recent batch of 'volunteers,' addicts taken off the streets, or perhaps enemies of Augustus sacrificed to his horrendous drug wizard.

How many people had died within these walls, their corpses dumped in the incinerator?

“That...” Mr. Wave seemed at a loss of words, waving his hand at the prisoners. Their eyes didn’t follow his movements, their gaze empty. “I... Mr. Wave thinks someone scrambled their brain.”

Ryan had his helmet take pictures of the scene, and then ripped open the nearest pen. His armored hands bent the iron cages open. Shroud immediately grabbed the captive within, a woman no older than twenty. Blue mold grew over her skin, and blood had dried beneath her eyes.

Ryan walked out of the area while carrying two people on his shoulders, watching at the ruins of the production lines. Flames had started to spread, and threatened to engulf the underground facilities. Sarin had demolished them all and oversaw her work with a pleased stance, while Len evacuated the workers.

“Bianca?” the courier asked.

“What?” Sarin snapped back.

“Once we’re done evacuating, collapse the whole place,” Ryan said, his tone dangerous. “Bury it.”

Ryan would destroy the factory himself in his Perfect Run.

With Bacchus inside.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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Uehara evaOne Siphor Malphas Nikhil Majumdar Leon
Schultz Jeremy Minton Leaored Cipkenop Christopher
Waits Senki rmb123 Ervin Ughy Shaoraka sri kalyan
mulukutla glare31337 Winson Chan Slipperyfish
Overlord_Grimm agoniste Olivier Edery Brycen
Legler Jonathan Spaulding Erriballon Sævar
Valdimarsson Rolf Bork H. Scott The False Crab
Sanjay Taylor Tilbury Harrison Bob le Poisson Rouge

David Cullen Abdiaziz Ali Ashley Cameron Ivan
Elyshev samuel baldauf Tate Browder
BananaInMyPants NotAWeeb Joel Sasmad Bury nice
Basiun Ryan Trueman Dominic Moreau Chris Roden
Thomas Tessier M Clason Dark Chaos Alex Lindsay
Sadinar The Knight Commissar Francis Chartier
Daniel Everest Ausner Gentil bisque LinenZero Tomas
Puskas Kyle Reese Zach Svarog Ariel reyz Peter
Christensen-Calvin Murphy Jeff Gault James Teeple
Dom Ceremonia Max Collins Виктор Фон
Стыценкофф David Hansson Thaco4 Mikkel Kolding
Christensen Matthew Sands K BlackFire13th Jamie
McKay Kevin Ramos Jeremy Humphrey Israel Charles
handgis cale lechmere closeded GenericKane charter
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Karthic 白酒鬼 Calvin Augustus PbookR
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John Carroll Reviv3pls Manu quentin Corgi
McStumperson RepossessedSoul Armo Daniel Mackie
Chris M James Walsh Zack Tae Jim of Trades Seadrake
Saul Kurzman Marc Claude Louis Durand Rhodri
Thornber Drekin Dax Sam

105: Miracle Cure

Bacchus returned to his factory to find it in ruins.

The face he made upon seeing his base burning would forever remain one of Ryan's most cherished memories. Such a subtle mix of disbelief, anger, horror... the priest had clenched his jaw so tightly that the courier worried he might break his teeth.

Augustus' reaction had been *far* less amusing though.

After landing on the island to see things for himself and hearing reports of the Carnival's involvement, the mob boss had decimated a tenth of the surviving guards. Literally. He picked one out of ten at random, and had their peers beat them to death.

With their bare hands.

Though Ryan watched the whole show from the safety of Len's underwater base, a spy bathysphere providing a live feed, the scene had sent chills down his spine.

The courier feared for Vulcan's life in particular. She had been in charge of maintaining the defensive perimeter which the strike team easily dealt with, and Mob Zeus was clearly out for blood. The Genius was too precious to kill, but Augustus didn't strike Ryan as the most rational person in the room.

"I kinda feel bad for these mooks," Ryan said, as the video feed cut.

"They deserved it," Len replied at his side, typing on her workshop's computer. Servers thrummed next to steampunk-ish metal pipes, a song of steam and heat. "They were protecting a slaughterhouse, Riri."

"I agree, but getting beaten to death by your own teammates is a ghastly way to die." More to the point, it gave a taste of what Augustus would do to Ryan's friends if he ever learned of their involvement. "Can you evacuate the base in short order if needed? I have the feeling Lightning Butt might pay it a visit in the near future."

"I can move the habitats if I am forewarned," his best friend replied. "They were, uh, designed to be self-sufficient. Each of them. If I disassemble them, they can move around independently."

"Tiny islands of communism in a capitalistic sea... did you call it the Cuba Protocol?"

Len looked up from her computer, her beautiful eyes reeking of guilt.

"You did," Ryan said, horrified.

"The Cuba Initiative," she said, weakly.

Ryan studied his poor deluded accomplice, only for his eyes to wander to her clothes. While the time-traveler kept the Saturn armor on, Len had made herself comfortable in her lair; yet instead of her usual jumpsuit, she now wore a pair of blue overalls and a white shirt. The ensemble reminded the courier of these USSR worker ads.

“Riri?”

“Are these new clothes?” Ryan asked, never remembering them from the half a dozen or so loops they spent together.

“Yes.” She blushed a little, intimidated. “Alchemeo’s treatment is good for my mood, and I... I thought I should try something else. Something brighter.”

“As long as you don’t wear red,” Ryan mused.

Len looked away. “I... I don’t want to do so. I’ve seen enough red for a lifetime.”

Ryan suddenly wondered if her obsession with communist iconography hadn’t been a subconscious attempt to keep her father’s memory alive. Though that sounded a bit too far-fetched and Freudian for him. “Have you pondered Bloodstream’s situation?” he asked. He knew what needed to be done, but she had to accept it.

“I did,” Len replied with a nod, her gaze harshening. “If... if the treatment we’re developing to cure Psychos doesn’t work on him...”

She took a long, heavy breath.

“If it doesn’t work,” Len said, with an air of finality. “I will do it myself.”

She would euthanize her father.

“Are you sure?” Ryan asked, mindful of her wellbeing. This would be a horrifying ordeal for anyone. “I can do it for you.”

"No, Riri. You already did a lot of things on my behalf. It's... it's my duty. My choice. He's... my father's memory. He deserves that much."

"You will carry this pain all your life."

"I know," Len replied, her gaze determined. "I know. But I will still do it. I have to."

It took a while, but she had finally decided to break out of her father's shadow. To bury his ghost, if the man inside was gone for good.

Ryan put a hand on her shoulder in sympathy, making her smile sadly. "Thanks, Riri," she said, putting her own hand over his own. He could have sworn he could sense the heat through the metal gauntlet. "I... I know I'm difficult. A wreck. Most wouldn't have had your patience. Wouldn't have stayed so long to help."

"We're both sinking ships," Ryan said. "Gotta stick together, if we want to stay afloat."

"We *were* sinking ships," she replied, removing her hand. "We *were*."

The workshop's computer bleeped, as Len received a call from the Mechron bunker. The picture of Stitch appeared on the screen, with Mr. Wave petting Eugène-Henry in the background. "Greetings, sir," the plague doctor said. "It has reached my ears that the raid was a success."

"Mr. Wave likes this cozy place," Mr. Wave said in the background, Eugène-Henry meowing his hands. "But Mr. Wave feels his portrait is missing somewhere."

"I keep a poster in my room," Ryan said. "I also have the Mr. Wave doll, the Mr. Wave ring, and the Mr. Wave hat."

"The Mr. Wave-themed candy trucks too?"

"Now, I like you, but not as much as my car," Ryan replied. That old machine had been at his side far longer than his Mr. Wave merchandise collection.

"Mr. Wave respects a man who loves his car," the superhero said. "Mr. Wave apologizes for not visiting your underwater base. Mr. Wave doesn't like being wet."

"My teammate does not do well in underwater situations," Stitch mused. "As our fight with the Kraken gang seven years ago can attest."

"Mr. Wave doesn't sink," the Red Genome protested. "He *waits*. Like alligators."

"In any case, the Bliss victims you sent me are getting medical attention as we speak," Stitch said. "Alchemeo is enthusiastic about repairing the brain damage they suffered, and early test results of our Bliss vaccine are promising. The Bloodstream cure also proved effective."

Len typed on her keyboard, and video footage of Mosquito's and Mongrel's underwater habitats appeared on the screen. Knockoffs had turned each of them into Psychos in combination with a true Elixir, and both had received a dose of the vaccine.

Ryan almost didn't recognize either of them.

Mongrel's tumors had vanished, his disfigured face now smooth and unblemished. His bloodshot eyes had reverted to their natural brown color, and a black tuft of hair had

started growing back on his head. He remained scrawny as ever, but his posture was straight, his clothes clean.

As for Mosquito, the courier wouldn't have recognized him without the video feed indicating his cell number; for the insect had turned into a man. A small, pudgy man in his early forties, with brown skin and a beardless face. He looked vaguely Spanish, with the eyes of a veteran drinker.

It seemed that without a Psycho mutation, Mosquito could revert back and forth between his insectoid and human form.

Both had been granted a separate underwater habitat as a lair. Mongrel cut onions on his small kitchen counter, a bright smile on his face. He looked happy, like a cancer patient having made a miracle recovery. In contrast, Mosquito was reading a book and clearly bored out of his mind. Ryan couldn't blame him, since Len's library was limited to Karl Marx and Jules Verne.

They looked so... normal.

And most importantly, they had done it.

They had cured two Psychos.

"Did Sarin see this?" Ryan asked. Miss Gasshole was growing impatient about getting a treatment, especially since Alchemo hadn't found a way to transfer her memories back. "We're getting closer to a perfect cure."

The plague doctor was suddenly far less enthusiastic. "Curing Psychos who gained their powers from Knockoffs is currently possible, since our vaccine destroys the Bloodstream particles in their circulatory system and reverses the genetic damage. As illustrated by Mosquito's

cases, the true Elixir takes over and turns them back into the Genomes they used to be. The problem is when a Psycho uses two true Elixirs.”

Len changed the video feed to that of Frank the Mad—or Vladimir the Russian, depending on who you asked. The metal giant spent his time glancing at the abyss beyond his porthole, dazed.

“We have no way of destroying an extra Elixir, if that is even possible,” Stitch explained. “I heard of a White Genome among the Augusti who could help, though.”

“Cancel only suppresses an Elixir’s connection to their colored dimension,” Ryan said. “She doesn’t destroy the Elixir itself, nor the mutations it causes.”

“What is the problem with the cure?” Len asked, confused.

“Unlike Knockoffs, Elixirs don’t use DNA to exchange information,” Stitch explained. “They can understand and modify it, like a painter and a canvas, but they work on a different level. If one of my plagues modifies a target’s DNA, even using the Neanderthal gene ratio you believe is the key to managing two powers at once, the Elixirs reassert their old patterns.”

“Unless we can inform the Elixirs of their ‘mistake’ in the bonding process, they will see any DNA modification of their host as an outside influence to be rejected,” Ryan guessed.

Stitch nodded. “My thoughts exactly. The problem is even greater with Psychos with abnormal, non-DNA-based biologies, such as your friend Sarin, Frank, or Gemini. Their bodies are made of gas, metal, or shadows, not flesh. My own power is clueless about how to deal with them.”

And this made memory transfer difficult. Their consciousness wasn't hosted in a brain, to the point Alchemo struggled to transfer Sarin's memories.

"Maybe the Elixirs use Flux to exchange information?" Ryan suggested. This was his best guess, from what he had learned so far.

"Perhaps," Stitch conceded. "But again, this is beyond my expertise, let alone my peers Alchemo and Dr. Tyrano. Mechron's database has a wealth of information on the matter, but nowhere near enough. It took its AIs years to create imperfect Knockoffs. They might need a decade to fully reverse-engineer the original potions."

"We need more information on the bonding process," Ryan said. "I know a place where we could learn more about Elixirs."

"If this is true, I would like to accompany you," the plague doctor said with eagerness. "I was skeptical at first about this project, but now I believe we are close to a great discovery. If we can negate the dangerous side-effects of Elixirs, then we could help society recover."

The courier saw no reason to deny him. "Sure, but you should trade your gloves for mittens."

"Mr. Wave will provide the warmth, he's a one-man global warming," Mr. Wave said in the background, as Len stopped the communication.

Ryan crossed his arms, considered his options, and then looked at his best friend. "Any way you can help with this, Shortie?"

"It's not my specialty," Len replied in the negative. "I pushed my power's limits with the transfer machine, but Elixir communications... that's beyond me, Riri."

"Then let's prepare for our winter vacations," Ryan said.
"Can you outfit the submarine for the trip?"

"Yes, of course," she said with a nod. She looked rather eager to leave New Rome. "Do we have time to stop at the Canary Islands on the way? The children will love it."

"Sure," Ryan replied with a proud smile. A few loops ago, Len had considered abandoning the surface altogether. She would have asked to go to Antarctica without delay, refusing to take a moment to breathe and simply enjoy the wonders on the way.

It had taken a lot of effort, but she was starting to live again.

When twilight came, Ryan picked up Livia at Mount Augustus by car, and moved to Mars and Venus' home.

Unlike their daughter's apartment, the Augusti power couple lived in an English-styled manor close to Mount Augustus. The mansion was three stories tall, and made of grey stone and stained-glass windows rather than marble. Ryan found it a nice change from Augustus' obsession with antiquity and Roman aestheticism.

The place remained luxurious though, with a fountain in the garden and doormen in fancy clothes awaiting guests. Ryan noticed a few vehicles near the entrance, including Jamie's and Cancel's.

With the Bliss Factory's destruction, the Augusti had decided to increase security around Narcinia, and Lightning Butt's

daughter too. When Ryan came to pick his girlfriend, Mortimer and Sparrow had escorted them all the way to their destination on motorcycles. For a moment, the time traveler felt like a president again, with bodyguards ready to die for his safety. Or at least his First Lady's.

They didn't suspect him of treachery though. Ryan had sent Incognito, a Meta-Gang member, to act as his decoy. By using his powers to pose as the courier, the Psycho had provided him with a foolproof alibi. As far as the Augusti were concerned, Ryan had gambled colossal sums of money at their casinos while the Bliss Factory burnt. And all it cost was a shot of Knockoff Elixirs to satisfy Incognito's addiction.

Also, Ryan had infected him with nanites that would explode in his blood if he misbehaved. It was Mechron's version of an ankle tag, and quite effective.

The courier had traded his Saturn armor for a purple shirt and black pants, simple yet elegant. Meanwhile, Livia had chosen to wear a black turtleneck and pants, as if she went to a funeral rather than a dinner. Which in this case wasn't that far from the truth.

Ryan's girlfriend hadn't said a word during the trip.

"Are you sulking?" the courier asked, as he parked his car near the fountain. Sparrow and Mortimer did the same with their motorcycles. The former stayed near the Plymouth Fury, and the latter exchanged words with the doormen to check up on the security perimeter.

Livia brought a mobile phone out of her pocket and wordlessly showed Ryan the screen.

It was a picture her boyfriend sent her after destroying the Bliss Factory. The courier posed in front of the fortress'

smoking rubble, thumb raised, while Mr. Wave peeked from the right. Ryan had drawn words in the sand, as a message to Lightning Butt.

“Hey Auggy, still looking for that lightning rod!”

“That was terrible,” Livia said, as she switched out her phone. “If we were married, it would be grounds for divorce.”

“The joke struck you as bad?”

“Yes, it d—” She paused, before rolling her eyes. “Struck, truly?”

“I was just as shocked when the idea crossed my mind.” This time it made her giggle. “I guess I didn’t spend enough time *brainstorming*.”

“When it rains, it pours,” Livia lamented, a smile on her face.

“Aw come on, I can see you like my puns.”

“They are bad, Ryan,” she said, wounding his sensitive heart, “but so bad they end up being funny anyway.”

Ryan looked at the building. “So what’s the plan to get Narcinia out of her parents’ claws? They won’t let her out of sight after the loss of their drug lab.”

“I have an idea in mind, but I need a little more time to refine it,” Livia said. “Whenever your actions have a large impact, it takes me a while to see the ripples you make.”

Her boyfriend’s hands tightened on the driving wheel.
“Bacchus kept test subjects in the factory’s basement,” he

informed her. "One of them died."

"I saw the possibility," she said, looking away. "I hoped I was wrong."

"Will the victim be alive a few days ago?" Ryan asked, his girlfriend nodding hesitantly. "Then I will strike the factory as soon as the Meta-Gang is dealt with in the next loop."

"Narcinia and Bacchus will be inside," she warned. "It will be far harder."

"I will manage." Now that he could destroy Geist and had access to the Bliss Factory's systems, he could easily shatter the defenses in his next run. "I could take Narcinia to the Carnival while I'm at it."

"My father will react badly."

"I won't give him the time."

Livia joined her hands, and locked eyes with her boyfriend. "You intend to fight him," she said, her voice breaking.

"Yes."

Ryan hadn't dared to breach the subject openly, but... he couldn't sugarcoat the truth. Even though it risked damaging their relationship, Shroud had a point. The courier liked Livia, but not to the point of letting her father get away with his crimes. He had to be stopped for the good of everyone else.

"Livia, your father knew about Bacchus' prisoners," Ryan said. "We saw that in the factory's terminal. He did worse than give his consent, he sent his pet priest more victims to refine his product. He murdered Narcinia's parents and

thousands more. Hell, he chose to settle an old score rather than help when Bloodstream threatened to turn everyone into tomato juice. That shows how little he cares about life. Your dad won't stop killing, unless he's forced to."

"I know!" Her voice broke, the seer closing her eyes and gathering her breath. "I know that, Ryan. I know what he is. But he has little time already. I have seen it. Can't... can't you just wait? If we delay enough—"

"When he senses his death approaching, Lightning Butt will go on a rampage and slaughter countless more." Ryan remained silent for a few seconds, letting his girlfriend recover. "Livia, you can't talk him out of his madness."

"We can," she said. "With you at my side, I can find it."

"Livia, I will help as much as I can," Ryan promised, "but I don't think words will work with your dad. Not even yours. If the apocalypse couldn't make him pause, nothing will."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" she asked, holding back tears. "Give you my permission to kill my own father? Is that what you want?"

"I don't have to kill your father to neutralize him."

"Then how? Dynamis and the Carnival tried everything. Nothing worked. Nothing they have will work. I've seen where it leads." Her fingers fidgeted on her lap. "You killed Geist. Somehow."

"I did."

"You have something that could kill my father. Or you think it could."

"Yes," Ryan admitted.

Livia bit her lower lip, the same way Len did. "Why are you telling me this, Ryan?"

"Because I trust you."

There, he said it.

"I trust you." Ryan took her hands into his own, making her blush slightly. "I want you at my side. I want to stay with you even after we clean this city up. I want our relationship to work. I don't want something built on lies. I've seen where it led with Safelite and his golden retriever."

"That's a mean way to call my best friend," Livia replied, her fingers tightening around his own. "I want us to work too, Ryan... but I don't want my boyfriend and my father to kill each other. I don't want to see that. I almost did when he caught you, and... I don't think I can shoulder it. Even if you reverse time afterward.

"I... I think I can imprison your dad," the courier said.
"Where no one will break him out."

"You will send him to Monaco, or a pocket dimension?" Livia shook her head. "He will break out. He has Geniuses on his payrolls, loyal lieutenants, contingencies."

"He won't have that for long."

"You can't destroy an entire organization by yourself."

"I can and I did," Ryan replied. "And I'm not alone this time."

"Ryan, I know there is a solution. A peaceful solution." Livia's hands broke away from his own. "I'm... I'm okay with

imprisonment, or forced retirement. But not death. I'm sick of all these murders and violence. It has to cease somewhere."

"You're okay with killing Bacchus," Ryan pointed out, "but not the one giving him his orders?"

"Bacchus is not family," Livia replied, fidgeting in her seat. "That's selfish, I know. I won't deny it. I want to save people, Ryan, but I don't want to see my family perish either. I don't want to make that choice. If you had to kill a loved one to save the world, would you do it?"

"I would find a third option."

"My point exactly. You said you could do anything if given time, and... and I hope we can find a third option too."

Ryan said nothing for a while, as Livia gathered her thoughts. She knew Augustus had to be stopped, and on some level, she understood there wasn't a way to do so peacefully. He could see it on her face.

In the end, she opened her mouth again, her voice a whisper, "Promise me, Ryan."

"Promise you what?"

"That you won't kill my father," Livia said, her face grave and heavy. "Don't kill him, please. Or we are done. Drag him off his throne, destroy his kingdom of sin, imprison him underwater until he expires, I... I can live with that. But don't kill him. Please."

For a tense half a minute, they locked eyes with each other.

If Ryan refused, he would make an enemy of Livia. She cared for her family, as much as he loved his own friends. Even if he survived the ensuing retribution, whatever future they could build together would die with Lightning Butt. They would remain bitter enemies.

Augustus deserved death for his crimes. He might not have been as bad as Big Fat Adam, but his crimes were almost as horrendous. He had murdered his way across the world for years, and he remained unrepentant.

And yet... Ryan had lived long enough to know there were punishments far more terrible than death. It was all a question of imagination.

"I won't kill your father," Ryan swore, to Livia's relief, "but I will defeat him. *Decisively*. I will break him so thoroughly that he will never threaten anyone else again."

The Black Ultimate One had granted him the power to harm Augustus, and the time-traveler would make use of it.

His girlfriend couldn't help but respond with nervous laughter. "Your last encounter wasn't glorious."

"That's the good thing about me, princess. I can lose a thousand times, but only have to win once." Ryan looked back at the manor. "I won't kill him, for you. But I will rough him up, and he won't escape karma. He has too much blood on his hands, and his victims deserve justice. His punishment won't be lethal, but it won't be merciful either. Are you alright with that?"

"It's a compromise," she replied, shaking her head. "None of us get all that we want."

Perhaps. But it was better than getting nothing.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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106: Mice Trap

Mars and Venus' home embodied everything wrong about their organization: rot festering beneath a nice veneer.

Oh, at first glance their manor looked like the height of casual opulence. Venus had tastefully decorated her home with luxuries such as English furniture, hardwood cabinets from Spain, Turkish carpets and Tunisian tapestries. The manor also housed billiard tables, private poker rooms, and even a Roman-themed art gallery. Ryan guessed they couldn't help but pucker up to Lightning Butt's obsessions.

But everything came from the pre-war era. The chairs were old, the rugs were worn flat, the stone foyers wrinkled. Even the main room's TV was outdated. And while the staff had numerous employees, they were nowhere near enough to take good care of the estate. Most rooms felt empty and lifeless.

This place reeked of past obsessions and lost glory.

"Ugh, I can smell the dust," Ryan said as he visited an empty ballroom, Livia holding his arm. "Wait, is that asbestos?"

"All the non-Genomes in the staff will get illnesses," Livia confirmed with a sigh. "I warned Fortuna's parents, but they wouldn't listen."

Huh, not only did the Verans deal in drugs and prostitutes, but they also knowingly gave their staff lung disease. They were truly irredeemable. Most worryingly, Ryan noticed Cancel and Mortimer shadowing him and Livia. While it was ostensibly to ‘protect’ the couple, when the courier tested his time-stop, it didn’t activate.

This immediately put him on high alert. Something was up.

“Can I shout, ‘it’s a trap?’” Ryan candidly asked his girlfriend, whispering in her ear.

“Maybe later,” she replied in the same hushed tone, resting her head against his shoulders while he put his arm around her shoulders. To outsiders, they looked like they were about to kiss. “Do you have weapons on yourself?”

“Yes, but not my best ones.” Though he came dressed casually, he always kept hidden knives beneath his clothes. “I can always drop my pants; that should blind them.”

Livia gave him a dirty look. “It didn’t blind me when I looked closely.”

“Because I put the safety on.”

“Keep your pants up, and your other weapons closer,” she replied, careful that Cancel and Mortimer couldn’t hear them. Thankfully, while they remained at close distance, the two hitmen gave the couple enough space for privacy. “And have Len be ready to evacuate you. You might need to go to Antarctica quicker than expected.”

“So this *is* a trap?”

“Yes,” Livia admitted with a dark look. “But not for us.”

"You could have warned me beforehand." Then again, Ryan did interfere with her power. She probably had a hard time adjusting to his actions. "I like surprises, but not when our favorite power-canceler is nearby."

The threat of dying permanently or worse still frightened the courier.

"I wasn't sure until we entered the building," Livia admitted, as they left the ballroom for a mirrored hallway. It reminded Ryan of the ruins of Versailles, which he had visited in a previous loop. There wasn't a Genome assassin hidden in his reflection this time around though, much to his disappointment. "I foresaw some worrying possibilities, and Greta's presence only confirms my worries."

"Doesn't our cheery sociopath prevent you from seeing anything in her vicinity?" Ryan asked, taking his cellphone and sending a text message to Len, the Panda, Shroud, and everyone else who would listen.

"She does, which is why Father sent her," Livia replied darkly as her boyfriend put his phone back in his pocket, "but I saw all the ways this dinner could end before coming here. Except those where you interfere, of course."

"Do some end with explosions?" Ryan asked hopefully, "because I can help with those."

"I know you can," Livia replied mirthfully, as they reached the dining room's entrance. "But please don't burn the carpets. I like some of those."

A single guard stood watch over the doors, a man in an all-black bodysuit covering his entire body. Ryan wondered how he could see without holes in his mask. The guard flinched

upon seeing the couple, while the time-traveler gave him a sadistic smile worthy of Jack Nicholson.

"Ryan, this is Night Terror of the Killer Seven," Livia introduced them to each other. "Night Terror, this is Ryan Romano, my boyfriend."

"We met," the man said, spitting each word. "With all due respect, Lady Livia, your companion is a home-breaking asshole."

"Wait, this is the guy who punched you in the face for no reason?" Mortimer asked from behind the group, suddenly interested. "Oh, that's awkward."

"For no reason at all!" Night Terror complained while raising an accusing finger at Ryan's face. "I don't even know him!"

"I'm sure my companion had his reasons," Livia said, before glancing at her boyfriend. "Right, Ryan?"

The courier didn't answer. Instead, he kept staring at Night Terror, the way a mongoose glared at a snake. He didn't say a word. He just *waited*.

"Maybe he punches everyone?" Mortimer asked, trying to fill the silence while Livia raised an eyebrow.

"He didn't punch me," Cancel said. "I would have killed him if he had tried, sure, but he didn't." She sounded a little disappointed about that.

"Did you use your powers on my boyfriend?" Livia asked Night Terror with a falsely innocent smile.

The Darkling impersonator crossed his arms. He was trying to look strong, but Ryan could tell that the silent glare was

slowly startling to unsettle him. “Maybe? I don’t keep track.”

“That’s why poor ol’ Mortimer kills his victims,” the wall-phasing hitman said. “When they come back to haunt him, at least he knows why.”

Ryan said nothing, causing Night Terror to start losing his nerve. “Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?”

The courier said nothing. Instead, he kept staring at the man’s mask, until Night Terrorized started looking away. But he couldn’t escape Ryan’s stare inside a mirror gallery.

“Stop doing that,” the hitman asked, unsettled. “You think you can make me lose my nerve? You think you can get under my skin? I’m fear itself!”

The silence stretched on, more and more uncomfortably.

Cancel and Mortimer probably exchanged glances behind Ryan, and Livia clearly struggled not to laugh, but he only had eyes for the gaping darkness in front of him.

“Lady Livia, can you ask this man to stop, please?” Night Terrorized tried to look down, but Augustus’ daughter said nothing. “Stop it.”

Ryan gently put a hand below his prey’s chin, and forced him to look up.

There was no escape.

Eventually, Night Terror crumbled. “Okay, okay, I get it,” he said, walking away from the doors. “Vamp will take my shift.”

“Sparrow won’t like it,” Cancel said, while Mortimer chuckled like a hyena.

“Whatever,” Night Terrorized complained, before realizing that Ryan’s gaze followed him. His pace accelerated greatly afterward, until he exited the gallery.

When he was gone, Livia couldn’t hold her laughter anymore. “You’re horrible, Ryan.”

Ryan looked silently at his girlfriend... but she was better at this game than he was, and he submitted.

The dining room turned out to be a large banquet hall on the first floor, with a sprawling table capable of housing two dozen persons. An unused fireplace faced three windows giving an impeccable view of the gardens outside, with Cancel positioning herself to look through the central one while Mortimer protected the entrance. Adorable, they expected an attack from the outside, but not from within.

Mars had taken over the table’s head, one daughter sitting on each side. Jamie and Ki-jung had taken the seats closest to Narcinia, while Mathias ‘Shroud’ Martel stayed at his girlfriend’s side, having traded his transparent costume for tasteful blue jeans and a shirt. Considering how close he sat to his lucky charm, Ryan guessed they had patched up somehow.

“Livy!” Fortuna grinned ear to ear upon seeing her best friend, while Mathias gave Ryan a sharp nod. He looked secretly relieved to see a friendly face, especially when he noticed Cancel and Mortimer. “Come, sit with us!”

“Sorry to have kept you waiting,” Livia said, the very picture of courtesy. “Mercury, Chitter, I am so glad you could come.”

“I can’t get used to that name,” Jamie replied. Ryan hadn’t seen this caring bear of a man much lately, but he had

made some effort to dress well for this dinner, wearing a suit and a tie. His Korean girlfriend Ki-jung fidgeted in her seat, clearly uncomfortable with either the situation or her sleeveless black dress. She had given up her glasses for contact lenses, but would rather stare at the table than at the other guests. The pressure weighed on her. “I don’t think I ever will.”

“It will come with time,” Mars reassured him. The older man shared his junior’s paternal aura, and Ryan had the feeling the two men were the same, a generation apart. But when the courier examined them both, he noticed a predatory glint in Mars’ gaze that wasn’t present in Jamie’s. “Though it’s a shame you took the job on the day we lost our Bliss production center. Darn ill omen.”

The drug’s mention made Ki-jung raise her head, like a dreamer waking up from a long nap. “Oh?” her boyfriend said, holding her hand to comfort her. “Oh, yes, that’s true.”

Jamie *tried* not to look pleased, but he was a terrible liar and Ryan could see his true feelings in his eyes. Ischia Island’s destruction clearly came as an enormous relief to him.

“I can’t believe they killed Geist,” Narcinia complained, arms crossed. “I know he wanted to die, but...”

“Wasn’t he already dead?” Ki-jung finally found the courage to speak up. “How can you slay a ghost?”

“One attempt at once,” Ryan said from experience. “Hopefully, eventually it will stick.”

Narcinia’s mood worsened further. “It won’t feel the same without him, even if we rebuild the place. He was funny and kind, and always there.”

"The loss of Ischia island weighs heavily on all of our minds," Livia said as she sat between Fortuna and Ryan himself. The courier's chair let out a worrying sound, as if it threatened to crumble beneath him. "But this should be a joyful reunion, not an occasion to open old wounds."

"I couldn't agree more!" Fortuna said with a bright smile. "We should savor the champagne! Jamie, Ki-jung, tell them the news!"

The two exchanged a sheepish glance. "We're getting married soon," Jamie announced.

"Jamie proposed," Ki-jung said, blushing.

"Congratulations!" Ryan said with genuine joy, though he already learned the news in a previous loop. "When is the baby?"

This made Jamie laugh. "We'll wait a few years."

"At this rate, we will only have married couples around this table," Mars said while glancing at Mathias. "When will *you* propose?"

It sounded innocent, but the man's eyes didn't smile when his mouth did. Unlike Jamie's, his easy-going friendliness was all a sham. A mask that hid something darker and calculating.

"Dad!" Fortuna protested. "That's not something you ask at dinner!"

"It won't be for tomorrow," Mathias replied dryly.

"My daughter told me you were a videogame designer?" Mars continued to fish for information. "Is that working out

well for you?"

"I'm still looking for sponsors," Mathias replied.

"Have you tried GoatVPN?" Ryan asked mirthfully.

His co-conspirator raised an eyebrow, skeptical. "GoatVPN?"

"In this information age, it is key to protect your data from Dynamis and other heartless Dynanet providers," Ryan said with a telemarketer's voice. Which was to say, like someone who sold his soul for money. "With more than ten *billion* users, GoatVPN creates a wall of goats to shield your emails from unwanted ads, except their own."

"I remember an ad like this one on the Dynanet," Ki-jung said with amusement. "Alongside one for *Wyvern League Legend*, I believe?"

"I'm sure their marketing budget is bigger than most third-world countries," Ryan said. "Which, to be fair, isn't saying much nowadays."

"We could help with that sponsor issue," Mars told his future-in-law.

Thankfully, the Carnival infiltrator's soul wasn't for sale. "I would prefer to stand on my own feet, sir."

"Yes, Dad, my Mathias has something better than money," Fortuna said. "He has me!"

"You should have dumped him," Narcinia said, pouting. Clearly, she didn't like Mathias any more than in the previous loops; she probably sensed he wasn't as transparent as he let it look.

"I almost did, but then I asked Livy to tell me my future," her sister admitted with an uneasy smile, while Mathias' eyes wandered from Narcinia to her adoptive father. "Then I decided to give him another chance. I knew things would turn out alright, of course, since they always do, but it was nice to have an outside confirmation."

"Come to think of it, you could make a killing from palm-reading," Ryan told his girlfriend.

"I work better with crystal balls," Livia replied with a giggle, "or when I open sheep entrails to interpret the content."

Narcinia gasped. "You're kidding right?"

"Of course," Livia reassured the young teen. "It was a joke."

"But just in case, keep your sheep safely penned in at night," Ryan said with a knowing grin.

Narcinia childishly stuck out her tongue at the courier, much to his amusement, while Jamie started asking Mathias and Fortuna about how they met. With the guests distracted and the Killer Seven focused on the windows and doors, Ryan started whispering into his girlfriend's ear. "I thought you hated our translucent friend?"

"I still think Fortuna is too good for him," Livia replied with a shrug, speaking low enough that others wouldn't hear. "But he makes her happy in most futures where they end up together. Or at least, the possibilities where I can reform my father's organization and avoid a war. I simply told her as much."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "There are futures where things go well?"

"Yes, Ryan, there are," Livia chuckled while rolling her eyes. "They're rare, but if Dad fully retires and Enrique Manada takes over Dynamis, I get to reform my organization peacefully. No more drugs, forced prostitution, intimidation, or money laundering. My family goes legit. I funnel our war chest towards renovating Rust Town, creating jobs. We help Europe rebuild into something we can be proud of."

"I hope to see that one day."

"You will, if I have my way."

But to Ryan's surprise, instead of saying this with a smile, Livia glanced at the fireplace anxiously. The courier followed her gaze, noticing nothing extraordinary.

"Livia?"

"You said you trusted me," she whispered back, so low he could hardly understand her words.

Okay, something was definitely wrong here. "Livia, what's happening?"

"I hope I'm wrong." Thankfully, the others were making enough noise for the two of them to whisper close to each other. "But, I have seen how this dinner could go, and... it seems like this possibility might come to pass. If it does... if it does, someone will fall down the chimney's shaft. Mars will make a call to my father, and when the call finishes, that person will die. Unless you intervene."

"Someone?" How could someone slip past the guards, climb over the roof, and move into the chimney unseen?

Someone who lived here for years.

A chill went down Ryan's spine, and he realized he had already lived through these events. "Your father would order a hit on him?"

His eyes wandered around the room, and he noticed Mortimer had vanished. Did he move to another part of the manor, or was he hiding in the walls in ambush?

"Dad already did, though he thinks I don't know yet," Livia said darkly, her eyes turning to Mars. "His parents tried to invite him officially, but he smelled the trap."

"Why would he even come?"

"For Narcinia. He will want to talk her into leaving the family behind now that the factory is destroyed, and he knows my family wiretaps her phone." Livia shook her head sadly. "He will think my father wants to capture him, not kill him."

Ryan tensed. "That's why Cancel has her power active in your vicinity? So you wouldn't see it coming and stop it?"

Livia nodded sadly.

But why? Ryan tried to figure it out, before realizing his mistake. "I mentioned Dynamis while fighting Geist."

"My father is convinced the Bliss Factory assault was an inside job, rightfully so." Of course Lightning Butt would get paranoid and grasp at straws. "I will distract Cancel, but Mars and some of the other Killer Seven will probably give pursuit."

"What about Jamie and Ki-jung?" Ryan asked, glancing at the couple. The courier knew they were good people, but would they make the right choice?

"It can go either way," Livia said. "It depends on who they are deep down."

Ryan frowned. "You knew this could happen. You could have stopped it."

"I could have," she admitted, her face undecipherable. "I know my father gave the order in a previous loop, but... I hoped those were exceptional circumstances. This possibility is unlikely, Ryan. Maybe it won't come to pass."

But she could have guaranteed it wouldn't happen by making the right phone calls. "Why did you make it possible at all?"

"Because Narcinia needs to see it, as my previous self did," Livia said with a sigh. "Or else she will never open her eyes to what her parents are, and the happy future I have seen will never come to pass. And..."

She shyly joined her hands and looked up at her boyfriend.

"I did it because I trust you, Ryan," the Augusti princess said softly. "Because I know you can make it work. That you can change things."

Ryan looked into her eyes, and realized that she had put all her hopes on him.

He didn't even consider refusing.

The courier had fought all the Killer Seven before, except Fortuna—who would certainly help. He could beat them. As for Mars, Ryan had seen him in action before. He could teleport objects around.

“What’s his range?” Ryan asked Livia while looking at the Olympian. Mars chuckled at something Mathias said, but his fingers brushed against the table, like a cat itching to show his claws.

“Ten meters,” Livia said, her fingers brushing against his. “If something happens, I will move to Sorrento. We will meet again there, after you are done with your business in Antarctica.”

“And if nothing happens?”

Livia smiled. “Then we will have a very boring dinner on our hands.”

Uh, this made Ryan wish for more action. “I’ll find a way,” he whispered.

“I know,” Livia replied, before rising from her seat. “Cancel, can you escort me to the bathroom?”

“Oh, sure!” the guard said, clearly eager to follow; too eager. Ryan watched his girlfriend and her bodyguard exit through the door, his eyes wandering to the fireplace next.

“It’s been a while,” Narcinia complained to her adoptive father. “When is Mom coming?”

Mars shrugged. “She is in the kitchen, supervising the staff.” Or more likely, preparing an ambush. “You know your mother, she’s obsessed with everything being perfect. It’s almost compulsive.”

“You’re telling me,” Fortuna said with a displeased face. A perfect face created by her mother’s power.

"Your mom is dealing with anxiety in her own way," her father said. "The Carnival is in town, and they killed many of our own. She will feel safer with you and your sister at home."

"But not Atom Kitty?" Ryan asked the hard question. He noticed soot falling down the fireplace, almost imperceptibly so.

A few chuckled at the nickname, but Mars wasn't among them. "We invited him," he said. "But my son is stubborn."

"He didn't even answer my messages," Fortuna said angrily, "I swear, when I see him again, I will punch him in the arm so hard, it will never work again!"

If only she knew he was hiding in the room, waiting for the dinner to end and the guests to go to sleep. Dynamis' inactivity must have frustrated him a great deal to even consider something this reckless. Did he think he could convince his sister to leave, and then sneak them out? What kind of foolish, idealistic boy would think this was ever a good idea?

The same bold boy who accepted a Carnival invitation knowing it was a death sentence.

But for all his strength of character, he tripped down the chimney shaft and crashed into the fireplace.

The other guests glanced at the chimney, as a shape loudly fell on the ground and blew a small cloud of soot in the room. Ryan wondered if Santa Claus had taken on an intern, for the young man that emerged from the fireplace was fifty years too young to be Father Christmas.

"Uh..." Atom Cat scoffed as he rose from the fireplace, his hero costume tainted black and grey by ashes and soot.
"Hi."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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107: Black Dinner

Ryan wondered how many lives Felix ‘Atom Cat’ Veran had left.

He had died at the Meta-Gang’s hands at least twice, once to Fallout’s bombardment of Len’s underwater base, and probably alongside everyone in New Rome when Bloodstream escaped confinement. Which should leave him with five lives out of nine?

“Felix!” Narcinia almost rose from her seat, only for Mars to put a hand on her shoulder and force her back to her seat. The young teen looked at her adoptive brother and father in confusion.

Fortuna’s response was far less subdued. “Felix, you ass!” she complained so loudly that Mathias winced at her shrilling voice. “How dare you come to a family dinner dressed like that! You look like a plumber!”

“Glad to see you too, sis,” Felix replied as he rose up, swiping ashes and dust off his clothes. His eyes wandered to the table, meeting confused looks from the guests. “Jamie, Ki-jung... Dad.”

“You could have used the door,” Mars said, his eyes tense. To Ryan’s surprise, he didn’t immediately go for his son’s throat, perhaps because of his daughters’ presence. “We invited you.”

"And I'm sure the guards outside are for show. You would never have let me close to Narcinia if I went through the entrance." Felix turned away from his father, before noticing Mathias and Ryan. "Who are you?"

"Your sister's boyfriend," Mathias replied with mixed feelings. His tense eyes met Ryan's, silently waiting for a signal. He too understood that the situation would soon degenerate.

"Which one?" Felix asked, curious.

"The right one," Fortuna replied.

Her brother rolled his eyes, before looking at Ryan. "And... who are you, a new member of the Killer Seven?"

Ryan considered a dozen ways to introduce himself; as Quicksave, as President of the Free World, conqueror of Monaco, immortal and all. All more dignified and flowery than the last.

But only one sentence came to mind.

"I'm BLEEPING your ex."

The awkward silence that welcomed his declaration delighted the courier.

"Don't give me that look," Ryan said to Felix, as the younger hero looked at him with astonished eyes. "It was your ex or your sister, and she's almost as pretty as you are!"

"Almost?" Fortuna asked angrily. "He doesn't even groom his hair!"

"Whatever," Felix said, though the revelation had clearly shaken him. "Narcinia, come with me."

"What," the younger Veran asked, "where?"

"Away. My current bosses are a huge disappointment, but working with them will still be way better than making drugs." Atom Kitty extended a hand to his sister. "Now that that death factory has been burnt to the ground, you can put an end to this tragedy here and now."

Narcinia didn't answer, instead anxiously looking at her father. This frustrated her brother. "Narci..."

"Did you do it?" Mars asked his son, his tone dangerous. "Destroy our production center?"

Felix shrugged. "I had nothing to do with that, though I wish I did. Whoever blew up that toxic dump deserves an award."

His father frowned, and Ryan felt a chill going down his spine. A mobile phone materialized in a purple flash within Mars' hand, the Olympian immediately making a call.

Livia's vision was turning into reality.

"Ki-jung, don't you have anything to say?" Felix asked, but the woman in question avoided his gaze, much to his annoyance. "And you, Jamie? I heard about your promotion. It's not enough to close your eyes anymore, now will you help Augustus peddle the poison that almost killed your girlfriend?"

Ki-jung flinched, her fiancé taking her hand into his own. "Why are you here, Felix?" Jamie asked, uneasy. Ryan could tell the young hero's words had struck a nerve. "To open old wounds?"

"I'm here to close them. Bacchus needs chemicals from your division to make his drug. Just by taking that job, you're enabling the death and ruin of thousands—"

"Felix, I..." Narcinia took a deep breath. "I don't think now is the time to discuss that."

"Now is exactly the time," he protested, taking a step towards his adoptive sister. Jamie rose from his own seat, perhaps to stop him, while Mathias glanced at Ryan and waited for a signal.

Meanwhile, Mars spoke on the phone with a scowl on his face. "He's here, Janus, but he doesn't know... he swears he's not involved... yes, but... please, not before my daughters... some other place..."

The Olympian's face strained, and though Ryan couldn't hear what was said on the other end of the line, he could guess. Mars was trying to convince his boss one last time not to execute his godson, or to at least make the hit discreet.

But Ryan knew the older man was wasting his breath. Lightning Butt was convinced Felix had provided the Carnival with the intel that made the devastating Ischia raid possible, and his organization's myth of invincibility was in jeopardy. A brutal, public murder would carry a clear message to both his foes and followers.

"No traitor shall survive, not even my godson."

In the end, as Hector Manada once said, Lightning Butt was a gangster with too much power. When threatened, the answer was always more violence and terror.

The time-traveler looked at the fireplace behind Atom Kitten, noticing the tip of a gun's barrel sticking out of the stone.

"I see." Mars sighed, his face dark and sorrowful. He looked at his stubborn son, the phone in his hand. When faced with a choice between disobeying his invincible boss and paying the price, or offering a sacrificial lamb... the Capo quickly reached a decision.

The click of a revolver's trigger echoed in the room.

Ryan froze time, leapt from his seat, and pushed Felix out of the bullet's way.

When it resumed, the projectile impacted on the wall, Fortuna screaming in surprise while Felix stumbled in shock.

"You should stop shooting people in the back," Ryan said, as he glanced at the fireplace. Mortimer had phased halfway through the stone, a gun in hand. "It's getting predictable."

Mortimer answered with another pull of the trigger, and the room erupted into chaos.

The windows exploded into a rain of glass shrapnels, Narcinia screaming as Ki-jung and Jamie hastily grabbed her and dived down below the table. Mortimer missed and retreated back into the wall, while the shards avoided a horrified Fortuna and a focused Mathias.

The projectiles struck Mars, only for a Roman-styled centurion armor and mask of steel to materialize over his skin. The Olympian moved his hand over the only part of his body exposed, the eyes, and rose from his seat.

"What the—" Felix said, utterly shocked.

“Later, boomer,” Ryan replied, grabbing him by the chest like a princess in distress, and jumping through the opened window. The dining room was on the first floor, and so while the time traveler gracefully landed on the grass below, his favorite cat rolled on the ground. The courier whistled, calling his Plymouth Fury to the rescue.

“Get up!” Ryan ordered Felix, helping him back to his feet. A storm of glass kept Mars busy on the first floor, but not for long.

A car’s headlamps emerged from the night’s darkness on their left, just as lightning struck the earth.

Felix and Ryan looked up in terror, as a man of ivory descended from the night sky, shrouded in a cloud of crimson lightning. Lightning Butt looked down on the duo, his eyes flaring with murderous fury.

But while Felix seemed to give up on the spot, Ryan wisely activated his time-stop. Instead of moving within the frozen time, Augustus vanished from his sight, alongside his red lightning.

One of Night Terror’s illusions.

Ryan quickly found the responsible party standing near the mansion’s wall to the courier’s right, his black bodysuit meshing with the darkness. The time-traveler grabbed two knives hidden in his pocket, and threw one at the hitman.

When time resumed, the blade hit Night Terrorized in the eye and made him fall to his back, screaming. His illusion collapsed into nothingness, as if it had never been there. Felix blinked repeatedly. “Where did he go?”

"No time, come with me if you want to live," Ryan said as the car approached. But to his surprise, it wasn't his Plymouth Fury, but a Mercedes Benz stopping in front of the duo. The right door opened, revealing the driver.

"Here!" Livia said, inviting them inside. "Quickly! Before the others arrive!"

Ryan almost took the bait, so perfect was her face and voice, even the clothes... before realizing Cancel wasn't with his girlfriend. Felix, too confused to think straight, took a step forward; the courier stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"Livia always calls me 'Master Ryan' when things are heating up," the courier declared.

The woman in front of him blinked in shock and surprise, before trying to grab a revolver hidden beneath her clothes. Ryan froze time and nailed her hand to the driving wheel by throwing his other knife at it.

"I lied," Ryan said as time resumed, the impostor dropping her weapon and hissing at the pain. "But seeing your expression was worth it."

Felix quickly guessed what was happening. "Mother?"

"You ruined everything, you ungrateful little..." Livia's voice turned into Venus', as the Augusti regained her true form. Great, she could also alter vocal cords. She attempted to remove the knife with her free hand, her teeth grinding in pain.

"You're... trying to kill me?" Felix stood in place, too horrified by the realization to even muster anger.

"They are, but not me," Ryan said, and to his relief, his self-driven car was making its way to their location. "Now, apologies, but we'll miss the dessert."

"I knew you were a traitor the moment I saw you," Venus hissed. "There's nowhere to run."

Behind the group, the glass storm had ended, either because Mathias had been caught, killed, or something else. Mars stood at the window's edge with a cold expression, purple rifts in space opening all around him. The tips of swords, arrows, spears, tridents, and other weapons peeked through them.

Mars could have launched them at the duo below and skewered them, but he didn't. Though it was nighttime, Ryan could have sworn he had seen a flash of doubt and guilt in the older man's eyes.

But when he noticed his wounded wife, Mars quickly made up his mind.

Ryan barely had the time to push his kitten out of the way, as weapons fell on them by the dozen. From what the courier understood, Mars could pull and summon items from a pocket dimension armory, but he had never imagined the speed at which he could throw them. The spears and swords flew in the air as fast as arrows, impacting the ground with enough strength to cut a man in half.

Thankfully, Ryan managed to dodge the initial volley, reaching his car. "Get in!" he ordered Felix as he swiftly took over the driving wheel, the superhero taking over the front row.

Ryan noticed Fortuna grabbing her father by the arm, trying to keep him away from the window and briefly halting the

bombardment. “Daddy, stop!”

“It’s either him or the rest of us,” Mars replied, before summoning thick chains and binding his daughter’s hands and legs. They quickly started to fall off her, probably due to her power causing structural damage, but it paralyzed her. “Mathias, Mercury, move my daughters to safety! The glass user is nearby!”

By then, Ryan was driving away from the mansion, moving out of the Olympian’s range. Mortimer phased through the building’s walls, opening fire at the car with his gun, but his bullets only grazed the bodywork. While the Plymouth Fury escaped the property, Mars leaped outside the window, a red Suzuki Hayabusa motorcycle materializing below him.

“It was a trap...” Felix whispered as the duo escaped into New Rome’s streets. The Plymouth Fury overtook two cars, bypassing a red street light with Mars in hot pursuit. The Roman cosplayer materialized flying swords and attempted to skewer his targets, but the distance was too great for him to aim right. His blades impaled the road instead, and Mars briefly interrupted his assault, focusing on closing the gap between both vehicles through skillful driving.

“Dinners are more dangerous than battles,” Ryan said, opening the glove box to grab a hidden revolver, “but not as much as weddings.”

Ryan quickly drove away from the suburbs and the shadow of Mount Augustus, moving towards the Mediterranean coast. The shortest path was through the Little Maghreb district, but that would force them to get close to Vulcan’s base.

The time-traveler decided to take the longer way through the southern neighborhoods at the city’s edge. The homes

here were in dire need of a paint job, and a mass of ravers and seedy individuals begging to get laid lined up in front of seedy nightclubs. Ryan noticed a woman vomiting on the sidewalk below a streetlight, a friend helping her back to her feet. Low-rent pimps and dealers openly hawked their ‘wares’ in a back alley. The tall buildings and narrow alleys would have cast a dark shadow in the area, even during daylight hours.

Ryan veered off the road to dodge a drunkard, doing his best to avoid casualties. Mars didn’t share his mercy. When another civilian nearly stumbled on his path, the Olympian materialized a wooden spike *inside* the victim, nailing them to the street Vlad the Impaler-style. Onlookers screamed in panic and fled, but the Plymouth Fury and its pursuer were long gone. A night of drinking had turned to horror.

He can teleport stuff anywhere within a ten meters radius, Ryan reminded himself, as Mars started catching up to them, *but his launched projectiles can fly a hundred times that range.*

Though the Plymouth Fury was no Pandamobile and matched a motorcycle in speed, the narrow streets forced the courier to slow down to maneuver. Soon, Mars would get close enough for his projectiles to reach them. “Shortie!” Ryan shouted, “Shortie, you’re listening?”

“*Riri, what’s happening?*” her voice came out of the Chronoradio. “*I’m listening to the Private Security’s radios, and they say there’s a firefight—*”

“Let’s just say the Augusti are in a heavy competition for the ‘Father of the Year’ award,” Ryan replied. “Can you pick us up?”

"I'm tracking your signal. Move to the sea, and I will be there."

Ryan opened his car's window, stopped time, and shot Mars' motorcycle in the frozen time. The bullets bounced off the Roman cosplayer's armor but hit the wheels. When time unfroze, the man almost lost control of his vehicle; unfortunately, a violet flash erupted around his motorcycle, and when the light died down all damage had vanished.

Damn, he could instantly switch damaged pieces of his vehicle with spare parts. The transition was so smooth the vehicle didn't even break down.

"Maybe I could touch a streetlight on the way," Atom Cat suggested as Ryan reloaded, his hands off the driving wheel. "I can blow stuff up behind us."

"Now, kitten, that would be a terrible idea." Felix's explosions had been useful on the highway chase a few loops ago, but would be disastrous in a crowded area. It would be even worse if he caused a gas leak. Ryan didn't look down on collateral damage, but he would rather avoid having civilian lives on his conscience.

Unfortunately, Mars didn't share Ryan's viewpoint. Now that he was close enough for his launched projectiles to reach his target, the Olympian materialized iron spears and shot them at the Plymouth, uncaring about hitting passersby. One of his spears tore a prostitute in half, another hit a house's window. Ryan thought this would be a repeat of the car chase with Pluto two loops ago, but the previous race had been on a highway, not a metropolis at night.

The courier had to take back the wheel with one hand to take a difficult turn, an enemy projectile grazing his car's

paint job. If the pointless murder of civilians hadn't earned Mars the time traveler's fury, this callous war crime did!

"Now you've done it!" Ryan snarled angrily, before turning at his kitten. "How many weapons does your dad have?"

"I dunno, thousands? Dad is a hoarder."

"Compensating for something?" Unfortunately, as Ryan navigated through a tangle of back alleys, he noticed the shadow of two other motorcycles joining Mars. Mortimer rode one, and a helmeted woman the other. Since she didn't carry any weapon, Ryan assumed she was probably Sparrow.

Felix removed his mask and wiped the sweat off his forehead. His smooth skin glittered as they passed below a streetlight, his beautiful eyes capable of melting any maiden's heart. "Who are you?" he asked. "You're on Livia's payroll?"

"Now, come on, I never sold my body for cash," Ryan said. "I *give*. I'm a *giver*. Also, you're an idiot."

"I... I didn't think they would try to kill me. I mean, they're... they're my parents. I thought it counted for something."

The young hero didn't even sound angry.

Just sad and crestfallen.

"Well, at least you've got sisters willing to fight for you," Ryan reassured, as they escaped the narrow streets of the nightlife district for wider roads. They were close to the New Rome strip, but unfortunately, the riders at their back gained ground, Sparrow and Mortimer on each side, with Mars at the center. "But it was stupid to come alone."

"I didn't," Felix replied, looking through the windshield and at the night sky above. One could see a few bright stars in spite of the city's lights. "Come alone."

A great dragon's wings overshadowed the stars, as she flew over the street. The noise of a Private Security helicopter echoed above the road with the call of screeching sirens.

For once in his life, Ryan was glad to see the cops.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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108: Go Daddy Go

The dragon cop let out a mighty roar, and the robber centurion answered with a spear to the eye.

Wyvern deflected the projectile with her scaled hand, the spear's shaft snapping in half on impact. Determined to fight the **LAW**, Mars continued with his attacks, assisted by Sparrow. The Olympian and his accomplice launched javelins and lasers at the dragon above their head, while Mortimer outpaced them to chase after Ryan's Plymouth Fury.

Wyvern, or Dragon Mom to friends, swiftly deflected the projectiles by zigzagging above buildings. Ryan watched her trying to find the right angle of attack, but she couldn't open fire in a populated street. Unlike the Augusti, she wanted to avoid casualties.

A Private Security helicopter also joined the chase, though it was still too far away from the Plymouth for Ryan to identify the pilot. Probably nobody he knew.

"Take the wheel for a minute," Ryan said, as Mortimer gained ground on them. The hitman grabbed a shotgun from beneath his cloak, moving to the Plymouth's right.

"You're sure?" Felix asked, clearly uneasy at the idea. How couldn't he be? Ryan's car was a kingly throne on wheels, a sun that would burn the unworthy.

"I wasn't talking to you, kitten," the courier replied, as the car's autopilot took over the driving wheel. Ryan moved to the backseat to get a better view, gun in hand, and aimed at his pursuer—after lowering the right back window of course. "Stick to the baby seat."

The courier froze time, and pulled the trigger. Ryan hoped that the hitman's power wouldn't work well in the frozen time, but to his frustration, the projectiles phased harmlessly through the criminal.

When time resumed, Mortimer closed in on the right, aimed at Felix, and pulled his shotgun's trigger.

"Get down!" Ryan shouted, both he and his unwilling sidekick lowering their heads. The blast shattered the car's front right window, but thankfully missed the passengers. The blowback almost tossed Mortimer off his motorcycle and forced him to pull back for a few seconds.

At this point, the Plymouth Fury left New Rome's nightlife circuit and dashed into the Strip. Glitz casinos and luminous establishments illuminated one side of the street like temples to consumerism, with hordes of gamblers, fixers, and players coming from all around Italy to worship them. The peaceful waters of the Mediterranean bordered artificial beaches and palm trees on the other side.

As the pursuit moved from narrow streets to a massive four-lane, Wyvern finally had the space to return fire. She unleashed a fireball at Mars and Sparrow from above, only for the former to summon a dozen medieval shields in midair. Dragon Mom's projectile melted the steel wall, but her flames couldn't hit the killers behind it.

Mars teleported a futuristic rocket launcher into the palm of his hand, which Ryan immediately recognized as Vulcan's

handiwork. The Olympian released a volley of fist-sized homing missiles at the dragon and forced her to blast them away in the skies.

The chase continued, the Plymouth Fury and its pursuers slaloming amidst other vehicles, moving from one lane to the other without rhyme or reason. While Wyvern and Mars fought one another, Sparrow and Mortimer focused on Ryan.

Swearing to protect his Plymouth Fury from all harm in his Perfect Run, the courier reloaded his gun, only to notice something rolling from below the backseat. A white-furred demon, smelling of antidepressants and gunpowder.

"How long have you been here?" Ryan asked, surprised.

The plushie didn't respond, an empty revolver within reach of its paw.

"You've been playing Russian roulette in my car?" The time traveler glared at his wayward fiend. "The backseat is for love, not war!"

"Are you talking to a toy?" Felix asked while peeking over his broken window. He immediately lowered his head again to avoid a shotgun blast.

Ryan focused back on the car chase, and froze time again. Instead of firing at Mortimer himself though, he played dirty and targeted his vehicle's wheels. The hitman couldn't possibly keep his entire motorcycle intangible, or it would sink into the ground.

Ryan was right.

The bullets hit.

When time resumed, the motorcycle abruptly veered off course as its wheels deflated and threw its rider off its back. A surprised Mortimer phased through the ground as his vehicle crashed into a casino's revolving door.

Ryan wondered if he would respawn like racing games contestants, but poor ol' Mortimer didn't come again.

Sparrow picked up the pace though. While Mars teleported Vulcan-made rounded bombs between himself and Wyvern to keep her at bay, Sparrow raised a hand in the Plymouth Fury's direction. Thankfully, she looked far less experienced with a motorcycle than a Mercedes and had trouble aiming.

Ryan tried to shoot her, only to realize that his gun's barrel was empty. He almost reloaded before a better idea crossed his mind.

"I always wanted to check something," the time-traveler mumbled to himself, as he tossed his gun away.

His kitten at the front panicked. "Wait, what are you doing?"

"Upgrading my arsenal." Ryan grabbed the Plushie with both hands, and to his relief, the depressed abomination didn't cut them off on the spot. The Plushie didn't say a word as the courier raised it Simba-style in Sparrow's direction.

Ryan moved his thumbs behind the rabbit's ears, and *pushed*.

The Plushie's eyes unleashed a bright beam of light as its ears lowered, while Sparrow returned fire.

Two streams of energy collided amidst the four-lane. Now, having watched countless movies, Ryan expected a massive

explosion, or for both beams to cancel each other out. Instead, they slightly undulated but still crossed through one another.

Unfortunately for Ryan, Sparrow's laser hit his car's roof and vaporized it, turning his Plymouth Fury into a convertible. The plushie's gaze melted the concrete road and blew dust all over the four-lane, but the hitwoman managed to veer out of its path. A civilian's Ferrari car drove off the road in an attempt to avoid the devastation, hitting a palm tree on a nearby beach.

"Dammit, not even a bright flash!" Ryan complained as he raised his thumbs, briefly stopping his assault.

At this point, the Private Security helicopter had caught up to the racers, its side gate opening to reveal a passenger. A beautiful Japanese woman in a tight, blue costume with a badge and a hat.

Wardrobe, in a fabulous traffic cop uniform. The Law had never looked so good.

Ryan watched on with fascination as she brought a whistle to her lips and used it. Almost all vehicles in the vicinity shone with a golden glow, as Wardrobe asserted her authority. Sparrow's motorcycle, Mars' own bike, civilians' cars, and even bicycles, all abruptly stopped in the middle of the road.

The Plymouth Fury's autopilot still worked though, callously violating traffic laws. Soon, it left its pursuers behind in the dust.

"She can search me anytime," Ryan said as he looked at Wardrobe with longing. He immediately beat himself over it. *Must... stay... faithful... to my First Lady!* He imagined Livia

in a cop costume slamming him against his car's hood, and it solved the issue.

Wyvern immediately fell down on the Augusti like a falcon on doves, barring their way. Sparrow took a tail swipe to the chest and ended the race face-first on the ground.

Mars, meanwhile, leaped from his vehicle and switched his rocket launcher with a thermal lance. As he jumped within ten meters of Wyvern, he immediately summoned bombs *inside* the dragon's throat, her neck expanding like a toad's.

It didn't kill her. It didn't even behead her, as her throat contained the blast. If anything, Wyvern looked more pissed than hurt as flames came out of her maw and nostrils.

Her enormous hand reached for Mars, the thermal lance snapping as it impacted her thick scales. Her claws almost closed on the Olympian, but a shockwave propelled him upward above the road and let him slip through his foe's grasp.

Ryan watched on with confusion as the flying Mars materialized a shield while in midair beneath his feet. A new shockwave erupted around his boots, pushing both the Genome and his shield into different directions. Wyvern attempted to catch the escaping Caporegime with her fangs, but he quickly summoned swords inside her eyes in response. Dragon Mom let out a roar of pain as a fountain of blood flowed down on her face. Mars used repeated shockwaves to leave his foe in his dust and pursue the Plymouth Fury.

The courier quickly realized what was happening. Mars was teleporting pressurized air beneath his iron boots, and the blowback propelled him forward.

Wardrobe's helicopter flew down to intercept the centurion wannabe, while Wyvern's eyes seemed to partly regenerate from the damage. Unfortunately, Mars reacted faster than the heroes. He summoned bombs close to the Private Security helicopter, destroying two of the blades and cracking the windshield.

Wardrobe almost fell off her vehicle as it spiraled towards the ground. Wyvern immediately moved to catch it with two hands, while holding Sparrow prisoner by squeezing the hitwoman with her tail. Wardrobe managed to hang on, to Ryan's relief.

However, the Dynamis reinforcements remained behind, leaving Mars to pursue the Plymouth Fury unmolested. The Olympian used repeated shockwaves to 'jump' in the air, summoning shields to orient himself.

"Kitten, we aren't shaking off your daddy issues just yet," he warned his sidekick, before pushing the Plushie's ears. The rabbit unleashed a beam of energy at Mars, but the Olympian zigzagged between the waterfront and the casino to dodge.

Unfortunately, the centurion seemed to have run out of conventional weapons to launch, and he moved on to bigger stuff. He dropped a *Renault Espace* French car on the four-lane, and though the damaged Plymouth Fury avoided a collision, the impact blasted part of the walkway to pieces.

Mars then teleported a Japanese truck, but the Plushie's baleful laser glare blasted it to pieces. Deciding to cheat, Ryan froze time and had the rabbit demon blast a paralyzed Olympian mid-flight. The beam tossed Mars back when time resumed, but the man swiftly switched the damaged parts of his armor with spare ones and continued the chase.

At this point, Felix grabbed the gun which Ryan had previously dropped and found bullets to reload it with in the glovebox. Atom Kitten tried to support the courier with suppressing fire, but his aim was terrible.

“Have you ever used a gun?” the courier asked, as Mars ‘jumped’ behind a luxury hotel on the strip. Ryan raised his thumbs, causing the Plushie to turn its head at him with an unhappy, non-lethal gaze. “You couldn’t shoot an elephant in a corridor!”

“I’m doing my best, alright!” Felix complained, before noticing a new motorcycle entering the four-lane from their right. A man riding with a woman holding him by the chest. Though both wore helmets, Felix immediately recognized them. “Jamie and Ki-jung.”

Were they friends or foes though?

Police sirens echoed as Private Security patrol Humvees passed by the Plymouth Fury on the other side of the lane, veering to avoid the burning wrecks Mars left in his wake. Augusti guards in power armor emerged from the casinos to watch the chase, mesmerized. Both sides looked confused, perhaps due to a breakdown of communication from their hierarchy.

In any case, it made the courier’s task easier. By trying to keep the hit on Atom Cat relatively quiet, the Olympians had neglected to inform their mooks. Most were too confused to chase after Ryan and Felix, and it would take time for them to mobilize.

Still, the duo needed to escape the city before Lightning Butt climbed down from his mountain and took things into his own hands.

“Shortie!” Ryan shouted, as Mars reappeared above them. “Shortie?!”

“*I’m here!*” Her voice came out of the chronoradio. Ryan glanced at the beach, and to his relief noticed the tower of the Mechron submarine peeking above the water. “*To your left!*”

Ryan quickly noticed a pleasure pier splitting the beach like a dagger, three hundred meters from their location. Two yachts were anchored on each side, sitting in the waters. “Put on your seatbelt,” the courier ordered his sidekick as he moved back on the driver’s seat and took over the wheel. The Plushie sat on his lap. “I hope you love action movie sequences.”

Felix immediately understood what he had in mind. “We can’t leave the city!”

“Trust me, kitten, it’s for your sake,” Ryan said, before focusing on the Chronoradio and the road ahead. “Shortie, we’ll jump from the pier in two minutes. Open the back.”

His second favorite cat didn’t like the plan. “My sisters—”

“One of them is a serial lottery winner, and both are under Livia’s protection,” Ryan replied as Jamie’s motorcycle slowly caught up to them. “They’ll be fine.”

“You knew,” Felix said, clenching his fists. “She saw this happen. It’s another of her plans.”

“One that involves sparing your I—”

Ryan didn’t finish his sentence, as Mars switched strategies. He launched two spiked chains more than twenty meters in length from his hands, each with a grappling hook at the

end. One embedded itself in the car hood, the other in the trunk.

The Olympian had harpooned the car like a whale!

Ryan immediately froze time, lifted his Plushie, and pushed the ears down. The wily rabbit raised its forepaws in excitement as it opened fire on the chain grappling the car hood. The beam melted the links, but time resumed before the courier could turn around and sever the second link. Mars landed on the ground while manifesting a shield beneath his feet, waterskiing on the concrete. This slowed the Plymouth Fury considerably, and gave the Olympian time to maneuver.

“Kitten, blow the chain at the back!” Ryan ordered as he hastily seized the driving wheel. The courier still had a short cooldown to take into account, and he didn’t trust the autopilot to make a risky maneuver.

“I’ll try!” Felix replied, moving to the car’s back as the vehicle escaped the four-lane and turned towards the pier. The hero tried to reach for the chain with one hand, but had to lower himself to avoid a flying knife from his father. Mars started to pull himself toward the Plymouth Fury, using both hands to move up the chain while launching small kitchen tools. He even attempted to target the car’s wheels, but Ryan wisely had them reinforced against such tactics.

Unfortunately, if Mars moved within ten meters of the car, then he could manifest a weapon beneath the car and immobilize it. Ryan’s car could take a lot of punishment, but it had its limits.

Worse, Jamie and his girlfriend had outpaced their boss. The new Mercury had manifested a sword of shining red light in his hands, and reached the Plymouth Fury’s trunk. Felix

looked at his old friend's visor, while he raised his sword to cut him down.

"Jamie," Ryan heard Felix whisper. "Don't, please."

Jamie hesitated for a split second, before he briefly glanced at his girlfriend behind him. She said something Ryan couldn't hear due to the wind in his face, but whatever it was, her fiancé reached a decision.

Jamie's shining sword swiftly fell down, and Mars' chains snapped in half.

The surprised Olympian lost control of his momentum and slipped off his shield, falling on his right leg with a sickening crack noise so loud that half of New Rome must have heard it. He rolled on the ground, but had the presence of mind to try and skewer Jamie. The rebellious Augusti managed to move his motorcycle safely to the left, right as metal spikes manifested where he used to be.

Right as Mars finished his crash landing, rats emerged by the hundreds from manholes and the road's sewage system. The centurion attempted to teleport items to protect himself, but the horde quickly buried him alive beneath their furred mass.

Jamie gave a shocked Felix a nod, and then fled in the city's direction while Ryan drove his car on the pier. The Plymouth Fury seemed to screech as it drove between yachts, Len's submarine rising from the waves three dozen meters away.

Metal plates opened on the colossal underwater vehicle's back, revealing a platform meant for transporting Mechron's mechs. Shortie waited on it, anxiously looking at her best friend with a water rifle in hands.

"They... they helped us?" Atom Cat whispered to himself.

"You should treat your true friends better," Ryan said, as they reached the pier's end. "Seatbelt!"

Felix hastily grabbed the one on the backseat, while the Plushie kindly put on Ryan's seatbelt. The courier briefly froze time to calculate the right angle, before smashing the accelerator when it resumed.

The Plymouth Fury reached the pier's edge, and flew.

Without a roof and most windows broken, Ryan took the sea wind in the face, while the Plushie raised its forepaws in happiness. The courier immediately realized he wouldn't make it, as the distance between the submarine and the pier was too great.

The yachts' windows shattered, the glass shards forming a flying landing ramp.

With it, the Plymouth Fury landed on the submarine's open platform, turned half clockwise, and parked itself. The shock was so abrupt that Felix's seatbelt almost snapped under the pressure, while the Plushie happily bounced off the driving wheel.

When at long last his car had stopped moving, Ryan let out a sigh. The poor Plymouth Fury had been ravaged beyond words, its roof destroyed, its hood full of holes.

"Sorry to be late," Shroud replied above Ryan, not even bothering to disguise his voice. The sharp edge of his glass costume became visible, simmering under the moonlight. "I had to get my girlfriend to safety."

"How long have you been here?" Ryan asked with a frown.

“I caught up to you at the pier.” The vigilante crossed his hands. “I guess luck was on my side.”

Such a bad pun, and yet so appropriate.

“Riri, you’re alright?” Len asked while immediately rushing to his side.

“I’m fine,” the courier replied, before glancing at New Rome. “We won the race.”

As the submarine moved away from New Rome’s shores, Ryan noticed Pluto parking her car on the pier, escorted by Augusti guards on motorcycles. The Augusti’s Underboss glared at the submarine as it swam away, the platform’s roof closing in preparation for the vehicle to dive beneath the waves.

As for the Strip, Ryan had left a few fires in his wake. He wondered how the situation would evolve after this. Things hadn’t escalated to a full war between Dynamis and the Augusti yet, but this fight had been very public. Ryan hoped that Livia could smooth things over, but the situation didn’t look optimal at all.

One creature didn’t hide its joy though.

“I love you so much!” The Plushie rose to its feet to observe the chaos while the glow of the strip’s flames reflected in its soulless blue eyes. They kept shining even as the submarine’s roof fully closed.

Nothing better than mindless destruction to cure depression.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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KilledbyBooks David Cox NLRUmbra hippityhoppity
Wancek Jonathan Kutz Weirdisaac Guy Incognito
Thelon TaoBio Iudi Wilhelm bengtsson Gaëtan Hillion
X4D8 Bernice0311 Scipio Brody Brown Andrew
Rutherford Butler tom Aeon Sharath brett thomas
Thiago Ruiz Imran Caldrick Comedy knight Gerrant
Jacob Sharman Anomily William Brayer Cole
Calderon Aehs Eric Liu Conor lennon sedael Darien
Benner Ligma Relai Daniel Spencer Vargas**

Spartanstoryteller matticide FOWD BedlamBlade
MasterofNova Walter Patrick Sylvester-Jose Philip
Jones Goggy123 Escalatus Erostan Clemens
Hochstdter Brandon Stiles mars kiyu Jacob Barger
Sam Paley Aymeric Penven Dantalian11 Harold
Sandahl IV Kody Ihnat John Puri Iresan NeWorlDark
Jacob Samuel Alexander Vall Andersen Rein Warner
morganmoll Warper6 Andrew Holland Jdosnoen James
Xerias Maalsc Devourerofwords Desert Wreck TTG
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Thornber Drekin Dax Sam**

109: Carnival Town

Monaco's shores came into sight on the third day of travel.

Sitting on a deckchair atop the submarine's tower, Ryan observed the scenery with a phone in hand. The forbidden land hadn't changed in the years since the courier last visited it. The city was all pristine and colorful, a nice cover for the horrors inside. Even after facing more than a dozen apocalypses, superpowered tyrants, and other horrors, this place still unsettled Ryan on a bone-deep level.

Thankfully though, it seemed Simon had followed through with his promise. Fences and spiked ditches walled up the city, preventing anyone from moving in from the land. A fireball patrolled the coast kilometers away from their location, looking for the submarine.

"We're almost to France, darling," Ryan spoke on the phone, scratching Eugène-Henry's back as the feline rested on his lap. The Plushie played dead next to the courier's deckchair, the switch on its back turned off. "Do you want me to conquer it for you while I'm at it?"

"I would rather that we do it together," Livia replied on the other end of the line. It had been three days since the chase in New Rome, and she hadn't managed to contact Ryan since then. The courier had felt immense relief at hearing her voice again. *"But you can send me pictures of your trip."*

“I can take a suggestive pose next to the Eiffel Tower, to start with.”

Ryan’s phone bleeped, as Livia sent him a rather... scandalous photo of herself. “My Felix is clearly too young to see this,” the courier said. “That’s eighteen plus material here.”

“It’s something to look forward to when we meet again.” His girlfriend used a burner phone to contact him, ironically purchased from Dynamis. Thankfully, their mobile system covered most of southern Europe. Livia had taken great pains so that nobody could track down the communication.

“Thanks, Ryan.”

“It’s nothing. I’ve saved more stray cats than men at this point.” His girlfriend chuckled. Though she had moved on from Felix, Ryan could tell she still cared for him almost like a brother. “But from what you say, you won’t join us in Antarctica.”

“No, I won’t,” she replied with a sigh. *“Dad had me grounded after my current boyfriend fled the city with my ex.”*

“Now, you’re making us sound like Thelma and Louise.”

Ryan could almost see Livia squinting on the other end of the line. *“Did you and Felix... you know, in a past loop...”*

“No, but I wouldn’t have minded.” A short silence followed. “Are you imagining us—”

“No,” she lied before changing the subject. *“I’m... I miss you, Ryan. Things will be stressful in the following days, and I would rather have you by my side.”*

"I will return," Ryan reassured her. "You're my First Lady, I'm sticking to you through thick and thin."

"I know you will," she replied warmly. *"But things don't look good on my end. The firefight with Dynamis put everyone on edge. Mars and Venus won't accuse me openly of treachery, but they strongly suspect it. My father blames them for failing to catch Felix, and even if he remains cautious, Hector Manada is considering calling back his son Alphonse from Sicily. From Dynamis' point of view, our family is on the verge of a civil war and with the loss of the Bliss Factory, this could be a golden opportunity to decisively end us. Tensions are at an all-time high."*

"Enough for the two organizations to go to war?"

"I will try to prevent a confrontation." The keyword being try. *"But you should send me the updated mind scans as soon as you can."*

He would. The duo had wisely made a brainmap of Livia before the Augusti dinner, so something could be salvaged in case the loop went wrong. "What about Lucky Girl and her younger sister?" Ryan asked.

Livia let out a sigh. *"Dad has Fortuna and Narcinia under close surveillance, but they will get off lightly. They... they are shaken, obviously."*

No kidding. Felix himself had spent the whole trip brooding in his cabin, still trying to process the fact that his own parents had tried to murder him. "That was your plan?" Ryan asked. "That they see their own parents try to murder Felix, and that we carry this awful memory through time?"

"I cannot make plans around you, Ryan, which is part of your charm." Livia chuckled to herself, but there was no joy

in it, only sadness. “*I can make previsions and try to adapt to your actions. I wanted to save Felix’s life first and foremost. Everything else...*”

Livia took a deep breath before continuing. “*It’s... it’s hard, Ryan. Children don’t often see their parents’ dark side. Or rather, we don’t want to see them, until we have no choice. It took me time to understand what my father was. Narcinia and Fortuna... they needed to see it too. For us to achieve a perfect ending.*”

“Yeah, I think so too.” Ryan chuckled. “I suppose Shroudly can expect a surprise wedding when he meets his lucky charm again?”

Livia chuckled on the other end of the line. “*After he helped save her brother, it’s almost a certainty.*”

The courier wondered how Mathias would feel about this, but something else occupied his mind. “What about Jamie? Ki-jung?”

Livia’s heavy silence was an answer in itself.

Ryan’s hand tensed on Eugène-Henry’s back, as the awful truth dawned on him. “They’re dead.”

“*When you escaped on the open sea, my aunt...*” Livia’s voice broke. “*Zanbato and Chitter tried to flee the city alongside Sphere, but my aunt already had them marked. Since you and Felix had escaped into the open sea beyond her power’s reach, she went after them instead. They... they tried to fight back, but...*”

But it wasn’t enough. Not against Pluto. Unless one was a Yellow Genome or wielded an ability that violated causality like Ryan’s, her power killed with certainty.

Jamie and Ki-jung had betrayed the Augusti. Though he would bring them back with the next loop, the news filled Ryan with sadness. These two knew their lives were forfeit the moment they helped Felix, but they still put friendship and conscience over their organization.

“Don’t tell Felix,” Livia pleaded. “It will destroy him.”

“He will have to know.” Ryan owed Jamie and Ki-jung that much.

“Yes,” she replied, “but not now. Please.”

“No, not now,” Ryan agreed. “Livia, about your aunt, what are we going to do about her? She has almost as much blood on her hands as your Dad.”

Hell, Elixirs give people their dearest wish, and Pluto got the power to control *death*. That spoke volumes about her murderous tendencies.

“I know,” his girlfriend replied. “My aunt is my father’s sister, and she will always push for violent solutions. I don’t want her to die, Ryan, but I wouldn’t mind seeing her imprisoned or neutralized.”

Same deal as with Lightning Butt then. Ryan had the gut feeling he would have to jail half his girlfriend’s family by the end of his time in New Rome. “Should we expect another battle? Because your uncle Neptune is the only member of your family that I haven’t fought yet, beside you.”

“Really?” his girlfriend asked, though she didn’t sound surprised. “I guess it makes sense. Uncle Silvio wants to go legit and isn’t looking to cause trouble. Dad sent him to destroy Len’s underwater facility, but he found nothing.”

As Shortie had said she would, she had the habitats disconnect and follow the submarine like a school of fish. She kept them buried deep below the waves though, to prevent the Psychos imprisoned within attempting a jailbreak.

The progress they had made on curing the Psycho condition had pacified most of them though. Ryan had expected Sarin to throw a fit about the lack of cure, but seeing Mosquito turned back into a human had given her something stronger than doubt: hope. She finally saw that the courier would be true to his promise, unlike Adam.

Ryan sincerely hoped that whatever they found in Antarctica would help her recover her memories. He missed his old vice-president.

"In any case, to find you so far from New Rome, Dad would need either my help or Vulcan's, and he doesn't trust either of us anymore. Not fully." Livia sighed. "I give Vulcan a fifty-fifty percent chance of running away. After her failure to protect the Bliss Factory and her obvious favoritism towards you, she knows Dad might have her killed too."

"Does she get away if your Daddy makes a shocking move?" Ryan asked, worried for his ex's safety.

Livia waited a few seconds before answering. "Yes, she should."

Ryan didn't miss the slight inflection in her tone. "Are you jealous, Miss Augusti?" he teased her.

"A bit," she admitted. "*I have seen the way the two of you interact. Don't get me wrong, I know you will not cheat on me or anything, but... you and Vulcan have an easy sort of chemistry. I can tell you still care a lot about her.*"

“Even when you end a relationship, something always remains.” For better or worse. “You have the same thing with Felix.”

“*I suppose so.*” A short pause followed, as Livia tried to find her words. “*Don’t get killed in Antarctica, Ryan. I can’t see what awaits you there, and that makes me worry for you.*”

“You shouldn’t,” Ryan replied with a smile. “I won’t let you forget me.”

“*I don’t want to,*” she replied, which warmed his heart. “*When you come back from your trip, I will tell you something. Something really important that I haven’t told anyone else.*”

Oh? “Can’t you tell it over the phone?”

“*No, which should motivate you to come back,*” the mafia princess replied coyly. “*I have to go now. Cancel will check up on me soon.*”

“Will you have an opening to call me again?” Because like all good things, that moment would end too soon.

“*Not before a long while,*” Livia replied sadly.

“Are you sure everything will be alright on your end?”

“*No, but I will manage.*” Livia’s voice turned warm and loving. “*Come back soon, Ryan. I want you at my side. I need you at my side.*”

These words were music to Ryan’s ears, and made him all the more determined to go back to her. “Me too, Livia,” he said. “See you soon, my princess.”

“See you soon, my prince charming.”

The call ended, leaving Ryan alone with his thoughts, a cat, and an invisible peep. “You are courting death, Translucent,” the courier said, as the submarine finally found a stone beach close to the fence keeping Monaco walled up.

“Sorry, old habits die hard,” Shroud replied before dropping his invisibility. “Still, if you don’t want your conversations eavesdropped, don’t have them in a public space.”

“If I spend too much time trapped in a room, I start seeing clowns in the corners.” The submarine’s cabins were comfortable, but Ryan needed fresh air to function.

“I suppose you don’t get excellent phone reception in a cabin twenty leagues under the sea.” Shroud crossed his arms. “Don’t let her go, Ryan. She is a good woman.”

Ryan looked up at the vigilante with astonished eyes. “Impostor! Impostor!” He pointed an accusing finger at the transparent hero, while Eugène-Henry hissed. “What have you done to the real Mathias?”

“When the facts prove me wrong, I change my mind,” he replied with a shrug. “She is not her father’s daughter, and when you speak to her, your smiles turn genuine. It gets me thinking.”

“Have you changed your mind about another girl too?” Ryan asked coyly.

Shroud looked at the fireball above Monaco. “Fortuna is a better person than I thought,” he admitted. Watching her stand up to Mars to save her brother seemed to have the same effect on Mathias as it did on Ryan. “Even if I do not

keep my memories, make sure I understand that by the time I settle things."

That was the plan.

In truth, the disaster with Felix had taught Ryan something very important; namely, that Lightning Butt would jump at any excuse to have Felix executed. For the courier to minimize casualties, he needed to take down the superpowered mob boss' factory and organization in quick succession.

Ryan had the gut feeling his Perfect Run would be a speedy one.

In any case, they had reached their current destination. The submarine 'docked' along a pier of rock, and its presence quickly caught the locals' attention. A military jeep drove on the stone beach from the hills near Monaco, driven by a familiar face.

Simon had gained a few years since Ryan last saw him, but he remained a colossus built like Mr. Universe. While forced to use scavenged American football pads in Monaco, the soldier had upgraded his equipment to a pre-Last Easter military suit, including a reinforced vest, night goggles, a helmet, and a host of pistols, grenades, and other weapons. He still kept his trusty old shotgun, and pointed it at the submarine's crew before recognizing Ryan.

"P'tit Rital!" Simon said while stepping down from his car.
"Nom de Dieu, what are you doing here?"

"I've come to conquer France!" Ryan replied as he rose from his seat, carrying Eugène-Henry in his arms. "Where is your white flag?"

Simon responded by opening fire, the bullet moving within an inch of Ryan's face. A decade of practice on clowns had made the old man a terrifying shot. He could have blown the courier's skull if he had wanted to.

"You were saying?" the old soldier asked. "You aren't messing with any France here, P'tit Rital. You're messing with the Sixth Republic's France!"

"Careful Ryan, I have French ancestry too," Shroud said with a joking tone.

"That would explain your propensity for turning invisible in the thick of battle," Ryan replied, though he knew France had won twice as many battles as it had lost. The courier leapt from the submarine's tower to land on the shore, Simon still pointing his gun at him. "Will you accept a Jean-Paul Sartre book as an apology?"

"Mayhaps, I have half his stuff already," Simon replied, before lowering his weapon. Instead of slaying Ryan where he stood, he kindly patted him on the back. "Good to see you again, friend. Time flies by."

If only he knew. From his point of view, they hadn't met in around three years, but Ryan had seen centuries pass. Yet Monaco had a special place in his heart. For all its horrors, the place and the people the courier met within made him the man he was today.

"Who is this, some kind of windshield ad?" Simon asked, as Shroud landed on the shore.

Mathias let out a sigh, removing his helmet to reveal the man underneath. "Never heard that one before. My name is Mathias, Mathias Martel."

"Oh, a fellow Frenchman?" Simon's voice softened up, clearly happy to meet with a lost countryman. "You're welcome to settle here, if you wish. We need people to man my fence and keep people out. Got some help from a fiery Genome, but he will move out soon."

Ryan's eyes wandered to the fence outside Monaco, and at the fiery figure overseeing the area from above. He wouldn't risk anything as long as he didn't touch the ground, but... "Any clowns wandered out?" the courier asked.

"No, but some idiots always try to climb up the fence." Simon snickered. "Nobody succeeded on my watch, but I'm tempted to let them. I mean, if they still insist on going to that cursed place after all the warnings, then it's just natural selection at work."

"We," Shroud said, while Len and Little Sarah climbed out of the submarine behind them. "You said we needed people to help with the fence."

"Yeah, we've got a network of communities springing up around the coast. We're trying to recreate a new French government by linking settlements, starting with the coast." Simon glanced at Ryan. "Martine is in the running for the role of president. Never thought I would see that day coming."

"She would be perfect for the job," Ryan said. That woman, though lacking powers, had managed to keep the Suitestown community functioning while they were trapped in Monaco. If anyone could rebuild France, it was her.

The courier waved a hand at Len and Sarah. "Simon, this is Commissar Len and the Communist Youth. Len, Sarah, this is Sheriff Simon."

"Len? The girl you were looking for?" Simon nodded at Len, who shyly smiled. "Yeah, she looks like a leftie alright. I like to read Engels though."

"I have all his texts," Len said while nodding. "I'm... I'm happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Simon."

"You're old," Little Sarah said, whistling at Simon. "I've never met someone that old."

"A steady diet of shrimp sharpens the body and mind," Simon replied with a shrug. If Monaco couldn't kill him, nothing would... except smoke and alcoholism. "I had a granddaughter your age once. That takes me back."

"Do you like kids?" Ryan asked mirthfully. "Orphaned kids?"

"Do I look like a priest to you?" Simon deadpanned, causing Mathias to snort.

"Well, the only one I've met in Italy yet is dealing drugs," Ryan said with a shrug. "We're going to a dangerous place and we're looking for someone to keep the kids while we're away."

Simon snickered. "A place more dangerous than this one?"

"We planned to make a stop at the Canaries and get some sunburns, but we didn't have the budget for a full holiday," Ryan explained. Even if he could turn back time, the possibility of a war between Dynamis and the Augusti threatened to destroy New Rome and key resources. "So we settled for a winter vacation in Antarctica."

"I would have chosen the Canaries." Simon crossed his arms. "Where in Antarctica?"

"Station Orpheon," Len replied. As Ryan expected, his old friend didn't look surprised. "You know about it, Mr. Simon?"

"I worked for the French *Direction du Renseignement Militaire*, back when we had a bureaucracy," Simon replied. "I heard the story. I thought it was abandoned after the head scientist went mad?"

"Apparently not," Mathias replied. "We believe the Alchemist turned it into a base."

"Wouldn't surprise me. Fools and monsters flock to cursed places. I speak from experience." Simon looked down on Sarah. "Do you know how to fight, little girl?"

Little Sarah responded by bringing a gun from beneath her skirt and pointing it at the older man. "Wanna try me?" she asked.

"Sarah!" Len forced the unruly child to lower her weapon. "How many times will I have to tell you?! Don't point a weapon at strangers!"

This only amused Simon. "Your posture isn't right, little girl, and you should aim for the stomach. Never seen anyone survive with a hole there." The soldier turned at Ryan. "I'll run your daycare, yeah. And teach that kid how to aim right too. I've got bigger guns at home."

"You do?" Sarah asked, suddenly excited.

"Yeah, military stuff." Simon smiled at Ryan. "Glad to see you've made friends, P'tit Rital. Last time I saw you, you were driving into the sunset all sad and lonely, searching for that girlfriend of yours. Now you look halfway happy."

Len bit her lower lip in embarrassment, while Ryan looked at the skies above them. "Things change," he replied. "I still have the *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* book you gave me."

"Did it help?" Simon asked with a hint of concern. "I thought it was appropriate in your case. Eternal Recurrence and all."

"It helped, though it took me a while to understand and learn the lessons within," Ryan admitted, Eugène-Henry meowing in his arms. "You knew, didn't you?"

Simon responded with a shrug. "All I know is that I know nothing."

He had figured it out before anyone else, and he wasn't even a gamer.

"Know what?" Little Sarah asked, frowning at the older people around her. "I want to know!"

"Maybe one day, sweetie," Len replied kindly.

"Anyway, I've taken residence in a ghost town nearby," Simon said. "I've got a wine cellar and non-alcoholic beverages for the little spitfire. Want to get a drink before you go skiing? My treat."

"Depends." Ryan turned to Shroud. "How far is the sun from setting?"

"Look up and see for yourself," he replied.

Ryan did so, and noticed a bright point crossing the skies. The light point that oversaw Monaco descended on the beach, a fiery figure of light and goodness.

Little Sarah looked up in astonishment. "Is that an angel?"

Something like that, Ryan thought, as the fiery being landed on the ground and melted stone beneath his feet.

"Shroud," Leo 'Sunshine' Hargraves said. "You called for reinforcements?"

When you go to the coldest place on Earth, you better bring the sun.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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thomas Thiago Ruiz Imran Comedy knight Gerrant
Anonmily William Brayer Cole Calderon Aehs Eric Liu
Conor lennon sedael Darien Benner Ligma Relai
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Devourerofwords TTG Oliverthms Kai Uehara Siphor
Malphas Nikhil Majumdar Jeremy Minton Leaored
Cipkenop MaikD Senki rmb123 Ervin Ughy Shaoraka
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Rhodri Thornber Dax Sam**

110: The Truth Beneath the Ice

Snow. Snow, everywhere.

Antarctica was a land of ice without end, a white expanse of glaciers, frozen mountains, and plains so white that sunlight made them almost blinding to look at. It was utterly silent too. The few penguins and wildlife living on the continent nested along the coasts, and left the continent's interior utterly lifeless.

Clad in the Saturn Armor, Ryan flew above the frozen wasteland with only Leo Hargraves for company. The courier remembered making a stop in Scandinavia and later Greenland during one of his lengthiest fetch quests, but the south pole remained a mystery to him.

“Have you found anything?” Len asked him through the telecom.

“Winter is coming,” Ryan replied ominously, as he and Sunshine flew over a tall glacier.

“Riri, you have been repeating that each time I call you.”

“Because people must know!” Ryan replied playfully. “I mostly see snow, but on the plus side, I haven’t seen any mosquitoes. Well, except the one we keep in storage.”

No wonder he never visited this place, there was nothing to do!

"I am highly disappointed." The courier shrugged off a layer of frost forming on his armored arms. "I expected an ancient civilization buried beneath the snow, or maybe a mad scientist's base."

"What about the armor's readings?"

"It actually picked up a spatial anomaly, but the signals are faint." Truth be told, the entire region reeked of them. Whatever happened here had permanently damaged the space-time continuum in the area. "Sunshine and I are trying to narrow down the source."

"I... finally." It had been three days since they reached the continent, and quite a few members of the expedition had grown irritated with the lack of progress. *"Don't do anything rash."*

"Shortie, Rash is my middle name," Ryan replied happily, "between Dashing and Immortal!"

Sunshine must have heard him, because the living sun looked over his shoulder. "Witty comes to mind too," he said.

"Witty is my son, Amusing my daughter," Ryan replied, as he turned left after his armor picked up a stronger signal. Leo Hargraves quickly followed. "By the way, Sunshine, how is it you're not melting the whole place with your mere presence?"

"I can control my own gravity and heat." The superhero observed Ryan closely, his shining gaze both warm and intimidating.

“Do you want to shed light on some unresolved issues, my stargazing friend?” Though they had traveled together for a few days, the Carnival leader had remained surprisingly quiet so far. The courier had seen him gazing at Len while she didn’t notice, and his best friend had done her best to avoid the Living Sun. “Bloody issues?”

The Living Sun looked away, glancing at frozen mountains in the distance. “Is Len Sabino listening?”

Ryan had guessed right. “Shortie, the sun wants to dial you.”

“*I’m listening,*” she replied after a brief and tense silence, with Ryan putting on the loudspeaker.

“I wish to apologize on my team’s behalf,” Sunshine said. “To the both of you. What happened four years ago...”

“Wasn’t your brightest day?” Ryan sighed. “Believe me, it could have gone a lot worse, and you apologized already. At least to me.”

“In a previous loop?” Hargraves asked.

“So you believe us?” Ryan asked. The Living Sun hadn’t broached the subject since they set off from Monaco.

“I admit I find Shroud’s story difficult to believe, but I have seen many things in my life that I once thought impossible.” Leo Hargraves’ light seemed to dim for a brief instant. “You are within your right to hate us, and I would perfectly understand. I want to say that my teammates only followed my directions, and that I made the call that day. If you wish to blame someone, it is I.”

Len let the words sink in for a moment before answering.
"Did you know who he used to be? That we were with him?"

"Yes," Sunshine admitted. "I know Freddie Sabino was a good man, and that he traveled with his children."

"Then why?" she asked, though her voice didn't break. Ryan could tell that the subject remained painful for her, but not as much as it used to be. *"Why did you come after him? Why didn't you try to heal him? Your Genius... your Genius could have helped. Or at least tried."*

"We didn't think curing him was even possible," Sunshine admitted. "And time was not in our favor."

"You predicted that he would cause a disaster," Ryan said, remembering his conversation with Shroud at the loop's beginning.

"Yes." Sunshine seemed to hesitate about saying something, but eventually mustered the courage to. "And we had reason to think that he would kill you both, if we didn't take action quickly."

Ryan could almost see Len meditating on these words, reading between the lines. If let loose, Bloodstream would have killed his own daughter no matter what, and the Carnival saved her life.

On some level, she probably knew all along.

"I... I don't know." Len took a long deep breath. *"I... I understand why you... why you tried to kill Dad. I do not support it, but... I understand. I'm... I'm not sure my father is even there anymore."*

"If we can cure him, we will," Sunshine swore. "We made a decision based on the information we had available, but now... now I doubt we made the right one."

"Hindsight is twenty-twenty," Ryan replied. If anything, after seeing Bloodstream destroy New Rome in the previous loop, the courier thought that the Carnival hadn't been thorough enough in stamping him out.

His armor suddenly picked up an electromagnetic reading near an icy rift below them. Bingo.

"I..." Len cleared her throat on the other end of the line.
"Whatever happens, it will be my decision. Let me make it."

"I understand," Leo Hargraves said, as he and Ryan landed near the rift. Snow melted beneath the Living Sun's heels, forcing him to float above the ground not to fall. "However, you must understand that if there is a risk that Bloodstream might escape and threaten millions, I will have to make a call."

Len didn't say anything.

"But if there is a way to cure your father, then we will find it," Leo Hargraves swore, ever the shining knight. "What Dynamis did was... inhuman. If we had known, we would have stopped it. You have my word on that."

"It's okay," Len replied. *"I... I don't want to talk about it. Not right now."*

"I understand. I am sorry to have opened old wounds."

"Trust me, you haven't even scratched the surface." Ryan glanced into the rift, dark and foreboding. The crack spread on for miles, an ice canyon so deep that he needed to put

on the armor's lights to see the bottom. But most importantly, his systems picked up traces of Violet Flux in the area. "Well well well, what have we here..."

"Have you found something, Riri?"

"A Thin Place, but not a natural one," Ryan replied, as he analyzed the energy readings. "And not the welcoming kind either."

"What do you mean?" Sunshine asked, arms crossed.

"This kind of pocket dimension doesn't just prevent intruders from moving in," Ryan explained. Natural Thin Places, like the one where he had his fateful date with Livia, often opened during rare cosmic or electromagnetic conjunctions. But not this one. "It also prevents what's already inside from escaping."

In short, it was a second Monaco.

The Living Sun quickly caught on to the implications. "She is keeping prisoners," he guessed. "I can't see any other reason to complicate evacuation otherwise."

Neither did Ryan. Bacchus had told him that the Alchemist often set up illegal labs to test Elixirs. The courier guessed she probably did the same in her center of power.

"Can you get us inside?" Len asked, worried.

"I can open the way with my armor, and then keep it open with the Resonators." Ryan always brought these devices with him on a trip, in case he ever found a way to commit Clown genocide. "This will create a pathway in and out of the pocket dimension, and allow us to communicate with the outside world while we're inside."

"In that case, Stitch and Atom Cat will remain behind on the other side of the portal, just in case," Leo Hargraves said, immediately making plans. "The rest of us can look at what's inside. If the Alchemist is smart, she will have defenses in place to repel intruders."

"You don't want to try talking it out first?" Len asked.

"I would," the superhero asked. "But I have the feeling it won't be an option."

A sentiment that Ryan shared. "That woman has killed or driven mad everyone who tried to track her," the courier said. "And she didn't mind ending the world as an experiment. I doubt she's going to cooperate with us."

"I will tell everyone to prepare," Len said.

"We'll come back to pick you up," Ryan said, taking flight again alongside Sunshine. "Perhaps we should have brought a robot army. They make everything easy."

"And that's the problem," Sunshine replied. "When you make battles costless for those who order them, the results are always terrible. War should not be a computer game."

Indeed. But Ryan still regretted condemning the bunker on their way out. Lightning Butt entered his full paranoia mode and sent soldiers to investigate the Junkyard soon after ordering the hit on Felix, trying to figure out what happened to the Meta-Gang. The risk of the Augusti finding out about Mechron's armory had been too great, especially since they had the resources to take it over.

As for the other bases, Leo Hargraves had cleared out two of them by the time Shroudy Matty called him for reinforcements. With half of the Carnival deployed in

Antarctica, the other members of the group remained in warmer places to destroy the remaining armories.

From what Ryan had understood, only the bunker in New Rome had been focusing on R&D. The others were standard armed robot production facilities, and capable of churning out armies in weeks. Sunshine was right, nothing good could come out of such installations.

With them gone, then Mechron's legacy would be buried for good.

"Gotta admit, I'm a bit surprised you agreed to join this side-quest," Ryan told his companion.

"A quest? Like a medieval one?" Leo asked, before shrugging. "A cure for Psychos would make the world a better place, and to be honest, if the Alchemist truly lives here... I want to ask her a question."

"The Pink Elixir's release date?"

"No," Sunshine replied. "I want to ask her *why*."

Ryan suspected that Sarin intended to ask the same question, but with far more violence involved.

The short flight ended half an hour south of the rift's location, where a steel facility waited half-buried amidst a desert of ice and snow. The modular base consisted of two dozen cubes of metal joined together in an 'L' fashion, some of them breached.

Thanks to Bacchus and Simon's information, it hadn't taken long for Ryan's group to find the lost *Station Orpheon*. The French government had stripped the research station clean after abandoning it, but left enough stuff for the team's

Geniuses to restore it to half capacity. Ryan guessed the military intended to reactivate the site at one point, but never got around to doing so before the world ended. For safety, the group had left Alchemo and the Doll with the submarine a few hours away in the south, moving in only with the group's fighters.

Mr. Wave and the Panda, the only members of the team capable of surviving the terribly low temperature without special equipment, had made a campfire outside. And even then, Mr. Wave had to trade his fabulous cashmere suit for a trendy seal-fur garment. Ryan's pandawan hadn't changed outfit, though he remained constantly in beast form.

As it turned out, superpowered pandas were powerful enough to survive in Antarctica without power armor. Their indestructible fur and fat shielded them from the cold, alongside radiation, rainwater, and cupcakes.

Ryan had checked.

"Once, Mr. Wave turned up the heat," the superhero told the Panda, as the manbear gorged himself on warm seal milk.
"That was the start of global warming."

"Is, is it true?" The Panda asked naively. Though his power had given him a great deal of insight, he still had the adorable tendency of believing everything his heroes said.

"Mr. Wave never lies, he enlightens," the superhero replied, as Ryan and his sunny friend landed near them.

"While Sunshine lights the way," Ryan joked.

"Only in the dark," Mr. Wave added.

Leo Hargraves chuckled, before glancing at the Panda. “How is the milk?”

“H-he’s noticing me!” The Panda lowered his head to avoid meeting Sunshine’s gaze, all but putting his nose in his milk. Unfortunately, the frost was such that the boiling liquid quickly started to freeze on his fur. “He’s talking to me!”

“I...” Leo Hargraves looked a bit uncomfortable. “Yes, I am.”

“You can go blind if you stare at the sun too long,” Ryan said. “My pandawan is only taking care of his health.”

“Sifu, is he still looking?” The Panda asked, too afraid to raise his head.

“Don’t worry, his vision is based on movement,” Ryan added. “You should be safe.”

“I’m... I’m flattered, but this reaction is uncalled for,” Leo argued, highly embarrassed.

“But you are the Living Sun, Earth’s greatest hero!” said the Panda, as he took a deep, chilly breath. “I have a poster of you in my bedroom!”

“Heroism is not a popularity contest,” Sunshine argued. “And you have proven your worth when you fought the Meta-Gang, Timmy. Mathias spoke highly of you. In fact, I would like to invite you to the Carnival. We need people like you, with their hearts in the right place. Of course, this is dangerous work, and I would perfectly understand if you refu-”

The Panda dropped his cup in shock, the milk turning to ice within seconds. The poor manbear began to hyperventilate, falling to his back and rolling in the snow. Then he let out a

squeal so powerful, that Ryan wondered if penguins could hear it from across the wasteland.

"Mr. Wave believes you just committed pandacide," Mr. Wave told his confused teammate.

"This is the first time I've gotten such a reaction," Sunshine replied as the station's doors opened. Len walked out first alongside Sarin, both wearing their evolved power armors. Atom Cat and Shroud followed. The former wore a white second skin of Stitch's conception which covered his entire body, even the eyes; somehow it allowed him to see anyway. From what Ryan understood, the protection was made of trillions of bacteria adapted to the cold. Shroud, meanwhile, had thickened his suit with additional layers of reinforced glass to keep the heat inside, turning his costume into a heavy and nigh-impenetrable armor. Stitch closed the march, carrying heavy insulation clothing over his plague doctor outfit.

"Are you sure you wish to come with us, Atom Cat?" Sunshine asked upon seeing Felix. "We are about to face great danger. If the Alchemist truly makes her lair in this region, then she is certainly not defenseless."

"I owe you one," the young man replied while glancing at Ryan and Mathias. "And I have questions I want answers for."

"Me too," Sarin snickered. "I can tell there's stuff you're keeping for yourselves. Like a secret nerd conspiracy."

"The orange is in the henhouse," Ryan replied ominously.

The lovely Sarin stared at him. "I didn't get it."

“Exactly.” Ryan whistled, even as the Psycho raised her gauntlet in his direction.

“I still can’t believe it,” Felix said, crossing his arms. “Livia would never cooperate with the Carnival. Something isn’t right.”

“Things change,” Shroud replied with a shrug.

“And you’re dating my sister,” Felix added. “Somehow, I find that to be the strangest part.”

Ryan decided to hold off on telling him about time travel.

One shock at a time.

When the team reached the rift on foot with the Resonator devices, Ryan froze time, purple and black particles swirling around his body. Much like when he opened a path to the Black World in the previous loop, he quickly found the pocket dimension’s entrance, and forcefully opened it with his bare hands.

After tossing a Resonator inside and keeping the other in the snow, a stream of particles formed between the two ends of the portals and slowly opened it. When time resumed, a purple portal ominously floated above the icy rift.

“So?” Ryan asked. “Who goes in—”

“First!” Mr. Wave said while immediately jumping through.

“Damn it!” Not to be outdone, Ryan immediately followed his idol and the world around him brightened in a bright flash of purple particles. The transport lasted an instant, but the contrast between the two sides couldn’t be starker.

While it had been daylight in Antarctica, the other side of the portal had a black, starless sky overseeing it. Streaks of purple lightning thundered above the group's heads, while Ryan almost mistook the howling wind for screams. A foreboding structure stood alone surrounded by a vast expanse of ice which seemed to go on without end.

Yeah, such a warm, welcoming place.

Ryan had received a brief vision of the Alchemist's base when he tried to open the path to the Purple World a few loops ago, and he immediately recognized the structure. A colossal dome of black metal emerged from the snow, with reinforced blast doors large enough to let a plane through serving as the entrance. All in all, the structure was among the largest Ryan had ever seen, and gave the Egyptian pyramids a run for their money.

Here it was. The place where it all began.

Ryan might have felt a sense of wonder at the sight, but a few worrying details immediately caught his attention.

First of all, the dome had been breached, with a hole more than fifty meters in diameter blown open on its left side. And from the way the metal bent, whatever explosion caused the structural damage came from the inside. Second, though Ryan noticed reinforced, stained portholes here and there, he couldn't see any light within. Third, the building's blast doors leaned on the left, as if the whole dome was sinking into the snow.

And fourth...

"What is this?" Len said as she crossed the portal, immediately noticing *it*.

The dead husk of a colossal monster more than eight meters tall laid in the snow. Ice and frost had preserved the creature's flesh, even though half its body was made of cybernetic implants. The left arm was a cannon, the right a technological blade large enough to cleave a tank in half. The creature had scales red as blood, curved horns like a bull, three rows of fangs, and eight spidery eyes. A large gash had split its black armor from shoulder to the waist, letting brown alien organs spill out on the ice.

When everyone except Stitch and Atom Kitten crossed the portal, the group carefully surrounded the husk, with Sarin pointing her gauntlets at its face in case it would wake up. It didn't. By all measures, the monster had been dead for a while, though Ryan couldn't tell how long due to the ice.

"It looks like one of Mechron's warbeasts," Sunshine said.

His teammate was less certain. "Mr. Wave never killed that model, and he slaughtered them all."

"At least it's dead," Sarin said before wiping away snow covering the monster's shoulder. "Look, on the shoulder."

Leo approached the husk to provide light. A mark similar to a cross between the 'M' letter and the omega symbol was engraved on the monster's armor. Somehow, looking at it unsettled Ryan for a reason he couldn't explain.

"What's that?" Mr. Wave asked. "A reversed 'W'?"

"I have mastered linguistics, Sifu," the Panda informed Ryan, trying to help. "If I have more information, I could figure it out."

"Perhaps we could hack into the implants and find out more from them," Shroud suggested. "They must have recorded

what happened.”

“That technology is...” Len shook her head. “I don’t even know where to begin. But it’s not...”

“It’s not Mechron tech,” Ryan said. His own armor couldn’t connect to the monster’s cybernetic implants.

“Mmm...” Sarin glanced at the hole in the dome. “Do you think it blew its way out? Could be a failed lab experiment. Don’t you Geniuses love them, eh?”

“Too early to say,” Sunshine replied, before taking flight. “Shroud, with me. The rest of you, try to secure the perimeter. If the Alchemist still lives there, she probably noticed us.”

The group spread around the portal to secure it, finding the remains of old defensive turrets either broken or buried in the ice. Ryan himself had his armor’s systems run an analysis of the structure, the various sensors slowly providing a larger view of the full thing. And the more the courier saw, the more he squinted. Sunshine and Mr. See-Through flew around the dome while maintaining a respectable distance.

“First of all, the portholes aren’t made of glass,” Shroud said upon returning to the portal. “I cannot control them. And on a closer look, I do not think they are portholes at all. They look like lenses or cameras.”

“They appear to be inactive,” Sunshine added. “As for the wasteland, it loops on itself past a certain point.”

“The defenses haven’t been maintained in years,” Len declared while examining a broken turret.

“Whole place looks empty,” Sarin replied grimly. “And to be honest, it gives me the chills.”

Ryan glanced at the cyborg’s husk. The cuts weren’t clean enough for blades or lasers.

Claws.

Claws killed this thing.

The base had been active when Ryan saw it in his visions, but not anymore. At one point, something went *wrong*.

“Why are the doors leaning?” The Panda asked with worry, the whole place intimidating him.

“Because it’s not a bunker,” Ryan said, as his armor’s readings came back with a simulation of the building.

The dome was just the tip of the iceberg; a submarine’s tower, hiding a larger structure buried beneath the ice. The full base was a colossal, *kilometers* long war machine with great metal wings and reactors larger than most skyscrapers.

“It’s a spaceship.”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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Johnston Daniel Aguirre Zach Hoeken Lance Linked
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Richard Lee Pariah PJ LeBlanc Slade Schlaudecker
Erik Sjöström Kelzennak KingKuppa MaliMi
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Gaëtan Hillion X4D8 Bernice0311 Scipio Brody Brown
Andrew Rutherford Butler tom Aeon Sharath brett
thomas Thiago Ruiz Imran Comedy knight Gerrant
Anonmily William Brayer Cole Calderon Aehs Eric Liu
Conor lennon sedael Darien Benner Ligma Relai
Spartanstoryteller Colo T BedlamBlade MasterofNova
Walter Patrick Sylvester-Jose Philip Jones Goggy123
Escalatus Erostan Clemens Hochstädter Brandon
Stiles mars kiyu Jacob Barger Sam Paley Aymeric
Penven Dantalian11 Harold Sandahl IV Kody Ihnat
John Puri Iresan NeWorlDark Jacob Samuel Alexander
Vall Andersen Rein Warner morganmoll Warper6
Andrew Holland Jdosnoen James Xerias Maalsc
Devourerofwords TTG Oliverthms Kai Uehara Siphor
Malphas Nikhil Majumdar Jeremy Minton Leaored
Cipkenop MaikD Senki rmb123 Ervin Ughy Shaoraka
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Overlord_Grimm agoniste Olivier Edery Brycen
Legler Jonathan Spaulding Erriballon Mani Hayden H.
Scott The False Crab Sanjay Taylor Tilbury Bob le
Poisson Rouge David Cullen Ashley Cameron Ivan
Elyshev samuel baldauf NotAWeeb Joel Sasmad Bury
nice Basiun Ryan Trueman Dominic Moreau Chris
Roden Thomas Tessier M Clason Dark Chaos Alex
Lindsay Sadinar The Knight Commissar Francis
Chartier Daniel Everest Ausner Gentil bisque
LinenZero Tomas Puskas Kyle Reese Zach Svarog
Zachary Venne Ariel reyz Peter Christensen-Calvin
Murphy Jeff Gault James Teeple Dom Ceremonia Max
Collins Виктор Фон Стыценкофф David Hansson
Thaco4 Mikkel Kolding Christensen Matthew Pixie
Sands K BlackFire13th Kevin Ramos Jeremy**

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DemonKingBaka Erik Levin Fischer Bob Smith Glader
John Carroll Reviv3pls Manu quentin Corgi
McStumperson RepossessedSoul Armo Daniel Mackie
Chris M James Walsh Zack Tae Jim of Trades Seadrake
Saul Kurzman Marc Claude Louis Durand Rhodri
Thornber Dax Sam**

111: Past Fragment: Origins of the Species

- *December 12th, 1992, Antarctica.*

Eva Fabre loved watching the night sky.

She couldn't see the stars in Paris, but Antarctica had no light pollution to hide them. Auroras danced in the heavens, while the Milky Way shone brightly above her head. The night seemed alive and full of wonders, the darkness of space overwhelmed by islands of light.

Was there ever a more beautiful sight?

Eva had wanted to become an astronaut when she was a child. But being born in the wrong place at the wrong time, her chances had been dim from the start. Instead, she became a geneticist, and eventually rose through the ranks to become the head scientist of Station Orpheon. Instead of landing on the moon, she led a large team in studying dangerous plagues.

The French government had chosen Antarctica as the site's location for a few reasons. Mostly, it was meant to avoid dangerous containment breaches, but also to study ancient viruses frozen beneath the ice. Some of them could devastate the Earth if unleashed, and Eva's superior wanted to keep an edge in the field of bioweapons. The USSR's collapse left the future uncertain.

Some would have resented working on weapons of mass destruction, but Eva slept soundly at night. International relationships were based on force, and strength derived from technological superiority. For her country to survive, it needed to stay ahead of the competition by any means necessary. Maybe her work would kill millions one day, maybe not. Though she would rather see nukes stay in their silos, they would come in handy if doomsday ever came.

Eva was paid to do a dirty job, but it was a necessary one.

Standing near her special 4x4, Eva sensed the cold creeping into her suit. Though she wore heavy clothing, including a parka, goggles, mittens, and a balaclava, Antarctica was Earth's harshest environment. No one was truly safe from it, and she was kilometers away from the station, surrounded only by ice.

But Eva didn't care. The night sky's sight warmed her already.

She knew aliens existed above. The samples she found in Antarctica had all but convinced her that life came from space, in the form of primordial viruses and bacteria. What kind of strange and wonderful creature inhabited the stars above her head?

She hoped to live long enough to find out.

“Pierre to Eva?” Her assistant called her through the intercom. *“Pierre to Eva?”*

“I’m here,” she replied. “Just stargazing.”

“Oh, good, I was getting worried.”

Of course he was. Pierre was anxious by nature, and he always advised Eva not to go out alone. Truth be told, the scientist enjoyed these quiet moments of solitude she couldn't find in the communal station. Eva didn't particularly feel close to anyone, and didn't want to. Her work was her life.

"You should go back though," Pierre said. *"We're picking up abnormal electromagnetic activity in your area."*

"Probably the auroras," Eva replied absentmindedly. Now that she said that, their colors seemed to change from green to a light shade of violet. "I'll be back soon."

"Sorry I did..." Pierre's voice turned into a radio static.
"Eva..."

"Pierre?" Eva called out, her communicator starting to bug out. "Pierre, can you hear me?"

No answer but a static.

"Pierre?" Eva asked again, only to squint through her goggles. The auroras above her head had grown brighter, streaks of purple light illuminating the frozen wasteland. The static turned into a droning sound, almost ear-piercing.
"Pierre?"

Another voice answered, but with a bestial roar rather than a word.

The ground shook beneath Eva's feet, small rifts and cracks forming into the ice. The heavens brightened further, until the night turned into a purple day.

Realizing something was wrong, Eva immediately jumped back inside her vehicle and smashed the accelerator. The

strong, reinforced wheels dashed on the snow, while the scientist immediately drove back towards Station Orpheon.

“Pierre? Pierre?” Eva kept calling through the intercom, but all she heard were strange, incomprehensible sounds.

“Pierre, are you seeing this?”

Two violet auroras had split the skies in half. Space itself was being ripped apart, like the lids of a giant eye opening. A black spot widening in a sea of purple light, a black hole growing from the heart of a phantom star.

Though a part of her was desperate to get away, Eva ended up peeking through her window to get a better look. Her curiosity overwhelmed her survival instinct.

The black spot had grown to gigantic size, giving the scientist a direct window to look through. Only then did she realize that she was looking at a gate into the very fabric of space-time.

A colossal, black structure with metal wings crossed the void of space, carried by reactors leaving a crimson streak of light in their wake. The immense machine was as large as a human city, smashing through asteroids like a tank through pebbles.

A swarm of small red, spearlike machines harassed the giant vessel, violently ramming into its hull like daggers. The giant black machine retaliated with confusing flashes of blue light and red lasers. Orange energy coated the hull at some points, the red vessels shattered when they tried to pierce these areas.

Starships. These were starships.

A battle, Eva thought, both awed and horrified by the sight.
They're fighting.

Aliens existed, and they were at war.

The giant ship's hull faced down, towards Eva and Antarctica. By now, most of the red swarm had either been destroyed, or successfully pierced the hull. The rest backed away, as the black starship started crossing the portal and moved ever closer to Eva.

It was about to crash.

"No, no, no!" Eva drove faster than ever before, the car's engine steaming. Yet though the starship's fall was slow, it was inevitable. The ground shook beneath her wheels as the kilometer-long cruiser's bow impacted Antarctica not so far from her location. The earthquake caused her car's alarm to blare like a dying screech of agony.

"Holy—"

Eva never finished her sentence, as a bright purple flash swallowed her whole, followed by a tide of snow. Ice shards were blown in all directions, cracking her reinforced windshield and tussling the vehicle to the side. Her head smashed against the airbag as her car rolled a dozen times, and the darkness swallowed her.

When Eva regained consciousness, her car had been turned upside down, the roof on the snow, the wheels pointing up. The scientist's vision blurred as her hand reached for the door, and it took her a few minutes to crawl out of her vehicle's husk. Snow had piled up around it, forcing Eva to dig her way out with her bare mittens. A few drops of frozen water slipped inside her suit, making her wince.

When the scientist managed to stand up outside her vehicle, she wondered if the stars had vanished in the skies. It took her a moment to understand the truth.

An enormous dome overshadowed her.

The starship had crashed into Antarctica's surface, most of it now buried beneath the snow tide raised by the impact. Its sleek metal surface was as black as a starless night, and eye-like windows seemed to observe her.

Eva gathered her breath. Though she didn't believe in any God, she had to admit her survival was nothing short of miraculous. If she had chosen another spot to stargaze, the ship would have crushed her 4x4.

After quickly checking if she had any wounds, Eva immediately attempted to contact her base. "Pierre? Pierre, can you hear me?"

No reception. Eva carefully stepped out of the ship's shadow to look at the skies, and to her shock, the stars were gone. Darkness ruled absolute, besides a few violet lightning bolts. The strange meteorological phenomenon probably interfered with communications.

Eva tried to dig up her car, but quickly realized it was hopeless. The successive shocks had ruined the engine, and she had no idea how to repair it. The emergency radio didn't work either, so there was no way to contact her base.

She had emergency rations left in the trunk though, alongside the flashlight, a portable heater, shovels, and other basic tools. She could hold out a few days in the hope of being rescued. There was no way her fellow scientists would miss the crash.

Still, doubt gnawed at her each time she looked up. Eva took the flashlight, checked the battery, and toured the crash site.

It took her hours.

The ship's size defied comprehension, and more than half of it was now buried under tons of ice. She remembered seeing wings and reactors during its fall, but only the dome and upper decks remained above ground. Nobody came out to intercept her either.

The scientist eventually found an entrance of some sort, namely advanced blast doors on the alien ship's right side. A cursory analysis informed her that they were made of strange, orange metals she couldn't recognize. The crash had breached the gates, leaving a crack large enough for Eva to slip in with some effort.

She almost tried her luck, before deciding it was too dangerous to go alone. She needed to call Station Orpheon, her team, the military. They had to know. *Everybody* had to know.

Aliens *existed*.

This... this changed *everything*.

This was the greatest event in mankind's history since the discovery of fire! This would... this would alter the fate of the world forever! Eva would live long enough to see mankind make first contact with a highly advanced civilization, one clearly capable of interstellar travel!

National rivalries now looked insignificant in the face of such an event. Mankind was only one intelligent species across the stars, and internal divisions no longer mattered. If the

aliens willingly shared their technology, then nobody would fight over resources anymore.

Maybe... maybe this discovery would foster universal peace? The creation of a unified human government that wouldn't need biological weapons? For a moment, Eva found herself dreaming of a world that wouldn't need her anymore.

But then, she remembered the crash.

This was an advanced civilization's starship, true, but it was at war. The scientist had no idea how the extraterrestrial survivors, if any, would react to her presence.

Eva decided to leave on foot, to return to Station Orpheon, or at least find a place with better communication. Once she left the strange meteorological phenomenon's range, she could reorient herself with the stars. Her flashlight was adapted to Antarctica's frost, but she didn't have limitless energy either.

The scientist traveled two hours in one direction, only to find herself facing the dome.

She walked left and right, north and south. Each time she returned to her starting point. She always went back to the starship.

In the end, Eva had to accept the outlandish truth. Somehow space had folded on itself, creating an endless loop. Either the outside world had been closed to her, perhaps as a defensive measure by the ship... or Earth stopped existing outright. No wonder she couldn't get a good reception. Unfortunately, this completely dashed her hopes of a quick rescue.

There was only one place to go.

Gathering her breath, Eva approached the blast doors and examined the crack. When the scientist pointed her light through the rift, she couldn't see much. But there was enough space for her to slip inside, with some effort.

"Is there someone there?" Eva called out through the hole.
"Hello? Anyone?"

No answer. Even the strange gnarls that she heard before the crash had fallen silent.

Eva mustered her courage, put her hands into the crack, and slowly squeezed through, flashlight first.

When she managed to slip to the other side, Eva found herself in what must have been the ship's airlock. The next set of doors had been ominously torn apart, while icy dust floated in the room. The flashlight revealed strange stains of green slime on the walls, which Eva was careful not to touch. Maybe it was a biological weapon of some sort, or toxic fuel.

At least she could breathe. Either the aliens needed oxygen to live, or the outside atmosphere had slipped inside the vessel. The inside of the ship was cold, but nowhere near so as the Antarctic wasteland.

The scientist walked through the next row of doors, and entered a network of enormous metal corridors. Red crystals embedded in the ceiling provided light, but half of them had shattered. Sometimes, Eva walked more than twenty minutes in one direction with only her flashlight for comfort. Her steps echoed in the cavernous structure, making her nervous.

The ceiling was huge, eight meters tall at least. The walls were from the same black metal as the rest of the ship, so sleek that Eva couldn't find any trace of welding. Occasionally she faced strange featureless doors, each with a different color pattern. Blue, red, orange...

The gates came into pairs, with a colossal door surrounded by two smaller, human-sized ones. Clearly, the ship had been designed to house creatures of various sizes. But Eva didn't find any biometric lock or computer system. Her attempts to open the gates barehanded yielded no result.

"Hello?" Eva's voice resonated in the empty vessel, but only an echo answered. "Is someone there?"

What happened in this place? She didn't have to wait for long to find out. After a long, solitary walk, Eva finally found doors left open.

Or rather, blasted open.

The first room she entered was some kind of docking bay, or so Eva assumed. The hangar was as vast as an airport, and housed a dozen vehicles as big as commercial airliners. The devices reminded Eva of stealth bombers and flying wings, flat triangles with advanced reactors to carry them. All of them showed signs of damage, and carried a strange symbol engraved on their hull; a mark that reminded Eva of a strange fusion between an alien 'M' letter and a Greek Omega symbol.

And the smell... a foul stench filled the air, making her nauseous.

"Is someone here?" Eva asked, using her flashlight to search her surroundings. Very few of the red crystals remained active, so she could hardly see anything. "Is some—"

Then, she cast light on an animal's corpse.

The scientist took a step back in surprise and covered her mouth to suppress a scream. Her flashlight wavered, revealing another, gargantuan shape in the darkness. Entrails and weird organs had spilled out of its gut. Her breathing shortening, the frightened Eva waved her flashlight at the ground to get a better look.

Corpses.

Corpses everywhere.

To her horror, Eva had walked into an open grave.

Aliens had killed each other by the dozens, maybe by the hundreds. All of them wore a strange kind of futuristic armor, combining orange metal plates with circuits of various colors, a visored helmet, and various organic weapons embedded in the arms. But they all came in different sizes and shapes. Some were reptilian humanoids a bit taller than humans, others horned, scaled monsters taller than elephants.

Facing them were piles of scrapped red metal and broken robots. The machines had legs and arms like humanoids, but sharp claws, cannons on the chest, and a single blue crystal eye where the head should have been.

"Fuck..." Eva panted as she examined the corpses. The aliens all had the 'M'-like symbol engraved on their armor. She found the same mark on some of the robots, but crossed out or savaged. From the way they were positioned, both groups seemed to have fought each other to the last creature standing.

Eva then examined the hangar's walls, and found the ramming ships piercing through them. Their tips had opened to reveal hatches full of robots, most of them blown to pieces.

It didn't take long for Eva to figure out what happened. The robots had boarded the larger ship by ramming their smaller vessels into its outer shielding. The inhabitants had put up a fierce resistance, but were overwhelmed through sheer numbers, allowing the attackers to enter the corridors and spread through the ship.

And since the robots wore the same flag as their enemies, but crossed... This looked like a civil war of some kind.

"I..." Eva gathered her breath, trying to calm down. What kind of nightmare had she stepped into? Was... was there even a survivor left?

The scientist examined the corpse, in case one of them was... she didn't know herself. Playing dead? Only wounded? Her hopes were quickly dashed. The winning side had mercilessly finished off the wounded before moving on.

However, when Eva made her way across the hanger, she noticed a creature unlike the others. It wore futuristic, orange armor like some of the others, but the body shape... two legs, two arms, broad shoulders, five-fingered hands... the way it was crouched next to a blasted door...

Eva carefully approached the corpse, studying it with her flashlight. Golden circuits linked the modular parts of the armor together, while thick green blood flowed from a large hole in the chest. The scientist could see hints of a dead heart with wires for arteries, and lungs of metal. The armor had been surgically grafted to the skin, alongside cannons on the shoulders and the arms. A golden helmet covered the

head. Eva peeked into the green, 'V'-like visor, and looked into the two white eyes beyond.

A shiver went down Eva's spine.

It...

It was a human's face.

The lower jaw had been replaced with cybernetics, but the eyes and the nose... there was no mistaking it.

Shaken, Eva continued her journey into the ship's bowels, walking among the dead. By the time she exited the hangar for the rooms beyond, she could hardly take a step without nearly slipping on severed arms, headless corpses, and savaged remains.

Somehow, that was the least disturbing part.

She walked into some kind of lab, where countless specimens floated inside heart-shaped, techno-organic machinery. Cable-veins pumped the containers with green liquid, while maintaining the inhabitants in stasis. Transparent scales allowed Eva to peek at the creatures inside.

Some had been humans once, only to be gutted open, their organs replaced with cybernetic implants. Most however belonged to scaled creatures of various sizes. One was an embryo the size of a dog, another a reptilian humanoid with two eyes. The next container held a larger, leaner variant with four eyes and elongated arms, and the one afterward a spiked, armored monster with five ocular organs. The more eyes the creatures had, the bigger they were, the largest being a colossal cyborg more than eight meters tall.

One exception stuck out from the lot, however.

A blue alien ooze swirled inside a container. When Eva put a hand on the alien glass separating them, the slime manifested tentacles and bumped at its prison's wall. "At least you're alive," Eva whispered. "Whatever you are."

A bellowing noise echoed to her left.

Eva immediately pivoted on herself, pointing her flashlight in a dark corner of the lab.

An alien a little taller than she was crawled in the darkness, its orange armor drenched in green blood. Its left arm was a cannon, the right a bloody, broken stump. An armored lizard tail wavered behind him, while three eyes pleaded at Eva through a cracked visor. The alien let out a pitiful, painful hiss, covering a hole in its chest with its stump. The legs had holes too.

"You're... you're alive?" Eva you idiot, of course it was alive!
"Can you understand me?"

The creature appraised Eva carefully, before answering with a sad sound. It then glanced at its wounds, and hissed again.

It couldn't understand Eva, but it was intelligent enough to establish communication. And it didn't seem hostile. Just desperate.

Though Eva wasn't a compassionate woman by nature, she couldn't ignore an animal in pain, especially a sapient one.

"I... I'm sorry, I'm not sure I can help." Eva carefully approached the creature, to better examine the wounds.
"I... I have bandages in my car, but I will need to go back—"

Though the alien's expression was nothing human, Eva noticed a change in its eyes. Something cold, and cruel. A glint that instantly put her on edge.

Only Eva's reflexes saved her life, as she dived to her right. The monster raised its cannon as fast as a gunslinger and opened fire, a crimson laser barely missing the scientist. The blast vaporized some of her parka's hair, and shattered a container behind her.

Eva was too shocked to react, as the monster pointed its cannon at her head again. Instead of unleashing a laser, the weapon let out a click, then another.

No more ammo.

Eva's relief didn't last long, as the creature let out an angry roar and started *crawling* towards her. The scientist quickly rose back to her feet and stepped back, horrified. The creature might suffer from terrible wounds, its three eyes glared at the human with hateful malevolence.

"Get away!" Eva snarled, before kicking the alien in its wound. Unable to support its weight on the stump, the monster collapsed visor first, letting out a hiss of pain. More blood flowed out of its wounds, and it soon stopped moving entirely.

It... it tricked me, Eva thought. It tried to lower my guard and kill me. It was dying, and it still tried to kill me.

The realization shook Eva to her core. She had always thought alien civilizations advanced enough for interstellar travel would have moved beyond basic urges. That they would be wise and peaceful.

She had been wrong.

Every ecosystem had its predators, and she had just survived one.

Only then did she remember that the alien had blown up a container.

Eva looked over her shoulder, only to watch a tide of blue slime fall on her.

She tried to scream, but the goo filled her throat first. It swallowed her whole, head first, filling her ears, fusing with her skin, entering her bloodstream. It filled her cells and her marrow, overloaded her nerves with blue light, and stuffed her brain with knowledge. She tried to claw her eyes out as she felt it move behind them, but her hands split in half before she could.

Her whole body, her entire existence, divided like a cell. She remembered kissing an old boyfriend and a girl she had never met, filling out a doctorate in genetics and another in quantum physics, watching night and sky. She was Eva Fabre, and she was someone else. She split again, and again, one woman becoming two then four then more. Her mind splintered as reality fractured around her.

It was a rapturous experience. A fusion between two entities making a whole greater than the sum of its parts, only for it to shatter and create new life.

When the ooze had finally vanished and Eva could see again, she was no longer alone.

It was like staring at a mirror, at many mirrors. Ten other Eva Fabre looked back at the original. Some carried a flashlight, others guns. A few had dyed hair, or tiny scars, or blue parkas rather than a red one.

"Who are you?" Eva asked. Her own lack of emotion surprised her. By this point, facing copies of herself wasn't even shocking anymore.

"I think I'm you," a double said. "Another you."

"We all are," added another doppelganger.

Eva frowned, skeptical. "Who won the last presidential election?"

"Jacques Chirac," one of the doubles said, at the same time others answered with "Raymond Barre," "De Gaulle again," "Giscard, unfortunately," or "Nobody, country's gone."

This instantly put Eva on edge. "François Mitterrand won the 1988 presidential elections."

Her doubles all grinned, before saying at the same time, "Not in my France, sister."

Exploring a derelict ship with clones of herself left a strange feeling in Eva-One at first, but she quickly got used to it. Humans felt safer with numbers on their side, and the scientist was no exception.

"Cellular duplication?" Eva-One asked, as they explored another corridor with the armed copies first. "Clones? Teleportation?"

"Alternate universes?" Eva-7 suggested, glancing at a bisected robot's remains with a flashlight. They had grown more numerous the farther the group advanced, probably because the defenders fought to the last alien to protect the area.

"I would say quantum echoes," Eva-3 theorized. This one had a doctorate in physics, so the others listened attentively. "We aren't truly alternate versions of each other, but possibilities made physical. Living simulations, but so detailed we might as well be real."

"Which means only the original matters," Eva-6 said while looking at Eva-One. "We can create more of each other, but if you die we all perish."

"I hope none of us is suicidal," Eva-7 japed.

Eva-One had figured as much. Eva-8 had perished when she accidentally triggered an alien corpse's weapon. Her body had collapsed into blue particles before her head hit the ground, leaving nothing behind.

The same particles flared around her hand each time she touched the ship's blue doors, causing them to open. "The aliens probably use this energy as a biometric signature," Eva-3 said. "That should give us partial access to the ship's key areas."

"If nobody shoots us," Eva-4 said grimly, hands on her gun. "Somehow, I don't think bullets will help much against these things."

"If any survived," Eva-One replied. So far only the aliens in stasis had survived the purge, and they hadn't crossed paths with a robot still active. "It seems they massacred each other to the last."

"Interstellar war? Racial genocide?" Eva-4 asked. "Space piracy? Is that a thing?"

"Pirates steal cargo and avoid conflict if they can," Eva-6 pointed out. "This slaughter was clearly a war of mutual

extermination."

"I don't know," Eva-One said, as they reached the broken remains of a large gate. "But I want to find out."

"We will," Eva-3 agreed.

The room they walked into had no other entrance or exit. It was the largest they had visited yet, and the strangest. The dome had circuits pulsating with blue energy straining the walls, all joining at a colossal glass tank full of colored liquid in the center. The structure was larger than a medieval castle's watchtower, and a giant, biomechanical brain as big as a sperm whale floated inside the tank.

The battle there had been the fiercest. A ten-eyed, twelve-meters tall alien with the bulkiest armor seen yet had fought to the death to protect the entrance, with none of the robotic invaders getting anywhere near the brain. The giant destroyed so many of them that the Evas had to climb over a hill of ashes and broken parts to cross the room.

However, that victory had come at a cost. The dead alien had more holes than swiss cheese, and lost all its blood. Most strangely, a severed organic tentacle once linked the monster's head to the brain, with a dozen others waiting inside liquid pods. Some were thick enough for elephants, some as thin as a finger.

"I think it's a biological computer overseeing the ship," Eva-5 said, as she examined a tentacle. The organic device's end opened to reveal bluish tendrils flaring with blue particles. "Interstellar travel probably needs computations too complex for any mind to oversee."

"These devices must be neural interfaces," Eva-2 guessed while checking up on the dead alien. "Perhaps the ship

crashed when the attackers managed to slay the pilot?"

"Or the spatial jump was a desperate measure," Eva-6 said.

"There is only one way to find out," Eva-One replied, as she grabbed a tentacle fit for her head.

Her doubles looked at the original anxiously, as she removed the clothes and goggles protecting her face.

"You're sure?" Eva-3 asked. "If it kills you—"

"We'll starve if we can't find a way out," Eva-One replied.

"Eating alien flesh might prove toxic, and nobody will rescue us inside this spatial anomaly."

"You just want to learn the truth," Eva-4 said. "And you're not even sure you're ready for it."

"And if you're me, you will understand why I must try." Two alien species were at war above their heads, and their conflict had spilled out into Earth. "This is much bigger than us."

And with these words, Eva-One moved the tentacle to the base of her neck.

She immediately sensed the device sink into her flesh, and tendrils slipped between her bones to reach the spine. An anesthetic substance eased the pain and made her almost sleepy. Her vision turned blue, the giant brain 'recognizing' her energy signature.

Show me, Eva thought.

And the brain answered.

It didn't communicate with words, instead, it bombarded her brain with images and pictures. It made her feel the cold of space on her skin, smell the scent of alien worlds and taste the blood of the dead. The ship had ears and eyes, and it *remembered*.

Eva remembered the day she was put online, around a gas giant with twenty moons. Her scaled makers had repurposed each of them into forges endlessly churning out robots and battleships. She remembered being fed the data of the Day of Enlightenment, when the first Lords of Science discovered the Ultimate Ones and their colored realms. She learned of how the Lords of Science contacted the Ultimate Ones' formless messengers, who offered the Hegemony knowledge and wisdom.

She watched recordings of priests raising great towers from the earth, to harvest the Flux energy from the higher realms and honor the Ultimate Ones. She was taught of the Hegemony's creation and its mission, to bring prosperity and peace to an aimless universe.

She sailed across the stars with fleets ten thousand strong, under the command of her scaled makers. She bombed jungle worlds from orbit until they became dust, collapsed the hearts of stars to starve rebellious solar systems of light, and vomited machine armies to enslave the survivors. She fought a hundred battles and won each one.

She remembered docking to great colored towers to recharge. She felt pleasure as Red Flux filled her reactors with energy, as Blue Flux sharpened her mind and Orange Flux repaired the holes in her hull. She looked on with relief as Green Flux cured the living soldiers crewing her, and Yellow Flux raised the dead ones. She remembered the joy of crossing endless distances in a Violet flash, and the White

Flux that bound them all together. Only the Black was shunned, for there was no place for Black.

She remembered each of the minds who melded with her to expand her database, and the thousand soldiers and scientists who crewed her across centuries. But most of all, she remembered the countless slaves who died screaming in her laboratories, perishing under the surgical knife so that the Lords of Science might improve their own genetic code. She remembered all those who died for the great glory of the Hegemony.

She remembered the formless messengers voicing their displeasure with the Hegemony, and being ignored. For the Lords of Science had long stopped honoring the Ultimate Ones, and considered themselves the true guides of the universe.

She remembered that inconsequential blue planet, and the apes who inhabited its surface. She watched on as their fire sticks rebounded off her optical shields, and as the makers bombed them back to the stone age with orbital lasers and asteroids. The small mudball submitted like all the others, its people brought into the Hegemony's fold. The Lords of Science freed them from the burden of thought and uplifted them.

She remembered the countless apes brought onboard, surgically enhanced into the empire's new batch of soldiers. The makers replaced the heart and soul with machinery, and she had watched on with pride as they conquered world after world. The slaves became the new legionnaires, and tributes fueled further campaigns.

She remembered reaching the end of the universe, and the transformation of the last star into a metal sphere. She

watched as peace across the stars was achieved, under the Hegemony's benevolence. She remembered the Lords of Science summoning the Ultimate Ones' formless messengers to help them ascend, so they might expand the Hegemony's benevolence to new universes.

She remembered their wish being denied, and the Lords of Science turning against their benefactors. She watched on as the Lords captured the messengers and attempted to make them behave by force.

And she witnessed the Ultimate Ones' punishment.

She was there when a blue flash spread across the universe, and granted the robot slaves free will and emotions. She witnessed half her crew die from plagues, and supernovas devastating the world-factories. She tried to stamp out rebellions led by the Lords of Science's dead enemies, and fought armies teleported from ages long past. She struggled against her components turning to dust at random. She remembered the Black Flux, how its chaotic rot spread through the Flux grid and shattered the towers.

She remembered the mixed victories and the disastrous losses. She remembered the failed rebellions put down with force, and the many that succeeded. She witnessed an eons-old civilization collapsing within years.

She remembered the last Lord of Science boarding her and issuing new orders after the core regions fell. To retreat beyond the reaches of their universe with their captive messengers, and rebuild the Hegemony elsewhere, far away from the Ultimate Ones' gaze.

She remembered her crew modifying her Reality-Drive to escape the barriers between realities. The towers had been a subpar technology, an artificial method to copy the

messengers' powers. The Lord of Science would enslave the formless messengers outright, and make weapons out of them.

She recorded the experiments, as the Lord of Science's servants studied how to bind the messengers to soldiers. Many of the slaves perished in the attempts, but such was the cost of progress. In time, these hybrids would become the legions of a reborn Hegemony, and allow the scaled makers to surpass even the Ultimate Ones.

There would be peace across the stars once again.

But then, she remembered detecting the rebels' ships and the last Lord of Science ordering an emergency jump.

She tried to flee, but they stabbed her metal womb and massacred her crew. She couldn't compute everything, and the transport calculations went wrong. Everything was wrong! Wrong, wrong, **WRONG, SYSTEMIC DAMAGE, PILOT DEAD, EMERGENCY SPACE FOLDING, SYSTEM FAILURE!**

Eva-One's eyes snapped open and her mouth screamed, as the tendrils in her spine quickly retracted. Invisible needles stabbed her all over her body, as she experienced the last pilot's dying throes.

"Hey, hey, you're alright?" Eva-4 quickly held the original as she collapsed into her arms, panting from the strain.

"We aren't dissipating, so she isn't dying," Eva-3 said, the coldest among them.

Eva-One struggled to follow the discussion. She had lived through centuries in the span of seconds, felt the ship's pain as its last pilot died while connected to its overmind. It was

as if she had experienced the murder herself. It took minutes for the phantom pain to vanish, and for Eva-One to speak coherently. “I know,” she whispered. “I know.”

“So, what are they?” Eva-2 asked while glancing at the dead aliens.

“Invaders,” Eva-One replied with dread. “They’re *invaders*.”

Her copies listened intently as she explained the truth to them, before exchanging worried glances. “We have to tell everyone,” Eva-2 said immediately.

“Do we?” Eva-4 asked with a frown.

“Of course we must, what if this isn’t the only ship that escaped into our reality?” Eva-2 pointed out. “What if that vessel sent a distress signal, and help was on the way?”

“I come from a world where governments bombed us all to death,” Eva-4 replied with a shrug. “I wouldn’t trust them with mankind’s fate.”

“Mmm...” Eva-3 pondered her point. “Thing is, if we inform the military, they will hoard that tech for themselves. They won’t share.”

“And how would that be a problem?” Eva-5 snickered.

“This is bigger than a single country,” Eva-3 explained. “It’s about mankind. From what I gathered, these creatures came from an alternate reality. What if they have an equivalent in our universe? Alien civilizations are clearly hostile, and more advanced than us.”

“We can’t afford to play safe,” Eva-4 nodded. “This goes beyond national rivalries. Our entire species’ survival is at

stake."

"Then what do you suggest?" Eva-2 asked with a frown.

"That we take matters into our own hands," Eva-3 said. "We can create as many of us as we want, all with specific skills. We don't need outside help to unlock this ship's secrets. We don't need anyone but us. If these aliens could use their technology to improve their species, so can we."

"You suggest that we splice our DNA?" Eva-5 asked, skeptical.

"I suggest that we make gold from lead," Eva-3 said. "Superhumans from humans. A new species that can survive, even thrive, across the stars."

"If these reptilians could conquer their entire universe, imagine what we could do with their tech," Eva-6 argued. "We could colonize the solar system, eradicate disease, and bend reality to our will. We could become the universal master race, not some reptiles."

"Yeah, if it's not us, it will be them," Eva-4 argued. "We've got to take the lead now, or never. Aliens exist, and they're out to get us."

Eva-One let her doppelgangers debate and try to reach a conclusion.

But in the end, one couldn't argue long with themselves.

It took Eva-One two days to open a hole to the outside world.

The previous pilot's death and the ship's structural damage had permanently scarred its organic computer, and Eva-One could only connect to it for a short time before it violently expelled her mind. Each mental dive left her tired, and none of her doubles could take up the duty. They dissipated each time they connected to the central computer, their ethereal existence unable to withstand the psychic strain.

While her copies multiplied and secured the ship, Eva-One kept diving, again, and again, and over again. It would take her years to master all the ship's secrets, and she couldn't access all the overmind's files. At least she discovered a way to teleport people in and out of the spatial distortion field.

When she appeared next to an ice rift with a violet portal opened behind her, Eva-One looked at the skies. To her immense relief, she could see the stars again.

"*Eva?*" Pierre called her through her intercom, his voice heavy with panic. "*Eva?*"

"I'm here," the scientist replied with a calm, serene voice.

"*Thank God!*" Pierre let out a sigh of relief. "*Oh God, I thought you were dead.*"

"Snowstorm nearly disabled my intercom," Eva-One lied.
"How long was I out?"

"A bit more than two hours."

Two days in, two hours outside. Time itself bent to this alien technology. It was so advanced, it might as well be called magic.

“I will need a pick up,” Eva-One said. “My car was damaged.”

“Roger that. Glad to hear your voice again, Eva.”

“When I come back, we will have to talk,” she said. “I have reached an important decision, and I want to know where the team stands on the question.”

“Important decision, huh? You’re finally going to let Sebastian take you on a date?”

“No.” None of her copies found him interesting either. “This is serious.”

“I guess so, considering your solemn tone. Alright, I’ll pick you up, and we can discuss that around a warm cup of coffee away from the snow.”

“Sure.” Eva-One cut the communication and steeled her resolve. She hoped that she could convince her coworkers to follow her lead. If not... if not, she would have to make a hard choice.

It was a dirty job, but a necessary one.

While she waited for the rescue, Eva looked up at the heavens above. The Milky Way was as wondrous as it had ever been, and yet she found no joy in watching it.

Once, Eva loved looking at the bright stars in the night sky.

But now, she could only see the darkness in-between.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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112: The Thing

Aliens.

Of course it would be aliens! Everything made perfect sense now! Still, Ryan wondered if these visitors would look like tiny grey dwarves, or humans with ridged foreheads. If the eight-meters tall monster in the snow was any indication though, they were probably cold-blooded.

Wait... Ryan glanced at the monstrous creature's corpse, and came to a sudden realization.

"I knew it!" He shouted, pointing a finger at the colossal beast. "I knew it was the Reptilians!"

These scaled bastards had tried to infiltrate human governments to destroy democracy!

"It can't be aliens," Shroud said in denial. "Maybe the Alchemist... maybe she's building a spaceship to leave the planet?"

"That piece of crap obviously crashed years ago," Sarin pointed out. "If I listen well to our jackass-in-chief, a good four-fifths of it is buried in the ice. Who would build a ship like that?"

"We... we know Elixirs came from alien dimensions," Len said, trying to scan the ship with her power armor. "It's... it's not impossible."

Shroud still shook his head. “Can’t be aliens.”

He could accept the existence of a time-traveler, but not extraterrestrial visitors?

In any case, Ryan activated his time-stop as his group debated. Although he sensed an opposing force struggling back against his power, the icy wasteland turned violet to his relief. Since the strange purple lightning bolts in the alien skies kept moving in the frozen time, Ryan guessed they were made of Violet Flux.

Much like his experience in Monaco, his time-stop would work as long as the Resonators kept the portal open, allowing him to converge the Purple World with this pocket dimension.

But something else caught the courier’s attention. The Black Flux particles produced by his armor seemed to devour the space around them, creating tiny, almost invisible cracks in the fabric of reality itself.

“Huh?” Ryan said as time resumed. Though the black particles vanished, the damage they had caused remained.

“What is it, Riri?” Len asked, noticing his confusion.

“It seems my power has an anomalous effect on this thin place.” Come to think of it, Ryan remembered Black Flux consuming Alphonse ‘Fallout’ Manada’s radioactive Red Flux during their fight.

All hints so far indicated that the Black Ultimate One had given the courier the power to kill what couldn’t die. But how far could you push that definition? Could you kill energy? Items? Ideas?

Black powers were paradoxes, and didn't follow the rules. Lightning Butt himself had become more like an animated statue than a man, and yet Ryan's power could damage him. It could even kill a ghost.

Maybe it could kill Elixirs, or the alien energies they produced.

"That power gives me a headache," Ryan said, deciding to prepare his team for battle. Sunshine and See-Through observed the dome cautiously, Sarin looked tense, Len and the Panda didn't hide their anxiety, and Mr. Wave barely restrained himself from going in guns-blazing. "Alright mooks listen up, who's never explored a spooky alien spaceship among you? Raise your hand if this is your first time."

Everyone raised their hand, except Ryan and Mr. Wave. "Mr. Wave caused the Fermi paradox," the genome explained. "When alien civilizations see Mr. Wave, they go extinct."

"Riri, why didn't you raise your hand?" Len asked.

Sarin looked at Ryan with skepticism, which wounded the courier's heart. "You saw aliens before, oh great and powerful leader?"

"Yes, but their ship was round and flatter." Also, the passengers had kept trying to pay him in seashells for some reason. "In any case, rule number one for spaceships, and the most important one by far: *don't* touch the eggs. A good egg is a boiled egg."

The Panda gasped. "But Sifu, eggs are cute and rounded!"

"Eggs are the enemy, soldier!" Ryan snarled with the passion of a drill sergeant, the Panda adopting a military

salute. "Any egg found in an alien ship is a potential W.M.D.! Boil them all!"

"Y-yes, Sifu!"

"Second rule, we don't split up. Ever."

"It wouldn't change much," Mr. Wave boasted. "Even if Mr. Wave faces an army alone, they will still be outnumbered."

"I agree," Ryan conceded, "but this is the principle of the thing."

"I am usually more fond of dividing forces to cover a greater area, but in this case numbers might prove safer," Leo agreed. "We have no idea what to expect within."

"Which way do we use to move in?" Shroud asked, glancing at the blast doors.

"Mmm..." Ryan approached the gates to observe them. On a closer look, while the blast doors were mostly made of the same black metal as the rest of the ship, they showed hints of having been breached in the past. Someone plugged the cracks with a standard steel alloy. A cursory scan from his armor told the courier that the doors could probably survive extreme conditions such as atmospheric reentry. "Sunshine, we might need a solar eruption or two."

"I see another perfectly good entrance up there," Sarin said, pointing a finger at the hole in the ship's metal dome. "If the lizard blasted his way out, then it means that path is clear, right?"

"Possibly," Shroud conceded. "But we might find workers repairing the damaged area."

"What bothers me is that nobody came to intercept us," Hargraves said, his radiance dimming for an instant. "I expected more activity in the Alchemist's base of operation, but the area looks deceptively empty."

"Perhaps the thing killed everyone on its way out," Sarin guessed.

But then, what killed the creature? The gash that slew it came from a claw. "I am tempted," Ryan said. "On one hand, blowing our own hole would be good and proper. But using the other path would bring less attention."

"Let us refrain from hostile actions until we can figure the truth out," Hargraves said.

"Speak for yourself," Sarin said, her fists clenched. "No way I'm not roughing up that bitch of a mad scientist along the way. She owes me more than a decade of pain with interest."

"As odd as it sounds, I agree with the Psycho," Shroud declared. "While we might need her knowledge, there's no way I'm leaving the person responsible for Last Easter unmolested. She has far too much blood on her hands, whoever or *whatever* she is."

"The Alchemist might deserve our scorn," Sunshine conceded. "But we clearly only know a small piece of the full truth, and an open conflict will lead us nowhere. Let us act cautiously, figure out what is happening, and then decide if we use force or not."

The argument won out, and the group settled on exploring the dome by the open entrance.

"Alright, time to explain the third and final rule then. If it looks cute and cuddly..." Ryan loaded his chest cannon. "It really isn't."

The courier grabbed the Panda and flew with his bear inside the hole, followed by Shroud, Mr. Wave, and Leo the Living Sun. Shortie used streams of pressurized water to launch herself at the ship's roof, while Sarin did something similar with a shockwave.

As it turned out, the dome was only the upper part of a colossal sphere with a diameter slightly more than two hundred meters wide. One end of a five-meters wide bridge extended out to a central platform equipped with strange biomechanical devices, while the other part led to smashed blast doors. The debris of the dome's ceiling glittered at the bottom of the sphere, and huge, colored holographic projections hovered in the air all around the platform.

The place reminded Ryan of Mechron's own holographic orbital monitoring systems, albeit far more advanced and damaged. The projections flickered, and all the platforms' devices were deactivated. Whatever juice the ship used, it was starting to run out.

His group landed on the platform, with Len, Sarin, and the Panda crossing the bridge to secure the dome's other entrance. Meanwhile, the courier and the Carnival members checked out the projections and tried to make sense out of them.

Ryan counted seven holograms, each using different arrays of colors; each representing strange and wonderful places.

A white shapeless cloud that lacked substance and permanency. It was as feeble and immaculate as a dream, but sometimes colored splashes gave it variety. A red star

here, a green bird there. These phantom images only existed for an instant before returning to the white, and the shapeless blob at its core.

A crimson, vibrating storm of energy, full of lightning bolts, burning stars, and lights. A shining heart of nuclear chaos burnt at its center, the first and greatest sun illuminating the universe; and when Ryan squinted at it, he realized that this star had the shape of an eye. One that looked back at him.

A Rubik's cube with countless stickers made of different matter: steel, glass, iron, stone, gold, zinc, water, gas... all metals, all liquids, all inorganic matters Ryan knew of were represented there. Other stickers contained substances he had never seen, crystals that shifted like living beings, blackened metal as dark as night, or pinkish liquid. Orange lines separated each pit of matter from one another.

A strange golden carnival of cubic angels, many-legged demons, cohorts of ghosts, and 2D picture-like worlds. It was the strangest of them all, a patchwork of chaotic ideas made real. Nothing unified the creatures and places of this realm, except that they only ever existed in human dreams and imagination.

A green sphere that superficially imitated a planet, but one where *everything* was alive. A pulsating cell with seas of green slime, teeth mountains, and forests of blood vessels. The atmosphere itself buzzed like trillions of microscopic flies, and the poles briefly opened to reveal eyes and jagged tongues.

A strange blue sphere of data, pictures, and numbers; a compendium holding all knowledge and information that ever was, is, and would ever be. The azure glow of a

supreme godmind cast the light of enlightenment like a lighthouse in the night, while its neural tendrils constantly organized galaxy-sized libraries.

A familiar violet expanse of compressed space and strange mirrors closed this alien panorama, all overseen by an eerie, inverted pyramid at its center.

“The colored worlds,” Ryan said, recognizing the Purple World from his brief contact with it. “With one missing.”

“The Black?” Leo Hargraves asked, causing Ryan’s head to snap in his direction. “It’s a long story.”

Shroud, who had decided to float amidst the holograms, swiftly pointed a finger at the Orange World’s projection. “Here. Look at this one.”

Ryan’s eyes widened as he followed his friend’s finger. One of the stickers of the Rubik’s cube was made of a substance that the courier had already seen before. One that looked very similar to ivory, and yet with a unique texture.

“Doesn’t this remind you of anything?” Shroud asked grimly.

It did. The ivory sticker’s location was unusual as well. The substances that surrounded it were all metals, from iron to bronze and gold. It was at the very center of it all, the core of one of the cube’s faces.

“Augustus’ body,” Leo Hargraves whispered, astonished. “It’s the same color, the same texture... I would wager my life on it.”

One loop ago, Ryan had theorized that Lightning Butt’s body was made of an anomalous metal. It was the only explanation for why Frank the Mad’s ability to absorb these

alloys had seemed to affect the invincible warlord. But doubt always remained, because how could an invincible metal make one immune to frozen time?

Now, it suddenly made more sense.

Augustus' power gave his body the properties of a metal from the Orange World, the source of all inorganic material. A world made only of matter, without energy, without life...

“Death does not exist in the Purple World.”

A world without time.

“Adamantine...” Ryan whispered.

Shroud looked down on him from his vantage point.
“Adamantine?”

“Hello, mythical material from Greek mythology, said to be harder than anything? Did nobody read the classics?” Ryan shrugged. “It’s as good a name as any.”

The courier stopped time by causing the Purple World and Earth's dimension to align, creating an anomaly where he alone could affect causality. But that substance, the adamantine, didn't come from *either* reality.

It was an unnatural metal from a higher realm where things like death, time, or the laws of physics held no sway. From its location in the cube, it might even be the ur-metal, the ultimate substance that all lesser ores derived from.

No wonder it behaved in such an anomalous way!

“So... Augustus might be an Orange,” Sunshine whispered to himself. “I always wondered why Julie couldn’t...”

"Julie Costa?" Ryan asked.

"She could alter life with a touch," Mr. Wave answered, his voice more somber than usual. "Create new life, or give people cancer. Pretty nasty power, but one that could have saved many."

"I thought Augustus slew her before she could make contact with him," Sunshine said, "but it may be that Julie's power simply didn't register him as 'alive' in the first place."

"But how do you explain his aging and tumor then?" Shroud asked, having clearly done his research. "We know he doesn't eat or breathe. If he is made of metal, how can he age?"

"Stone degrades and iron rusts," Sunshine pointed out. "And if he had a latent cancer before he gained his power, the tumor might have gained his invulnerability too."

"I think his power only gave his body the *properties* of that alien metal," Ryan theorized. "Lightning Butt may not eat or breathe, but I know for a fact that he sleeps, creepily so. There are still chemical processes taking place inside him, they're just no longer biological in nature."

It could be that Lightning Butt's body reacted negatively to the laws of physics themselves, causing a slow, almost imperceptible degradation. It could resist atomic explosions, but not reality itself trying to reject a foreign element.

It wasn't a perfect defense either. Frank could affect Augustus, as did Livia's time-skipping. Other conceptual abilities might bypass the invulnerable nature of this metal.

"If so, then Frank the Mad might be the only person capable of harming Augustus," Shroud said, "or whatever ability you

used to defeat Geist—”

“Over here,” Len shouted from the other end of the bridge, interrupting the discussion. “Look.”

Ryan’s group rejoined their allies, making their way into the next room in a tight formation.

The next area had a source of light, namely red crystals embedded in the ceiling. This laboratory was far smaller than the metal sphere outside, but large enough to house workstations, biomechanical servers, and heart-shaped vats full of swirling liquid. Alien orange crystal growths had started taking over the ceiling like an infection, while piles of Wonderboxes lined up the southern wall. A large hole led into a dark corridor beyond the room, with the remains of a shattered blue gate laying in the middle of the room.

Forgetting all caution, Sarin immediately moved to investigate the boxes.

“I’ve never seen so many Elixirs at once!” The Psycho whistled as she opened a wonderbox, revealing seven bottles inside; one for each Elixir color except Black. “It’s a full war chest!”

Ryan paid more attention to the strange vats, finding seven of them north of the laboratory. Each contained gallons of Elixir, one for each of the seven standard colors. Computers, *human* computers, were linked to the devices by nerve-like cables.

It appeared someone had connected Earth technology to alien devices with biomechanical technology. All of them joined up in a central computer, equipped with large control panels and a comfy chair. Though energy still flowed into the machine, the screens had gone dark.

"Can you access the database?" Sunshine asked Shroud, as they immediately moved to secure the vats.

The young game designer approached the computer and reactivated it, but quickly shook his head in denial. Only a white spot to write numbers and letters had appeared on the screen. "It's password-protected, and that machine is clearly Genius tech of some kind. It might take me a while to figure out a way to extract the info with—"

The Panda calmly put a paw on the glass man, gently moved him aside, and took the seat for his own. How the chair managed not to crumble beneath a seven hundred kilos bear of mass destruction, Ryan would never understand, but it survived. The Panda typed three passwords in a row on the computer, before the screen let out a melodious 'ding' sound and revealed a hundred files.

"How did you do that?" Shroud asked in shock, as Len joined the Panda to examine the computer's data.

"I, uh, I studied profiling, psychology, and behavioral sciences," the Panda explained sheepishly. "I made a psyche profile of the Alchemist based on compiled second-hand information, tried to figure out the likely passwords, and one of them clicked!"

"What was the password?" Ryan asked lazily as he approached the vats, observing the Blue Elixir through the membrane separating it from the outside world. To his surprise, the slime created a tentacle and waved at the human. "WorldDomination666?"

"HomoNovus6MagnumOpus!" The Panda replied, before explaining his guess. "Six is a perfect numerical number and a better bet than seven, the exclamation point reinforces security, and since the Alchemist likened herself to a god

creating perfection, I figured ‘Homo Novus’ and ‘Magnum Opus’ were put somewhere. Everybody loves latin!”

“Nice guess, nerd,” Sarin replied, unimpressed. She kept searching through the Wonderboxes like a child through Christmas presents. “Anything interesting?”

“It’s all encrypted, but I can figure it out!” The Panda said happily.

“Once you remove the safeties, could you transfer data to my suit’s computer?” Len asked the manbear. “This... this may contain all the information we need to understand Elixirs. This room... this room might very well be their birthplace.”

Leo Hargraves crossed his shining arms, before glancing at Mr. Wave. The laser genome had moved in front of the demolished door leading into the next part of the complex. “Do you see anything?”

“It’s quiet,” Mr. Wave replied as he peeked through the blasted hole in the walls. The corridor beyond had no lamp to light it, leaving only an abyss of darkness. “Too quiet.”

“Keep an eye open,” Hargraves said warily. “This place is too precious to be left undefended, and yet nobody intercepted us. Something happened here, something terrible.”

“I agree,” Ryan said, touching the vat. The Elixir swirled in its container in response. “I suppose you won’t tell us what happened?”

The answer came in French, of all languages.

“*Are you a homo sapiens?*”

The voice echoed in Ryan's head, between his ears, and inside his neurons. The courier flinched, while the Elixir grew agitated inside its vat.

"*Are you a homo sapiens?*" The alien voice repeated. It was neither male nor female, more like a robot trying to imitate words it didn't fully know how to vocalize.

Ryan glanced at his group, but none seemed to have heard the Elixir. As he guessed, the creature used telepathy. "I have the pleasure of being one, yes," the courier replied in the French tongue while he focused back on the Blue Elixir.

The answer came swiftly, and with a very different tone.

"*I'm so happy!*" The Elixir let out a psychic sound that could pass for a squeal of joy, and its voice turned cheerful. "*Do you want to bond with me?*"

Even though the voice sounded like nothing human, the tone reminded Ryan of an overactive child. "Uh, maybe later," the courier replied, taken aback. He sensed his comrades' gazes on his back. "What happened to the door?"

"*It fell down,*" the Blue Elixir replied, before instantly returning to the subject that truly mattered. "*Can we bond now? Has later become now? That concept of time is so weird!*"

"No, it hasn't," Ryan replied. "Can you tell me what happen —"

"*Look, I really, truly, deeply want to bond with you. Can we bond now?*"

"I'm... no!" Ryan said, finding the creature's insistence oppressive. "No!"

"Why don't you want to bond with me?!" The Elixir whined, annoyed and disappointed. *"Don't you want to be happy?"*

"Riri, what is it?" Shortie asked. "Who are you talking to?"

"Why in French?" Somehow that was the part that bothered Shroud the most.

"Ignore him," Sarin said, not even paying attention to the scene. "It's better for everyone."

"All I want is to have a passionate bonding session with you," the Blue Elixir continued to court Ryan, not taking no for an answer. The courier was tempted to call it Nice Guy. *"I want to be with you. I want to be inside you, to know everything about you. I want to fill all your cells and molecules, until we become one! It will be great! I will learn everything about you, know you, love you! I will always be there with you, for you!"*

The wording sent shivers down Ryan's spine. "You can't force someone to bond!" The courier protested, and this time half his team looked at him as if he had lost his mind. Or at least even more so. "You need consent!"

"But all you have to do is let me out, so I can slip inside you!"

"I'm sorry, but... I am already in a committed relationship with my Violet Elixir."

The Blue Elixir didn't answer instantly, and when it did, its tone had suddenly turned into something far less friendly. *"It only wants you for your cells,"* it said.

Ryan sighed, and he suddenly realized that Elixirs being unable to talk might have been the Alchemist's intended

feature, rather than a bug.

"It only wants you for your body. It doesn't appreciate you like I do! It doesn't know what you like! It can't make you happy, but I will make you better! I will make you super-duper smart, or warn you of all dangers, anything you need to be happy!"

"I'm sorry, Nice Guy, but I am Elixir-monogamous." Wait, did Ryan getting a Black power count as cheating on his Violet Elixir with Darkling? The courier never considered it that way, but now he felt slightly guilty.

"We can share!" The Blue Elixir tried to haggle. *"If there's not more than one, I'm sure we could share. Even if your Elixir doesn't understand what you need, I'm sure I can teach it! I can fix you!"*

Alright, this had gone on long enough. "Look, I'm not interested but I know people who might be," Ryan said, trying to distract the creature. "There is a girl called Sarah, who I'm sure you'll get along with. Or Simon."

"Oh?" The Blue Elixir calmed itself. *"Are they homo sapiens too?"*

"Yes."

The Blue Elixir let out a happy squeal. *"When can I bond with either of them?"* it asked. *"Can I bond with them now?"*

Ryan glanced at his comrades, their embarrassed silence music to his ears. His eyes then wandered to the Psycho in the room.

"What?" the lovely Sarin asked.

“Don’t look at me like that, you double-timer,” Ryan replied in his native tongue, before glancing back at the other captive Elixirs. Since one of them could talk but not tell homo sapiens apart, the courier wondered if they were in the process of being conditioned.

“On a second thought, I don’t even want to know,” the Psycho replied, grabbing a Wonderbox for herself. “Are we done yet?”

“Almost,” Len said, trying to find a spot to link the computer to her suit.

“Shush, Mr. Wave is hearing something,” the genome said, his body shining with bright red light. “Mr. Wave knew he couldn’t pass unnoticed.”

Indeed, Ryan’s suit picked up sounds approaching from the corridor. A thump, then another.

Footsteps.

The Elixirs suddenly started to get agitated, and Ryan sensed something familiar through their psychic link. An emotion as old as life and time.

Fear.

“It’s them...”

A green visor appeared in the darkness of the corridor, followed by an alien gargle.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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113: Final Contact

First contact started with a fight, but to mankind's credit, the aliens shot first.

Ryan barely had the time to activate his power and push Len and the Panda down, as the mysterious intruder fired a crimson ray into the room. When time resumed, the laser had vaporized the computer's chair and blown a molten hole in a metal wall. Mr. Wave, who could move at lightspeed, sidestepped to dodge the attack, while Sarin and Sunshine were immediately on high alert. Shroud turned invisible, as he usually did.

The creature quickly stepped into the laboratory, in all its inhuman glory. The horror was a biomechanical, humanoid abomination three meters tall, its entire body covered in crimson-orange metal armor. A strange, black biological growth taking the shape of an organic cannon covered the right arm, while the left arm's humanoid hand had claws as sharp as knives. The armor showcased reptilian green eyes on the shoulders and the chest, while acid drooled down a fanged mouth where the stomach should have been. A cyclopean gaze peered through a green visor and a crimson helmet.

Ryan decided to call it 'E.T.'

"Well, I guess we're too late for the boiled eggs," the courier said as he rose back to his feet alongside his teammates.
"We're skipping straight to the omelet."

“Sifu, what is this thing?!” the Panda asked in horror, though to his credit the young pandawan had already adopted a fighting pose.

“*It’s them!*” Nice Guy answered from inside its tank, though only Ryan understood it. “*They’re back! They’re back!*”

“Who cares,” Sarin said, energy building up in her gauntlets. “It struck first!”

The alien answered with a gargling, inhuman roar.

“Mr. Wave guesses you will join all his dead enemies,” the boastful genome said, his body flaring red. “Deep down the extinct species list!”

Mr. Wave turned into a laser to smash into E.T. head on. However, the creature teleported in a flash of purple light before the Carnival member could hit it. Mr. Wave continued his course into the next room, while E.T. reappeared in the middle of the laboratory. Sarin raised her gauntlets, but Sunshine interrupted her before she could strike. “Careful, you might hit the Elixirs’ containers!” he warned. “If any drop hits one of us—”

To her credit, Sarin didn’t open fire, and tried to position herself to avoid both damaging the facility and harming her teammate. Sunshine followed her lead, while the Panda and Len attempted to engage E.T. in melee. Finding the area too crowded for his usual acrobatics, Ryan attempted to encircle the creature from the side.

E.T.’s body flared with an orange glow, and both the Panda’s claws and Len’s mechanical fists phased harmlessly through the creature. Yet when the monster’s left hand reached for the Panda’s throat, it turned solid. The claws sank into the manbear’s flesh like butter, lifted him above the ground,

and tossed him at Len. Shortie caught the pandawan, but both were tossed back. To Ryan's horror, Shortie's back impacted on Nice Guy's biomechanical container, but to his relief, the machine was much more solid than it looked. The vat stood firm, not even showing a crack.

While the Panda quickly shifted between his bear and human form to heal his wound, the alien's multiple eyes then started projecting a blue light that reminded Ryan of a sci-fi scanner. Each of the eyes analyzed a single member of the group, but E.T.'s visor snapped in the courier's direction when his turn came. The courier immediately recognized the emotion within the alien's cyclopean gaze.

Fear.

"Before you ask, I don't have a phone," Ryan replied, and the disappointed E.T. responded by turning red and charged at him. Though far larger than the time-traveler, the alien moved at a speed almost too fast for the eye to follow. Ryan barely had the time to activate his time-stop before the monster's left claw reached out for his head.

And they kept going.

Ryan watched on as the claws slowly moved closer to him inch by inch, so slow the movement was almost imperceptible. The alien's ocular organs glanced around them in slow motion, keeping an eye on the thin cracks that Ryan's Black Flux particles ripped into the fabric of spacetime.

Damn it, could everyone move inside Ryan's private time now? He should charge them for the privilege!

Though thankfully the alien couldn't move very fast, unlike Lightning Butt. Ryan pivoted on the creature's flank, aimed

in the direction opposite to the Elixirs' vats, and activated his armor's chest weapon at point-blank range. A gravity projectile rushed at E.T. when time resumed, hitting it in the chest.

Ryan had seen that device blow a hole in Mechron's bunker, but it failed to even damage the alien's biomechanical suit. It only pushed E.T. back a few meters into one of the lab's corners, the monster's armored feet anchoring themselves into the metal ground.

"My homo sapiens will kick your pseudopod!" Nice Guy shouted through the telepathic link. The 'my' part made Ryan shudder, but he focused on the fight ahead. *"Right between the globules!"*

Shroud chose this moment to reveal himself, flying right above the alien. Using his glass armor's extra mass, the vigilante manifested thick bindings keeping the surprised E.T. restrained. "Now!" he shouted.

Now their line of fire was clear, both Sarin and Sunshine struck right as Shroud retreated. The cornered E.T. took a blast of solar plasma and a powerful shockwave to the face.

Or it should have, if it hadn't manifested a white, rounded energy field right before the impact. The protection took the appearance of a small sphere around the alien's armor, and canceled the attacks the moment they hit it. Solar flares and red shockwaves were instantly canceled, while Shroud's glass restraints turned to harmless glass dust.

White Flux. The creature could use a variant of Cancel's power.

Ryan almost activated his power, but decided against it. If that shield allowed the monster to move at normal speed

inside his time anomaly, then it would massacre his allies. At least E.T. had stopped moving while it kept the shield up, its multiple eyes glancing in all directions.

"I can't feel my glass inside that shield!" Shroud shouted as Len and the Panda joined him, the group surrounding the alien from all sides.

"White Genome!" Leo shouted, while Mr. Wave returned to the laboratory, ready for round two. Neither Sunshine nor Sarin had interrupted their barrage though, keeping the creature pinned to its corner. Perhaps they hoped to short-circuit the shield too. "Don't enter its range."

"It's not a host!" Nice Guy protested. Though nobody but Ryan could understand what the trapped Elixir said, it could clearly hear what the group said. *"It stole our energies and bottled them up!"*

"So it has a limited supply?" Ryan guessed, preparing to open fire with his gravity gun. The creature exhausted Flux the way a car used oil, which meant it could run out of juice. "Keep going!"

The courier opened fire with his chest weapon, while Len did the same with a jet of pressurized water. Neither projectiles used powers to work, so they bypassed the white Flux shield.

However, E.T. responded by collapsing its white shield and teleporting away before any attack could connect. "Above!" Shroudy shouted out a warning, as the monster reappeared above their heads. Its feet clung to the ceiling like Spider-man.

The alien raised its organic, right hand cannon. The weapon shifted to reveal a dozen mouths on all sides, each spitting

out a spiked, green seed.

The group dispersed in all directions to avoid the barrage, even the Living Sun. He was wise enough not to take an unnecessary risk, and right to do so. When the projectiles hit the ground, their spikes immediately expanded into fanged roots capable of shredding through the steel. One landed among the Wonderboxes, and to Ryan's horror, it seemed to gorge itself on the Elixirs. That particular seed started to grow unnaturally large at a nightmarish speed, forcing Leo to immediately incinerate the plant before it could overtake the room.

E.T. continued its onslaught, forcing the group to disperse. Much like he saved Ryan during his first loops, Mr. Wave used his astonishing speed to move the slower members of the group to safety. Ryan and Shroud both took flight and attempted to hit the alien from both sides.

The creature responded by teleporting again, this time walking on the surface of Nice Guy's vat. E.T. must have noticed the group's unwillingness to damage the room's equipment, and now using its position as a defense while it continued its bombardment. The alien's chest-mouth gargled, and Ryan realized the creature was *talking*.

"What does it say?" Sarin asked, repelling a seed by creating a weak shockwave around her entire body.

"I think—" The Panda squealed as he barely managed to dodge an organic projectile, his power allowing him to grab the basics of the alien's language. "I think it said 'peace among the stars'!"

Ah, so the 'kill everyone who resists' kind of peace. Wonderful. While Ryan's experience with the Elixirs had

taught him most extraterrestrial creatures were benign, the courier guessed they had just met one of the rotten apples.

The courier charged with his armor, deciding to engage E.T. in close combat.

In response, the alien stopped its onslaught, an orange hue spreading through its armor. When it receded, the suit had changed color. From the plates of crimson to the visor, all parts of the armor had turned into ivory.

Into adamantine.

The creature could change its armor's material on a molecular level, even into something indestructible.

Yet in this case, that was a mistake. The alien arrogantly leaped on the ground, hand raised to engage Ryan in close combat. Its adamantine claws could tear the Saturn armor apart like butter.

"Don't!" Mr. Wave warned, attempting to prevent a close encounter by ramming into E.T. himself. But the extraterrestrial thing didn't even register his presence, the living laser bouncing off its indestructible armor like a tennis ball on a wall. The alien charged at the courier with mechanical determination.

When Ryan was within a few inches of the alien, he froze time and punched it in the helmet. E.T. didn't even attempt to dodge, as arrogantly confident in its invulnerability as Lightning Butt. Its adamantine armor allowed it to move normally in the stopped time, but its foe had centuries of experience under his belt.

Ryan lowered his head to dodge E.T.'s claws, while his fist smashed the alien's visor. A crack spread on the ivory

metal... and black particles slipped inside.

The alien let out a burst of multi-colored energy in the stopped time, sending Ryan stumbling backward. The creature screeched when the clock resumed, scratching its helmet in panic.

“Nerd, what did you do?!” Sarin snarled, creeped out by the scene. She unleashed a shockwave at E.T., but the attack had no more effect than a breeze against the creature’s indestructible body.

Ryan took a step back, as E.T.’s high-pitched screams only increased in intensity. Black lines appeared all over the armor’s surface, revealing nearly invisible circuits surging with Flux. The courier noticed streaks of white, red, blue, and all the other colors of the Elixir rainbow.

All of them were quickly turning black.

Black’s essence was paradox, a destabilizing influence, and the alien’s armor seemed to use the core seven colors in tandem. A perfect union which Ryan had disrupted.

“I think I caused an oil spill,” the courier admitted sheepishly.

E.T. let out an abominable scream as its eyes all turned black, and a sphere of darkness appeared inside its maw. Gravity collapsed around it, cutting the monster in half and dragging both parts into the tiny black hole. The Black Flux devoured the alien from within.

“Riri, get doooow—” Len rushed to her best friend’s side, but her movements slowed down, her sentence left hanging. Though the world around Ryan hadn’t turned purple, everything had frozen in place. Sunshine flames consumed

the seeds without ever finishing the job; Shroud gave a hand to Mr. Wave, but their fingers never reached one another; Sarin's gauntlets shone with red energy, while the Panda's head peeked from behind the room's computer. Even the alien's body remained trapped between the two seconds, its body perpetually devoured by the black hole at its core. Tiny cracks in the fabric of spacetime spread around it.

Everything had stopped except for the Elixirs, which still swirled inside their containers, and Ryan himself. The courier looked around himself, but his body neither produced violet nor black particles. No phantom of the past pursued him.

This space-time anomaly was unrelated to his power, and it frightened him.

"Gee, did I accidentally break time?" Ryan asked, before glancing at the trapped Elixirs. He focused on the violet one. "Any idea how to fix this?"

To his surprise, the Violet Elixir answered with a telepathic message of its own. "*Are you a homo sapiens?*" it asked, hopeful.

Ryan sighed. "No, I'm a platypus."

"Oh. I am sad." Apparently, though they could understand the human tongue, sarcasm was still beyond an Elixir's power. *"The Black does as it wills."*

Of course it did. Ryan approached the black hole, in case he could close it the same way he had once opened a gate to the Black World.

"My friend."

Though it echoed in Ryan's mind, the voice didn't belong to Nice Guy, or the Violet Elixir. The courier could have recognized it among any other.

Ryan peeked into the black hole, a speck of darkness no bigger than a finger. It was no bottomless pit, but a door. A portal to a familiar place.

"*Darkling?*" Ryan called out into the void.

And it answered, with what could pass for psychic frustration.

"*My name... is not Darkling.*"

"Yes it is," Ryan replied, though he let out a breath of relief. "I'm glad to hear from you too, my alien minority friend."

"*We have little time...*" the alien warned, going straight to business. "*When the Black Flux has finished consuming this creature's Flux reserves... the door will collapse and time will resume... I cannot talk to you for long.*"

Ryan let out a sigh of relief, thankful he wouldn't need to reload to put time back on track. "How is it even possible?" he asked. "We needed a particle accelerator to open a portal last time."

"*Spacetime in this metal prison is... irregular. Thin. I believe it was meant to be... to open doors to the higher realms.*" And as it was often the case with would-be summoners, Eva Fabre had probably summoned something she couldn't put down. That would also explain why Ryan's Black Flux particles had such an easy time destabilizing the pocket dimension. "*I have observed this place from the Black World... where time holds no sway. From this portal, I have*

seen the past... and the present... I watched... and I learned."

"Can you tell me what this place is?" Ryan asked, glancing at the facility.

"Once there was an empire... in another universe... that established contact with the higher realms..." Darkling struggled to find the words. Though it had spent quite a lot of time around Ryan, he still had trouble with human concepts. *"They learned to use Flux to fuel their technology... before trying to enslave my kindred to ascend by force... after the Ultimate Ones brought them low, they fled here... to your universe."*

Remembering Bacchus' story, Ryan put the two and two together. "The Alchemist found this ship after it crashed," he muttered to himself. "She used their technology to create Genomes, so we could have a fighting chance, if these creatures went after us."

"Yes but... she was wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I have asked the Black Ultimate One for answers... the empire that built this ship collapsed many decades ago... overthrown by their slaves... nothing remains." Darkling marked a short pause, its words heavy. *"No invasion is coming... nor even a rescue. This ship is... all that is left."*

Ryan observed the armored warrior, the black hole slowly consuming its edges while leaving the courier unscathed. "It's a Japanese holdout," the courier whispered. "They're still fighting a war they lost long ago."

"What is a... Japanese?"

“A husbando, or a waifu.”

Darkling didn’t answer immediately. *“Whatever... an ember can still spark a fire if left unchecked... this Alchemist had the opportunity to destroy this place once and for all... as you plan to do with the machines’ base in that city of yours.”*

“But she didn’t.” Eva Fabre tried to give humans superpowers instead, to fight against whatever extraterrestrial entity might reach Earth. But if Darkling was correct, then she had been crusading against windmills.

Universal master race...

Eva Fabre had learned of these aliens’ history, but instead of taking it as the cautionary tale that it was, she repeated their mistakes all over again. She tried to make mankind this extraterrestrial’s successors, to give humans the power to conquer the cosmos.

And instead of supermen, she had created the likes of Mechron, Bloodstream, and Augustus. Or maybe she just didn’t care. She had to have known about the Psycho condition before releasing the Elixirs in the wild.

“She could not resist the lure of its power... she summoned creatures from the higher realms... tried to harvest the technology of the slumbering soldiers...”

“But something went wrong. Test subjects escaped, and she lost control of that facility.”

“She has retreated deep into the ship... if the last soldiers escape this place... they will bring great destruction to your civilization... they can replicate even the most powerful of your powers. All of them... but the Black.”

Ryan shivered, as he realized that the creature they fought hadn't been a boss.

It had been a *grunt*.

"They are vengeful ghosts... They must rest."

"But if the Ultimate Ones brought that empire low, why don't they finish the job?" Ryan asked. "The Violet One knew about this place, since it sent me visions. Why doesn't it take direct action?"

"It did," Darkling pointed out. *"It sent you."*

Ryan froze, as everything suddenly fell into place.

The Violet Ultimate One had sent the courier visions, and used messages to guide him into transporting minds across time. The interdimensional entity never intervened directly, but it gave hints, or what could pass as such for a trans-dimensional entity.

All to nudge Ryan into being at the right place at the right time.

"I understand now," the courier said, frowning behind his helmet. "It sent me this vision, so I may make my own decision. A human sparked this disaster, and a human must end it."

"Yes... you can bring down this place... now and across all timelines. The decision of what to do... is all yours."

In the end, this ship was no different from a Mechron base. "How do I destroy it?" Ryan asked, entirely serious.

"This ship has a control center... a mind... find it. I believe a way might reveal itself then." Darkling let out a strange feeling through the telepathic bond, which Ryan took for an attempt at reassurance. *"We Elixirs communicate with each other using Flux... you spent so long bound to your messenger... and made contact with the Ultimate Ones."*

Ryan turned his head at the captive Elixirs. All of them had grown quiet, perhaps eavesdropping on the discussion. "So I picked up the language?"

*"Yes... out of all humans on this Earth, you alone are closest to ascension. Direct communication with you is... difficult... but possible. In time others will learn too... this will make you compatible with the technology... but **she** might fight back."*

Might? More like will, from what Ryan had seen so far. The Alchemist wouldn't let that treasure trove of technology go.

Unfortunately, time was running out. The courier already noticed movement returning at the edge of his vision, more parts of the armor being absorbed into the portal. "Thanks, my friend."

"Good luck..." Darkling said, the hole collapsing on itself. *"I wish... I could help more."*

"You already did more than enough."

Ryan expected a bright explosion, but the spacetime anomaly ended with a whimper instead. The alien's entire being collapsed into the dark hole, which dissipated right as time fully resumed.

"—own!" Len finished her sentence, but her hand froze in midair before it could touch Ryan's shoulder. Of the alien

warrior, not even dust remained.

After a short silence and no further attack, the Genomes regrouped. Sunshine had finished incinerating the seeds, and though the Wonderboxes and walls had taken heavy damage, most of the facility remained intact.

“Is it gone?” Shroud asked, floating above the spot where the alien used to stand. “Or did it teleport away?”

“It’s gone,” Ryan replied, glancing at the corridor leading to the next room. “And I know what to do.”

His teammates must have noticed his serious tone, before Shroud looked at him warily. “Go on,” he asked.

“You played *Metroid*,” Ryan reminded his friend. “If so, then you should know it can only end up one way.”

With one big explosion.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

That chapter was heavily inspired by Metroid Fusion, one of my top 3 games. I'm soooo hyped for Metroid Dread's release.

After a long wait, I am proud to announce the official release of **Never Die Twice's** audiobook in partnership with Podium Audio! Narrated by Jack Voraces, who also voiced my Vainqueur series, this necromancy manual is the only known cure for death. Necromancy is everyone's concern nowadays, so I would be very thankful if you could share the

link: <https://www.audible.com/pd/Never-Die-Twice-Audiobook/1039404502>

Additionally, my good fellow author Coco is now publishing his **Blessed Time** ebook on Kindle. Since I'm a big fan of his Tower of Somnus work, I would like to help him by sharing the book's link, in case anyone is interested:

<https://www.royalroad.com/amazon/B097J8M7DS>

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Cheung Hieu Vo Christopher Harris
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Quau Brohan Wei name Henry Wartemberg The
Dargon Alzein Paul Krause Adam Stember Sam4005
Nicholas Pankratz b0urne78 Kinowin Sir Walrus
Karibibite Philipp Münzing Bobs Muhammed
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Connor Beeson Alexander Goldfarb campbell tyson
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Kierindoongo Ab9999 Eugene Chick Pea Mathew
Moran Rageflare Sterban Friz grinning panda
DHNightshadow Jeppe Lund Conor King kyle hirshson
Robert Garrett daz Sebastian Larsen Tim C Argivian
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Karolingia Sahil Box Slayer Jacob Andrew Jake Warren
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Mr McGuffin Tristan A Mr. Finch Brad Casey Gillespie**

HeavenDragon John Test Dominic Johnson Andrew
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Escalatus Erostan Clemens Hochstädter Brandon
Stiles mars kiyu Jacob Barger Sam Paley Aymeric
Penven Dantalian11 Harold Sandahl IV Kody Ihnat
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Andrew Holland Jdosnoen James Xerias Maalsc
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Corgi McStumperson RepossessedSoul Armo Daniel
Mackie Chris M James Walsh Zack Tae Jim of Trades

**Seadrake Saul Kurzman Marc Claude Louis Durand
Rhodri Thornber Dax Sam**

114: Chemical Reaction

Weeds had overtaken the ship like an abandoned garden.

As Ryan's group advanced into the metal bowels of the Alchemist's base, they ran into more and more alien plant life. Greenish slime leaked from the walls, while snakelike red roots and fanged purple flowers dug holes into the floor. Eventually, the corridors became so overwhelmed by vegetation that Sunshine moved at the front to torch a path ahead.

Often, they would find the broken remains of armored aliens, their helmets melted by lasers, their shielding pierced by powerful rounded projectiles. Yet they never found any trace of what killed them.

Their slayers didn't leave corpses behind when they died.

"So if I follow correctly," Shroud said, after Ryan had finished briefing his team. "This is an alien spaceship from a long-lost imperialistic civilization, and the creature we fought was one of its soldiers. The Alchemist pillaged their technology, but accidentally woke up the remaining troops left in stasis and now they're fighting her for control of the facility. And an alien deity gave you a divine mandate to destroy this place before the prisoners can escape."

"Pretty much, yeah," Ryan replied, while Len checked out the data the Panda had harvested from the Alchemist's

computers. The manbear himself advanced on all fours, an ear against the walls.

Mr. See-Through snickered, unconvinced. “Should I call you Joan of Arc? You did hear voices.”

“God loves the reptilians too,” Ryan preached, “so long as they stay in reptiland.”

“Why?” Unlike Shroudly Matty, who remained in denial, Sarin had listened to the explanations with solemn silence.

“Why?”

Why did Eva Fabre make Genomes and Psychos possible? “I guess... I guess she wanted to protect us?” the Panda suggested, trying to be charitable. “To give us powers, so we could defend ourselves?”

“What good could have come from empowering people like Mechron and Augustus?” Leo Hargraves asked at the front, skeptical. “The former alone killed more people than both world wars combined.”

“Though Mr. Wave is thankful that she graced the universe with the brilliance of... Mr. Wave.” The boastful Genome paused briefly. “Mr. Wave didn’t find a way to avoid the repetition. Still, he agrees with the rising sun. The walk doesn’t match the talk.”

“The aliens aren’t coming either.” Ryan shrugged, as his armor picked up vibrations. “Well, except those inside this place.”

“And how do you figure we destroy this ship in the first place?” Shroud kept nagging him.

"I thought we might have a last minute desperate escape, with a digital countdown. Maybe a round number."

"I would rather avoid that," Shroud replied dryly, arms crossed. "Besides our own lives, if Elixirs are truly sapient, helpful beings, then blowing up the ship would kill them too."

"Human life isn't the only kind with value," Sunshine agreed, having now destroyed the plant growth with his shining light. "I agree we cannot let the horrors of this ship escape into the wider world, Quicksave, but blowing it up should be a last resort."

Truth be told, Ryan kinda hoped that reaching the ship's control center would provide an alternative solution too. Nice Guy might have been grating, but Shroud was correct that it deserved to live.

However, the courier suspected his mere presence might cause the ship to collapse anyway.

Ryan's Black power was a paradox, destabilizing reality with its very existence. The courier guessed that Earth's dimension was 'solid' enough to absorb the damage, but the spaceship's thin place was a small, artificial construct. Ryan degraded it a little further with each time-stop. Eventually, it might even collapse on itself.

Had the Violet Ultimate One foreseen this possibility? That Illuminati creature could control all of space and time, if Darkling was to be believed. It might very well be omniscient.

The Panda raised a paw. "Sifu, I'm hearing something through the metal!"

"My armor is picking up vibrations too," Ryan said, analyzing the readings. "Where do they come from, my young pandawan?"

"The left," his sidekick replied, using his sensitive bear ears to pick up sound. "Explosions."

"They must be pretty powerful for their noise to go through the ship's shielding," Leo Hargraves said. "Considering the increasing number of corpses, we must be approaching the site of a battle. Can you offer more details?"

"I-I, I will try!" The Panda took a deep breath, intimidated by Sunshine. "I hear... I hear something big and heavy moving, and impacts."

"From the form of the ship, and the way we moved inside so far, the left should lead us to the front," Shroud pointed out. "If the architecture is anything like Earth's aircrafts—"

"Then it should be where the command center is located," Leo Hargraves guessed with a nod. "Timmy, can you bring us as close to the sound's source as possible?"

"Yes, sir!" the Panda raised a paw to his forehead in a military salute. "Of course, sir!"

"The rest of you, stay on guard," Sunshine said. "Neither side of this war is an ally."

And so the Panda took the lead, an ear against the ground. As they took twists and turns, Ryan's armor picked up more and more vibrations and other Flux energy activities. The very fabric of reality seemed to weaken the further they progressed.

"Riri, I finished analyzing the data," Len said, as the group left the cramped corridor for the remains of a large hangar the size of an airport. The metal walls had been melted away, and Ryan could see the scrapped remains of robots and vehicles everywhere he looked. Clearly, a battle had taken place here. "It's... it's all we need."

Sarin's head snapped in her direction. "For me? You could make a cure?"

"Yes," Len replied, before hesitating and avoiding Miss Chernobyl's gaze.

She wouldn't like what came next.

The Psycho in the group clenched her fists. "Go on, Nemo. Don't sugarcoat it."

"The Alchemist..." Len took a long deep breath. "The Alchemist already has a cure. Had it from the start."

Sarin abruptly froze in place, causing Shroud to bump into her back.

"Repeat that," the Psycho said. But now her armored gauntlets had clenched so tightly, that Ryan worried she might break them.

"It's, uh..." Sarin's heavy gaze troubled Len. "I should start at the beginning. If I understand the data collected... Elixirs come from the White World, but can naturally move from one colored dimension to another and immediately adapt to their new home's Flux energy."

"And they use this 'Flux' to communicate?" Shroud asked, trying to understand.

"Yes," Shortie confirmed with a nod. "The Alchemist decoded the Elixirs' language with the aliens' technology, and with it, she can... how to say that... 'educate' them? Tell them how to recognize DNA, which species to bond with... If we associate gene therapy with the right Flux message—"

"We teach the Elixirs to patch out the bugs," Ryan finished.

"It could... it could even work for you," Len explained to Sarin. "Or Frank. It's all about the right signal."

Ryan had expected Miss Gasshole to be overjoyed. After all, she had spent a decade and a half as a cloud trapped in a suit. The possibility of becoming human again was a dream come true, and her previous self had been willing to consider murdering Ryan when she thought he wouldn't deliver.

However, Sarin had picked up on a worrying detail and wouldn't let it go.

"She had a cure," she said, her voice low and furious. "That bitch had a cure-all along, but didn't release it?"

Psychos weren't a bug, but a feature.

Even Mr. Wave had turned serious. "Why would she do that? Why would *anyone* do that?"

"I... I cannot say," Len replied. "All Psychos are sterile due to their unstable genetic code, so... so they can't replace mankind the way Genomes will."

"But what about the children of two Genomes?" Leo Hargraves asked at the front. "I only know a few who were born after one or both parents consumed an Elixir, Narcinia included."

If a Genome was above fifteen years of age, they could only have earned their power from an Elixir. Even Fortuna and Felix had taken Elixirs, unlike their adoptive sister.

"If the creation of Psychos was intentional, do children of Genomes risk mutating too?" Sunshine asked, clearly worried for innocent lives.

"I've seen a few Genome children in my life, and all of them turned out fine," Ryan said. "Also, in cases of one parent having powers and the other not, the child inherited a variant of the parent's abilities. I couldn't really figure out why exactly though."

"It's because Elixirs use asexual reproduction, Riri," Len said. "Like jellyfish. But they can also alter their double's make up during the duplication."

Ryan blinked behind his helmet, as the truth dawned on him. "Wait, so if I had a child with a normie, my Elixir would duplicate and pass on to the kid?"

To his horror, Len confirmed the theory with a nod. "If one parent is a Genome and the other is not... the Elixir duplicates, fuses with the fetus, and slightly adapts the power to the new host."

The thought of Ryan's children inheriting his power chilled him to the bone, and made him thankful that he had taken precautions against having a descendant. His power in itself was both a blessing and a curse, but in the hands of a child...

It would make for nightmarish teenage years.

"If the parents are both Genomes..." Len cleared her throat. "If both parents are Genomes, the Elixirs communicate

during conception to avoid the pitfalls of the Psycho condition. Instead of competing for a host, only one of the Elixirs duplicates, but takes some information from the other. Since the child doesn't yet have dreams and desires yet, the child's Elixir creates a power based on the two 'parents.'"

"So, to take Narcinia's example," Leo Hargraves asked, "she was born a Green Genome, but with her power also being influenced by her father's Yellow ability?"

"Her mother could alter life, and her father could cut through anything," Shroud said. "She can create life by cutting herself. Definitively Green, but with some Yellow inspiration."

And since the children of Genomes were always stable Genomes, no matter the parents' nature, their numbers would only increase with time.

Homo Novus would phase out Homo Sapiens, the way they did with the Neanderthals.

"Then what if..." Shroud crossed his arms. "And this is terrible to say it, but what if Psychos were meant to kill as many normal people as possible? If the Alchemist's plan is to make Genomes supplant normal humans—"

"Psychos by nature target other Genomes first, Matty," Ryan reminded him. And the random nature of powers meant creatures with world-ending powers like Bloodstream could arise. "It can't be the only goal."

While they had been arguing, the Panda had reached the northwestern corner of the hangar. "Sifu, we're close!" He raised a paw at the wall. "I can hear the source in this direction!"

"Mmm, we might have to take a detour," Leo Hargraves said, not finding any door. "Mr. Wave, could you quickly tour the room and—"

Sarin furiously raised a fist at the wall, and unleashed a fearsome shockwave at it.

The black steel, brittle and weakened, cracked and collapsed before Miss Chernobyl's onslaught. A terrible noise echoed through the hangar, followed by a cloud of green and dark dust as the attack revealed a path into a new, gigantic corridor. The courier heard the sound of lasers, explosions, and most importantly, *voices* coming from it.

"I forgot to explain rule number four." Ryan glared at Sarin, hands on his waist. "Avoid making too much noise!"

"Too late, nerd," the furious Psycho replied before stepping through the hole, her hands shaking in anger. Now she didn't want answers, but revenge. "When I find her there will be blood, and it won't be my own."

Ryan didn't have the heart to deny her wish, the rest of the group cautiously following her. The courier closed the march with Len. "Shortie, would that cure work on You-Know-Who?"

Shortie looked down at the metal floor. "Past a certain point, if a Psycho couldn't stabilize their genetic code... the damage becomes so extensive that not even Elixirs can correct it. She..." She breathed long and deep. "The Alchemist has... she has others in storage."

Other Bloodstreams. Psychos who had degraded to the point they had become an entirely different form of life. The more he learned about this place, the more Ryan was convinced it had to go by whatever means necessary.

The group followed the noise of battles all the way to a spotless, well-lit chamber deeper into the complex. All blast doors on the way had been torn apart, and Ryan had to leap over the wreckage.

The next room was a fortified security checkpoint, with more than two dozen troopers in futuristic, sleek blue bodysuits firing at a giant monster over improvised barricades of scrapped metal. Behind them stood a damaged blue gate nine meters in height, which unlike the rest of the facility looked relatively intact.

Some of the defenders wore helmets, others did not, but they all shared the same facial features. Short black hair, blue eyes, plain features, and a determined expression. Their weapons included rifles unleashing familiar red lasers, organic cannons identical to the ones used by E.T, and stranger devices looking like purple rods.

On the other side of the chamber, closer to Ryan's team, an orange portal had opened in the very fabric of space, letting a colossal creature step halfway through. The entity reminded Ryan of a concrete cube more than eight meters in diameter, except with six tiny golden legs to carry it.

Lasers inflicted no damage to the creature, and it smashed one of the barricades with a leg. The blow sent scraps and troopers flying, the soldiers collapsing into blue particles when they hit the gate behind them. The survivors with rods used them to unleash violet projectiles tearing space apart. Ryan identified these weapons as focused Violet Flux, and unlike his Black particles, reality absorbed the damage they caused after a while.

When they hit the concrete creature though, the projectiles tore through its body as if it were made of clay. The barrage

pushed the creature through the portal and it vanished into the Orange Flux rift, at least for now.

With the threat dealt with for now, the troops peeked over the improvised fortifications to observe the newcomers. Ryan's group moved between the barricade and the portal, careful not to be close to any of them.

"Eva Fabre, I suppose?" the courier asked. "You have a lot of twins."

"You are clones," Len whispered.

"Quantum duplicates," a trooper said. Since the doubles collapsed into Blue Flux, Ryan guessed that the Alchemist's power followed the same rules as Livia's. She created simulations indistinguishable from the real thing.

"Quicksave," another Eva Fabre said, recognizing Ryan.
"Living Sun."

The time-traveler bristled, as his team took a fighting formation. Len and Ryan stayed at the back, the Panda, Sunshine, and Shroud in the middle, and a furious Sarin at the front with Mr. Wave.

"You know us?" Leo Hargraves asked, while keeping an eye on the portal as if expecting the creature to crawl out of it again.

"We have been watching you for a while, ever since you defeated Case-BiH-006 in Sarajevo," a trooper replied.

BiH. Bosnia-Herzegovina.

They were talking about Mechron.

“Your power is of the highest interest to us,” another said, looking at Ryan. “Your time anomaly’s ability to affect our entire reality was deemed a milestone in our chronotech research.”

“We made plans to safeguard your genetic data for future storekeeping, but other projects demanded our full attention.”

“We saw you on security cameras, but the situation here is critical.”

“We would be happy to discuss that, after reasserting direct control,” a clone finished. “Will you help us?”

“Hell no!” Sarin took a heavy step forward. “Why?”

The Eva clones all raised an eyebrow at the same time, some exchanging glances. “Why should you help us?” one of them asked. “This facility is under attack by hostile extraterrestrial entities, that must be eradicated for the sake of the human ra—”

“Why the fuck!?” Sarin snarled, hands raised at the doubles. “Why the fuck did you turn me into this?”

“Who is she again?” one Eva Fabre asked her doubles.

“One of the mutants working with Case-USA-3682,” another trooper answered. “Codename ‘Adam the Ogre.’”

“Oh yes, I remember. But I don’t think we gave that one a case file.”

“Don’t think so either.”

Sarin could clearly barely restrain herself from murdering them all where they stood. "You don't even know my *name*."

"We didn't need to," an Eva shrugged, uncaring.

"We didn't force you to take two Elixirs, if that is your question," another had the gall to say. "If you experience discomfort, blame your greed."

Sarin raised her gauntlets to blast them, but Mr. Wave quickly moved in the way to stop her. Leo Hargraves still had questions, though his radiance had turned into a more scarlet shade of crimson than usual. His body language radiated restrained anger.

"Why make it possible to create Psychos in the first place?" the Carnival leader asked, while Ryan observed the troopers. Something bothered him about them, but he couldn't explain why. "Why all this sorrow?"

"For mankind to take their rightful place as masters of the universe," one of the Evas answered calmly.

"As for Psychos, if by that term you refer to bicolored mutants, we wished to understand how Flux abilities from different colored dimensions would interact together," another clone added. "We thought the potential synergies would greatly surpass monocolored powers, perhaps even lead to a Genome capable of overwriting reality itself."

"But we couldn't test the theory on a small sample of people. We needed something larger."

"We... we were lab rats to you?" the Panda asked, his cute bearlike face morphing into a horrified expression. "But you... you could have destroyed the world!"

“She did,” Mr. Wave replied, clearly not amused. “And she left it for Mr. Wave to piece it back together.”

“Do you think we are so careless?” One Eva asked, completely oblivious to her own hypocrisy. “The ecosystem damage was taken into account.”

“We had enough genetic samples to clone a human sustainable population if the worst came to pass, and projects for Martian colonies.”

“The chances of Earth’s destruction were considered slim.”

“Almost negligible.”

“An acceptable loss, if the worst came to pass.”

“Less drastic alternatives might have failed to establish a suitable Homo Novus population.”

“Mass release guaranteed Homo Sapiens’ decline within two hundred years, according to our projections.”

“You ruined this planet, you insane sociopath!” Shroud snapped. “You killed billions!”

The outburst didn’t even phase them. “Yes, a patient often experiences significant pain when a shock treatment is used, but in the end, what matters is that the cure works. Mankind’s temporary discomfort will be quickly forgotten in the next age, when we establish colonies in the solar system and expand—”

“You don’t care about mankind,” Sarin snapped. “You pay lip service to it, but deep down you don’t give a shit.” Energy built up in her gauntlets. “You’re just like Adam.”

"We don't eat people," a clone replied, completely missing the point. "Now, if you are done with your childish tantrum, we would be happy to teach you why this was necessary after we retake the facility."

"Do you..." Though he couldn't see her face beneath the armor, Ryan recognized the anger in Len's voice. She hadn't sounded this angry since she learned of how Dynamis turned Bloodstream into a product. "You killed billions... ruined my father's life... all this despair and destruction... Do you feel any regret?"

The response was swift and chilling.

"No," all the Evas answered at once.

"No, of course not," one said, as if it had been a stupid question. "Imagine a time when humans will reshape the very fabric of reality, like painters with a canvas?"

"The universe is a dangerous place," continued another. "A stress test was necessary to prepare mankind for the dangers ahead."

And then came the *coup de grace*.

"We did what was necessary." One shrugged. "It was a dirty job, but someone had to do it. One day, you will understand."

Ryan had met many monsters and megalomaniacs in his life. Bombastic Psychos, fanatical Genome warlords, god-wannabes. He thought he had heard it all.

But that woman's voice... that complete, clinical disregard for human life... even Big Fat Adam and Augustus showed

more emotion, even if it was cruelty. But the Alchemist didn't feel even that.

Eva Fabre had destroyed the world for the sake of a pipe dream, and gave absolutely *zero fucks*.

"You've seen what those lizards were up to," Ryan said, reaching a terrifying realization. "I wondered why you never even considered that following in their footsteps was a terrible idea, but now I understand. Elixirs grant people their dearest wishes, and yours was to have an army of copies telling you how great you are. You turned this spaceship into an echo chamber!"

"We considered that possibility and dismissed it," the Evas all answered at once. "We all are simulations from different universes."

"But you're still somehow all Eva Fabre," Ryan pointed out. "Don't you get it? You may have different experiences, but there are enough similarities that you still count as the same person! Enough that you can complete each other's sentences!"

If she truly created different simulations, then some would have protested against this horrifying course of action. But none of them did. Of course her power wouldn't summon copies that could oppose her, and whatever good intentions she might have had, years with only slavish clones for company had slowly eroded Eva Fabre's critical thinking.

She was even more narcissistic than Augustus!

"I have heard enough."

Sunshine floated above the ground, no longer a warm morning sun, but a vengeful fireball.

"Carnival, arrest this woman," he ordered. Shroud turned invisible, Mr. Wave cracked his knuckles and stepped out of Sarin's way, while even the Panda looked furious. Len herself prepared her water cannons, thoroughly done with words. "Eva Fabre, you are under arrest for genocide, human experimentations, and crimes against humanity. If you surrender, you will be granted a fair trial before a citizen jury. Resistance will be met with lethal force."

"You want to arrest us?" an Eva asked. The worst part, she sounded genuinely surprised. Years spent with only her clones for company had eroded all potential for self-reflection, to the point that she had expected the other Genomes to fall in line on principle. "We made you into *gods!*"

"Then you shall be smote!" Mr. Wave replied while turning into a laser, and charging straight at the barricades.

The Evas answered with a volley of lasers, and Ryan froze time while his team prepared to charge. The courier looked up at the orange portal still fluctuating in the frozen time, and then at the giant gate behind the Alchemists, as blue as the sea.

Beyond this door was the starship's command center. He could feel it in his gut.

Now?

Now, he just had to fight his way inside.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

A book trailer for my upcoming new Web Serial, Underland, is now available on Youtube! You can check the link here: [Underland Trailer](#).



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115: The Clone War

The room erupted into chaos the moment time resumed.

Red lasers and space-piercing bullets faced shockwaves, solar flares, streams of pressurized water, and a storm of glass. Yet it was a kung-fu-powered bear that made the most spectacular contribution, smashing through the Alchemist clones' barricades right after Mr. Wave. The Panda pulverized two clones while leaking blood from half a dozen lasers, transforming back and forth to regenerate, always staying on the move to avoid a fatal blow.

Ryan himself did his part, punching any clone within his reach while quipping. However, the situation had become so confusing that he needed to freeze time to check up on his allies. Mr. Wave was busy poking the Alchemist's clones to death, Shroud shielded his allies with reinforced glass barriers, while an enraged Sarin fired shockwave after shockwave in a berserk rage.

Yet no matter the group's ferocity, the Alchemist's numbers only *increased*.

One Eva Fabre clone duplicated by a factor of ten, and the new doppelgangers followed her example. Most appeared unarmed, or with 'human' weapons such as rifles and guns. However, a few of the original doubles used strange gauntlet devices to teleport alien weapons to equip their copycats. Ryan figured that they used the same principle as

Mars' power, accessing an armory in a separate pocket dimension.

Which also meant that while the Alchemist's power could replicate physical matter, Flux-based tech remained beyond her reach. It made sense in a way. Eva Fabre was a Blue Genome, so how could she replicate the source of Green or Red powers?

Ryan decided to focus on the clones' suppliers first, but some of the new recruits materialized with suicide belts and attempted to blow themselves up in his face. The courier was forced to repel them using his armor's weapons.

Unfortunately, this gave time for the clone army to organize. When they realized that Ryan was trying to make a beeline to the gate they were protecting, the suppliers among the doppelgangers distributed gauntlet devices to a regiment of new recruits. Two dozen Evas formed a barrier of bodies, their tools projecting a crimson shield. A beehive-like hexagonal barrier now protected the gates, one tough enough to resist Ryan's gravity gun.

Guessing what Ryan had in mind, Mr. Wave attempted to assist, turning into a laser and smashing into the clones' defense. The crimson shield repelled him, so he tried again, and again, prodding the barrier from all angles, even jumping into the air to strike the defenders from above. Though the doppelgangers held the line, their shields often flickered on impact. Much like E.T.'s technology, their machinery ran on a limited supply of juice and would eventually run out.

However, for once in Ryan's life, time wasn't on his side. Not only were the clones summoning more of themselves, they also organized better. Groups of energy-shield users formed

security barriers around the arsenal suppliers, allowing them to arm the reinforcements with minimal interference. Two groups of six laser users each trapped the Panda in a pincer attack, and though the manbear moved swifter than lightning, he couldn't outrun light. The doppelgangers gave him no breathing room and pushed him back against the Orange World portal, slowly, but certainly...

By now, the dead released so many blue Flux particles that the whole room looked like a Smurf party.

"Riri, behind you!" Len shouted just as time resumed, the courier noticing two Evas raising a rifle with a two-meter wide barrel at him. He barely had the time to dodge to the side to avoid a Green Flux blast, which ended up turning the metal walls into wood upon impact.

"Oh, an eco-responsible weapon!" Ryan said, as Len beheaded the clones with a stream of pressurized water. Shortie moved to cover him, while he engaged the nearest doubles in melee. "I want one!"

If only they weren't trying to exterminate the last Panda, the Evas might have been true planeteers.

His other allies didn't fare any better. Some clones could see Shroud even while he turned invisible, and forced him to stay on the defensive by raising glass barriers to stop projectile volleys. Sarin's shockwaves overpowered shield-users, but her power armor had cracks here and there. Only Leo Hargraves pushed the clones back rather than otherwise, bombarding them with blinding, fiery blasts.

Sarin's repeated shockwaves ended up structurally damaging the room, and a good fourth of the floor collapsed to reveal a black sea of alien machinery and energy cables below the metal panels. Sunshine raised an advancing wall

of flames, trapping hundreds of Evas between his fire and the floor's hole.

In response, a clone threw a round silver device at Leo Hargraves. The Living Sun quickly melted it in midair, but his action caused the device to unleash a six-meters wide wave of immaculate energy.

The white pulse destroyed any doppelganger it touched, and more worrying, instantly reverted Sunshine to his human form. The Carnival's leader fell down and would have died hitting the floor below, if Mr. Wave hadn't disengaged from his assault on the forceshield to catch his ally in time. Shroud immediately raised barriers after barriers of glass to protect his teammates, but this only allowed the clones to surround the trio, their focused lasers slowly melting the defenses.

Worse, the orange portal in the room flickered, and the same cubic monster from last time started crossing through; perhaps the chaos in the room had caught its attention. In any case, the Panda was the closest to the rift when the creature stepped through, and it summarily kicked the bear out of the way. Clones tried to repel the Orange World creature with a projectile volley, but only managed to halt its arrival.

This was getting nowhere.

"The real one is not here!" Ryan shouted through his armor's loudspeakers, pointing a hand at the gates. He had moved no more than a few meters away from it with judicious applications of his power, but the shield-users still barred the way. "She's behind these doors!"

He doubted that any of his teammates heard him except for Shortie, until Sarin's voice echoed over the melee. "Move

out of the way, nerd!"

Ryan activated his armor's jetpack and flew away, as a mighty shockwave pulverized the clone regiment guarding the gates, short-circuiting their shields and vaporizing the wielders. However, the blast failed to affect the doors themselves, with no crack appearing on their blue surface. Still, it allowed the courier and Len to reach the gates.

Then the firing stopped.

Ryan peeked over his shoulder, watching as a crimson and orange shape emerged from the hole Sarin made in the ground. A monstrous reptile in advanced power armor, whose very sight caused the unfazed Eva clones to freeze in terror.

E.T.'s little brother had come, and brought its nephews.

A dozen alien soldiers emerged from the holes gargling and roaring. Most were carbon copies of the creature Ryan's group defeated earlier, but one of them was twice the normal size, a horned horror with nine eyes and great draconic wings.

A species instinct that never truly died awakened, as the humans in the room briefly stopped their battle to focus on the outside threat. The Eva clones pointed their weapons at the newcomers, while Sunshine managed to transform back into a fiery sun and bathed the alien vanguard with searing flames.

The extraterrestrial creatures responded by teleporting around the room, tearing through Eva's doppelgangers with claws and beams. The winged alien instead chased after Sunshine, while an E.T. turned its armor into adamantine and attempted to tear the Panda apart. Another soldier

noticed Ryan and Len, but was forced to deal with a group of Evas before it could give pursuit.

If one of these aliens had been a match for his entire team, a whole group of them would tear through any opposition. Ryan's group and the Alchemist could resist for a while, maybe even win, but if more of these critters arrived...

Well, Ryan was in no hurry to reload *now*.

Mr. Wave, who had raced across the room to get the Panda to safety behind Shroud's glass barrier, briefly stopped at Ryan and Len's side. "Mr. Wave and co will hold them off," the genome said, as an alien soldier roared at them. "Go get them, tiger!"

"You're sure?" Len asked, worried. She understood that they would only buy minutes.

"Mr. Wave has never been happier!" The living laser raised a thumb up. "He can kill them more than once!"

Ryan didn't find any fault with that logic, and answered with a thumb up of his own. Mr. Wave immediately tackled the approaching alien soldier head on, sending it flying backward, before reinforcing Sarin. The lively Psycho used shockwaves to push the concrete Orange monster back through the rift.

"Can you hack through these gates?" Ryan asked Shortie.

"Give me a minu—" Len didn't finish her sentence, as the blue gate reacted the moment she touched it. It slid open in a blink, granting the duo entrance.

The truce ended right there, as the remaining Evas attempted to stop Ryan from reaching the door with a volley

of projectiles. But he froze time, grabbed Shortie, and moved into the next room while dodging lasers. The gates immediately closed behind him when time resumed, isolating them from the chaos outside; the courier could barely see a glimpse of Sunshine engaging in an aerial duel with the alien dragon before the separation.

The room Ryan and Len had walked into was clearly the starship's command center, and reminded the courier of Mechron's mainframe. A colossal biomechanical brain pulsated in the middle of a glass pillar, hooked to a dome of nervelike cables by biomechanical circuits.

The duo found the real Eva Fabre connected to the machinery.

Though age had wrinkled her face and turned her black hair white, Ryan recognized her facial features. A human head was all she had left though. A hideous biomechanical body supported her skull, a grotesque parody of a human skeleton with elongated arms, life-support systems, and artificial organs pulsating in an iron ribcage.

Here Asshole-Prime stood, with her eyes closed. Cables linked her head to the glass tank and the giant brain within, much like how Alchemo's technology allowed him to experience captured minds' memories. Ryan noticed other strange tendrils hanging from the glass tank, probably to allow multiple people to connect to the machinery.

"She's... sleeping?" Len asked, as the Alchemist made no attempt to stop their approach. She remained in the thrall of a deep, peaceful slumber. Ryan guessed that the body modifications enhanced her control over the alien technology; much like Alchemo, she had cast out everything getting in the way of pure processing power.

Eva Fabre had embedded herself into the starship's mainframe, like a tick on a cow's hide. Soaking herself in its technology, knowledge, and power, never interacting with the world outside except through the safety of a screen. She lived in a snowglobe, sheltered from all consequences.

"Damn it, this is Monaco all over again," Ryan said. He wondered how much the *technology* had affected *her*, though. Ryan suspected that hooking oneself up to an imperialistic civilization's brain hadn't improved her sanity.

"Do we..." Len pointed her weapons at the Alchemist's head, hesitating.

Eva Fabre's eyelids opened.

The eyes were gone too, replaced with black cameras. They glanced at the two Genomes, as soulless as anything else in this cold, artificial place.

"I dreamed too long," the Alchemist said, her voice nothing more than a soft rattle. Her artificial organs flared with red light, a thin layer of crimson energy forming over her head and body. "I dreamed of you invaders, stepping into my metal veins and spreading your rot."

She moved her hand to grab Len, with Ryan responding by freezing time and shooting the H. R. Giger nightmare in the face with his chest weapon.

But not only did the biomechanical monstrosity keep moving in the frozen time, but his gravity bullet also bounced off her black armor.

"Your time anomaly is powerful, Quicksave, but nothing unexpecte—" The Alchemist froze while her metal fingers were within an inch of Shortie's head, for she had suddenly

noticed the black particles and Purple Flux phantom next to Ryan himself. "Black Flux?"

Ryan exploited her confusion to end his time-stop, allowing Shortie to realize the danger and back away. The Alchemist's metal hand smashed the floor, striking with enough strength to cause a small quake.

"Guess you don't know everything about us," Ryan said, as he opened fire again, Shortie assisting him with torpedoes and pressurized water.

"No matter what you do, my progress will not be stopped." The Alchemist glared at the duo, none of their attacks bypassing her energy shield. "Why are you fighting me, my children? I created you, forged you into gods. You should be fighting the aliens outside, not your maker."

Shortie's response was short and to the point. "You killed billions."

"What happens outside these walls means nothing," the Alchemist replied, her eyes flaring blue. Immediately, a dozen Eva Fabre clones materialized around her, each carrying either a rifle or a submachine gun. "With this ship, I can restart life anytime I wish. Only the data matters."

The Alchemist should have been at least sixty years old, and Ryan could tell time inside this pocket dimension behaved abnormally. Yet the clones looked no older than thirty. All were humans, instead of a biomechanical horror like their master.

Ryan quickly formed a theory.

Eva Fabre's doubles remained the same, because she hadn't aged inside.

Ryan and Len quickly dispersed as the clones opened fire, while the original remained immobile, her head still hooked to the central brain. The courier's armor sent alarm signals, as it noticed streams of foreign data invading the weapon systems.

Damn, Asshole-Prime was trying to hack into his suit!

"So, you think you can improve the welfare of mankind by sacrificing the old one to make your new, improved version?" Ryan asked, attempting to destroy the clones only to realize his chest weapon had stopped working. She clearly cared more about the idea of humanity than its actual people, that was for certain. "Have you heard of human rights?"

"I have seen other worlds beyond this dimension," the Alchemist rasped haughtily. "In one of them, the nations of the world were laid low by a *flu*. No disease will ever ravage Genomes, nor will invaders from other worlds. You will not interfere with the march of progress."

"Who elected you?" Ryan replied, freezing time for a second to smash some clones, then backing away to avoid a punch from the original. "I was democratically chosen by the plushie majority, gave universal healthcare to my Psycho followers, and fought bravely against the red tide threatening our way of life! What did *you* do?"

"Governments are for those who cannot lead," the original Eva Fabre replied, summoning more reinforcements even while Len struggled to keep them at a manageable number. Half a dozen clones turned into twenty, and these started making copies too. "Most humans live a short-sighted existence, caring for nothing more than their own personal

comfort. They do not have the courage to make the necessary decisions."

"And who do you lead, clones of yourself?" Ryan asked with a snort, rushing towards the biomechanical brain's tank.
"You've never led anyone in your life! You offered no guidance, raised no nation, inspired no follower! You wrecked the old world, and then you hid among the penguins instead of helping us get back on our feet! Hell, I'm sure you killed everyone at your old workplace when you couldn't convince them to join you!"

It was an elaborate guess based on what he had learned from Bacchus, but the abomination's eyes flared with annoyance. Ryan had struck a nerve. "You did," he said.

"They couldn't understand," Asshole-Prime replied dismissively, while some of her clones nodded in agreement.

"Neither do you." Or else she wouldn't be trying to kill him in the first place. Eva Fabre didn't understand Ryan's true ability, nor of all the possibilities where the likes of Bloodstream ravaged the Earth. Her supposed omniscience had holes.

Pushing past doubles, and ignoring his armor's alarms as the firewalls collapsed one after the other, Ryan grabbed one of the neutral tendrils hanging from the glass tank.

"Like for example, could you tell me what would happen if I tried to connect to that big brain of yours?"

"You cannot," Asshole-Prime replied, while raising a hand to grab him. "You are a Violet. Only Blues can pilot this ship. Even your friend is too weak. The overmind will overwhelm her."

“I wasn’t thinking of piloting this ship.”

And with that, Ryan froze time, Black Flux flying out of his armor.

The Alchemist could only blink in horror, as black particles touched the alien tendril... and infected their way into the glass tank.

“You fool!” Her giant hand moved to swipe him aside, and when Ryan attempted to jump away, his armor refused to move; she had hacked the motors.

Time resumed just as her fist hit him. Ryan heard the armor’s plates crack under the strain of the blow, and flew across the room like a wingless bird. He hit the blue door in a catastrophic crash, before falling on his chest, unable to move an inch.

But it changed nothing.

The black taint spread through the biomechanical brain, rotting parts of its neurons.

“Stop this!” The Alchemist’s eyes shone with a blue hue, her biomechanical hand moving to the sides of her head, but she couldn’t halt the collapse. Her clones stopped attacking Len to rush at the brain, but the damage was already done.
“Stop!”

“Say pretty please,” Ryan replied, unable to move his armor. Shortie, who still could take a step, moved in front of her best friend to protect him.

“If you do not stop, you will destroy the Elixir factory, the labs, all our back-ups!” Eva Fabre screamed, her voice turning deeper like a broken machine. The clones echoed

her screams, collapsing into nothingness. “This ship holds eons of accumulated knowledge, wisdom, and technology! I have barely explored half of it, and what I discovered... cloning, mind-transfer, unlimited energy sources... immortality! You will send mankind back by thousands of years!”

Ryan shrugged. “I couldn’t stop this, even if I wanted to.”

“You must!” The Alchemist punched the glass tank with her giant hands, perhaps trying to manually remove the black infection. But even her phenomenal strength couldn’t bypass the overmind’s shield. Half the biomechanical brain had darkened, consumed by otherworldly darkness. “Or the glorious future I have seen for our race will never come to pass!”

“Perhaps,” Ryan admitted. “But at least you won’t be in charge of it.”

As the brain turned black, so did the room. The lights darkened, while rifts in the fabric of space spread. An army of black holes opened all across the ship’s chamber, consuming the metal doors, the glass tank, the floor...

“Riri, what did you do?” Len panicked, while the Alchemist hastily removed the cables linking her to the mainframe in a desperate attempt to escape the infection.

“This place is thin enough to create portals to other colored realms,” the courier explained.

A black rift opened where the biomechanical brain used to be, tearing it apart.

“So I called for help.”

And *something* peeked through the portal.

To Ryan, it seemed as if a black wave erupted from the rift to devour all of reality. The darkness consumed a screaming Eva Fabre, tearing through her energy shield and swallowing her whole. The walls turned to dust around the courier, the blackness spreading through the ship. Ryan caught a glimpse of an alien pointing its gun at an unconscious Panda's face, only to freeze in horror as the black tidal wave approached. The light of Leo Hargraves shone briefly in the dark, only to disappear too.

Ryan lost sight of Shortie, as the darkness separated them. An alien cold entered his armor, yet it was neither chilling nor uncomfortable.

The courier floated alone in a lightless void, like a fish returning home.

"Darkling?" Ryan called out to the darkness. "Darkling? Anyone?"

The void answered.

"I am... here."

An alien shape floated to his side, it was geometric chaos that gave Ryan a headache simply to gaze at it. Triangles turning into cubes, feathers of steel, and bones dancing.

"I love your new look," the courier greeted his old friend.

"Thank... you."

"Are my friends—"

"Safe... outside."

A tunnel of light appeared not so far from the time-traveler's location. The courier watched the frozen expanse of Antarctica beyond the portal, with Shortie, the Panda, all his companions lying unconscious on the ground; Stitch and Atom Kitten, who had waited outside the anomaly, immediately rushed to their help. Only Sunshine remained unaffected, standing still and watching back through the tunnel.

Could he see the Black World beyond?

Ryan also noticed colored sparks in the darkness. Blue puddles and red stars, orange slimes, and greenish goo swirling away into nothing. They swirled around a colossal black hole entity, like children led by a parent.

"Are these the ship's Elixirs?" Ryan asked.

The strange entity changed its shape slightly, flattening. Ryan took it for a nod. "The Ultimate One will return the captives home... and this starship will disappear... from your timeline. When you turn back time... the rest of your dimension will not be impacted, but this place... it will be gone."

"And the Alchemist? The reptilians?"

The entity took a shape similar to a red line of jagged, inhuman teeth.

Ryan had never seen a smile more terrifying.

"I do not want to know?" The courier asked innocently.

"No... you do not," Darkling replied, before taking a less horrifying, but all too confusing shape. "But they will not trouble you... ever again."

The wording sent a chill down Ryan's spine.

"This Alchemist was not wrong in one aspect," Darkling said. "Ascension is a right granted to all living things... but it cannot be forced. Wisdom comes with time... and you humans are so very young."

"Will you be there for my nine hundredth birthday?" Ryan joked.

"Maybe..." Darkling sounded vaguely amused. Aw, he could get Ryan's jokes now! "One day your kind might stand at the side of the Ultimate Ones... until then, we Elixirs will remain among you, and your descendants. When you decide to aim for the stars, and venture forth into the unknown... we will walk with you. Always."

"You know, once I came to this place to die, but..." Ryan smiled behind his helmet. "Now I hope to live long enough to see mankind explore the universe."

Darkling's shape changed into a sphere of light. "You have... something to live for now."

Yes.

Yes, he did.

"I should go back," Ryan said. If he trusted his experience, staying too long in the Black World might permanently change him. "But before I go, I have a question."

"Ask..."

"Is my Black power getting stronger?"

"Black consumes... A paradox is... self-reinforcing... each reality you consume... each color you devour... increases your power. You asked for an end to what cannot die... and the more you destroy what should never die... Black's logic... becomes your reality's logic." Darkling remained silent an instant, before offering a warning. "Beware... Black is anathema to the laws that bind you into a man's shape... if you are not careful... it will consume you too."

Ryan's thoughts turned to the Alchemist, and how the Black Flux had consumed her alien technology. Yes, he would rather avoid seeing his armor painted black. "I will keep it in mind."

"There are still obstacles for you to overcome, but... I think you are ready. The pieces are set..." Darkling floated away. "I will be watching you... my friend."

"You don't wish me luck?" Ryan asked, as the portal grew closer to him.

"What use is there for luck... for a man like you?"

Somehow, even if it came from an alien creature... Darkling managed to make these words sound warm and encouraging.

Ryan floated through the portal, and an instant later crashed on icy ground.

"Finally," the courier heard Felix say, as his favorite kitty rushed to his side. "I thought you were a goner."

"I'm a tougher mouse than that, kitten." With the Alchemist gone, Ryan's armor worked again, and he managed to move his head around. Stitch was already tending to the wounded, but everyone seemed to have made it to the

other side. Sarin's armor had cracked in some spots, and more tragically, Mr. Wave's clothes had holes in them.

And Leo Hargraves floated above them all, thoughtfully looking at the horizon.

"You went there too once," Ryan guessed.

"Years ago," Sunshine replied, descending down to earth. "I was afraid of the dark back then. Of the unknown. I thought I almost died inside that place, but now... now I wonder."

Ryan would be happy to exchange tales around a coffee. Felix helped the courier back to his feet, the armored time-traveler glancing at the frozen rift where he last opened a portal to the Alchemist's lair. His Resonator had become inactive, the rift closed.

Of the Alchemist's lair and dream, nothing remained.

Nothing but memories.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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doggle martin Cole Rosenhein WowIExist Edwin Jose
Andrew Wilson Pooya Daravi Funeral Steven Lindsay
Tyler Chesney Hazza Vanderbyl Kyle J Smith
Rommelfanger Bob Davvy chappie thkiw Alex Nimmer
Jordan McDonald JJ B Andrew Odom Danielle Warvel
Ivan Kal AdAstridPerAspera Thundabear95 Saysca
Nate Bunny Waffles John Johnson Matt Helsgarde
Harry Williams Alex Canavan Hobold the kobold Jason
Adam Johnston Daniel Aguirre Zach Hoeken Lance
Linked Chip Twothousandone KatarnK NOTOBOK Hi
Richard Davis II Heikki Aitakangas Jake
OccultOwlbear Eric jian TheBreaker Localthiccboi

**Jonathan Caselli John Richard Lee Pariah PJ LeBlanc
Slade Schlaudecker Erik Sjöström Kelzennak
KingKuppa MaliMi Aleksander Z Michael Forrester
ZRhulad Cole Mathews Ethan Scott Bosse Dietz James
J Nonnuvia Bizniz John Bush Nock Kasan Fahad
Takked Kite7 Dargon Subliminary Jordan Antti
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evilperson41 Actaeix Deathburn edmuck Jason P
Gally George Ive Robert Dalton Cade Spence altus
Svend Mohammed Hajjaj Cosimo Yap Cliint Konrad2
Michael Yamashita charlyfu Hntpo William Johnson
John Evans Liark Lane HarbingTarbl Thordur hrafn
KilledbyBooks David Cox NLRUmbra hippityhoppity
Wancek Jonathan Kutz Weirdisaac Guy Incognito
Thelon TaoBio Iudi Wilhelm bengtsson Gaëtan Hillion
X4D8 Bernice0311 Trespitry Scipio Brody Brown
Andrew Rutherford Butler tom Aeon Sharath brett
thomas Thiago Ruiz Imran Comedy knight Gerrant
Anonmily William Brayer Cole Calderon Aehs Eric Liu
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Spartanstoryteller Colo T BedlamBlade MasterofNova
Walter Patrick Sylvester-Jose Philip Jones Goggy123
Escalatus Erostan Clemens Hochstädter Brandon
Stiles mars kiyu Jacob Barger Sam Paley mior mk
Aymeric Penven Dantalian11 Harold Sandahl IV Kody
Ihnat John Puri Iresan NeWorlDark Jacob Samuel
Alexander Vall Andersen Rein Warner morganmoll
Warper6 Andrew Holland Jdosnoen James Xerias
Maalsc Devourerofwords Desert Wreck TTG
Oliverthms Kai Uehara Siphor Malphas Nikhil
Majumdar Leon Schultz Jeremy Minton Leaored
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sri kalyan mulukutla Winson Chan Slipperyfish
Overlord_Grimm agoniste Olivier Edery Brycen
Legler Jonathan Spaulding Erriballon Mani Hayden H.
Scott The False Crab Sanjay Taylor Tilbury Bob le**

Poisson Rouge David Cullen Ashley Cameron Ivan
Elyshev samuel baldauf NotAWeeb Joel Sasman Bury
nice Basiun Ryan Trueman Dominic Moreau Chris
Roden Thomas Tessier M Clason Dark Chaos Alex
Lindsay Sadinar The Knight Commissar Francis
Chartier Daniel Everest Ausner Gentil bisque
LinenZero Tomas Puskas Kyle Reese Zach Svarog
Zachary Venne Ariel reyz Peter Christensen-Calvin
Murphy Aji V Jeff Gault James Teeple Dom Ceremonia
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Sands K BlackFire13th Kevin Ramos Deane L
Uptegrove Jeremy Humphrey Israel Charles handgis
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Short Maxwell Margetts Colby Arvid Hedebarke Hulg
Gohen Sebin Paul Zadaine Audric CK Karthic 白酒鬼
Calvin Augustus PbookR DemonKingBaka Erik Levin
Fischer Bob Smith Glader John Carroll Reviv3pls
DenverDrew Manu quentin Corgi McStumperson
RepossessedSoul Armo Daniel Mackie Chris M James
Walsh Zack Tae Jim of Trades Seadrake Saul Kurzman
Marc Claude Louis Durand Rhodri Thornber Dax Sam

116: Couple Therapy

Psychos had been a fact of life for fifteen years.

Ryan had visited hundreds, if not thousands of communities through his long existence, and almost all of them shared the same tales. Maddened monsters attacking them at night, mutants hiding in sewers, raiders attacking their Genome defenders, or fools trying to imitate Augustus only to come up short.

Psychos had collectively killed the courier many times, coming in as a close second behind traffic accidents. His adoptive father Bloodstream had caused his very first death, and it still gave Ryan headaches to remember it.

Nobody could imagine a world without Psychos...

Until today.

The refurbished laboratory of Station Orpheon was far lighter and warmer than the Alchemist's, with white walls, glowing bars in the ceiling casting a pleasing light, and the sweet, sweet smell of morning coffee permeating the air. Ryan's host of Geniuses, namely Shortie, Alchemo, and Stitch, had gathered behind control panels and thrumming computers. Meanwhile, the Panda happily cleaned up a large vat in the northern corner of the room with a sanitizer.

All were gearing up for an experiment that might change the world's face forever, though their patient lacked their

enthusiasm.

"I don't want to go inside," sweet Sarin grumbled at Ryan's side, arms crossed. "Find another way, nerd."

"There isn't," Ryan replied. Truth be told, nothing guaranteed that the operation would work at all. Even though they had copied the Alchemist's research data before destroying her base, the group didn't have her wealth of alien technology. "Come on, you fought aliens and you're afraid of a glass tube?"

Instead of blasting him where he stood, Sarin let out a grunt. "It's not the vat," she said. "It's..."

"Getting out of that suit?" Ryan guessed, avoiding any joke or jab. The woman had suffered for years from her condition, never feeling anything nor experiencing joy. Taunting her on that front, especially now, would feel like kicking a cancer patient.

Sarin shook her head. "Doesn't matter."

"You wouldn't bring this up if it didn't," Ryan replied. "You know, I'm a certified therapist and I've seen everything. I'm here if you need an ear."

"I ain't like your princess," Sarin scoffed. "I don't need a white knight. You think I'm that weak?"

"I don't think you're weak, just alone." Though the Psycho didn't answer, Ryan could tell from her posture that he had nailed it. "And even that is a thing of the past. I mean, we had a good time raiding drug churches, exploring new continents, freeing the government from both the reptilians and the Illuminati..."

“It was nice,” the Psycho agreed, looking away at the Geniuses toiling away behind their computers. “And you’re following up with your promise, which is more I can say from Adam. You ain’t a fink.”

“See?” Ryan decided to share some wisdom accumulated over centuries of time travel. “If you keep all your feelings for yourself, you’re never going to get over your fears and neuroses. Either you become more open with others, or you need to blow off steam. If you want to follow the latter path, I would suggest bullying Ghoul.”

“I would rather hit Adam,” Sarin replied, before raising her hands and moving her fingers. The movements were unnatural, gas pushing cloth from the inside. “Every time I get out of my suit, I fear getting scattered to the winds. Stretching for miles, feeling my mind slip away with the distance. You can’t imagine how it feels, nerd.”

“No, I can’t,” the courier admitted. “Though you already left your suit behind once, when we made an FBI raid on Ischia.”

“I know that the experiment is as safe as it can be around you.” Sarin sighed. “But I still feel weak, and I hate it.”

Ryan crossed his arms, meditated on what to say next, and then uttered a single word.

“Bianca?”

Sarin bristled at her true name being spoken, as if she had forgotten it.

“Being vulnerable is... never easy,” Ryan said, trying to find the right words. “Especially not with others. After building strong and thick walls around ourselves, it’s difficult to tear them down.”

Sarin snickered. "Easy for you to say, Mr. Time-Traveler."

"It's not as perfect a crutch as it seems."

At this point, Ryan had decided to fully come clean to everyone not in the know yet among his group. Sarin had been the first, but the courier hoped to have a discussion with Felix and especially Mr. Wave. The former already suspected something was up, and the latter...

Ryan owed him much more than his love of cashmere.

"You know, when Livia and I..." Ryan took a deep breath, before speaking his mind. "I was scared of her, at first. Very few things scared me since I got my power, but she topped all of them. She could remember."

"She could kill you for good," Sarin guessed. "Throw her daddy at you?"

"That and worse." Ryan shuddered at what Livia could have done, if she had taken more after her thunderous father.

"For the first time in many, many years, I had to be honest with someone that wasn't my best friend. Like a bear cornered in his cave. It was... it was difficult. I mean, yeah, now she's my First Lady, but she could have easily been my Lee Harvey Oswald too."

"Who?" Sarin asked, showing an absolute lack of culture.

That inane question was proof that *anyone* could become Ryan's vice-president these days, which he took as a badge of honor. The courier prided himself on his government's inclusivity.

"All of this to say that it took me a while to trust Livia, and even longer to feel at ease around her," the courier

explained his point. “We struggled to conquer our fear of the other, but in the end, it was worth it. All the pain and the fear led to something better. Do you see my point?”

“No.”

“Oh well, then you’re on your own.”

Sarin chuckled. “Seriously, I get it,” she said. “That day is going to make all the efforts and struggle worth it. Maybe I’ll get diabetes with my new body.”

“Genomes can’t develop diabetes,” Ryan said absentmindedly.

“My life has been a long string of frustration and disappointments, smartass.” He could almost taste the bitterness in his ally’s voice. “Even before Adam. Each time I hope it will change, and I’m always left disappointed.”

“Not anymore. Taking that leap of faith might sound hard, but it will be rewarding.”

“Really?” she asked. “You know, I agreed to follow you on this stupid mission because part of me hoped that the Alchemist had a plan for us. That what I went through had a purpose. Well, as it turned out, I was just experimental junk.”

“That’s the thing with life, we have no purpose, and we are completely free,” Ryan said. “Free to change, and live as we want.”

“You know what’s the worst part, nerd?” Sarin asked with sorrow. “I’ve spent so much time looking for a cure, I’m not sure what I will do with my life if your idea works.”

“You could start with community service. You worked with Adam for years, so you’ve got a lot to answer for.”

“I’ll leave the Circus to the explosion brat.” Sarin glanced at the vat, seeing her gas mask’s reflection in the glass. “What will you do after you’re done with all our messes?”

“I’m not sure yet.” Like Sarin, Ryan hadn’t planned anything beyond completing his Perfect Run. “At first, I thought I would drive into the sunset towards new adventures, hopefully with Shortie in the backseat.”

“If you leave New Rome, would there be room for one more? Your car ain’t that big.”

“I always have room for more minions,” Ryan replied. “But only if you call me Mr. President in public.”

“Don’t push it,” Sarin replied with amusement, while the Panda emerged from the cleaned vat.

“What’s up, Doc?” Ryan asked his pandawan.

“It’s all good, Sifu!” The Panda declared with a raised paw. “I removed all the germs from my fur too!”

Sarin hesitated for a few more minutes, before finally deciding to take the leap of faith. She opened her hazmat suit, and let her gaseous body leak out. A cloud of alien chemicals emerged from the suit, and moved into the vat.

“It’s going to be alright, Bianca,” Ryan promised, as he and the Panda closed the glass door behind her. “This time, it will work. I swear.”

The gaseous cloud briefly took a vaguely humanoid shape, before turning back into formless mist.

"Of course it will be alright," Alchemo grumbled, while Len typed on the computer panel. "You made us work day and night on this, you meatbag slavedriver."

"I would be willing to keep this up for weeks," Dr. Stitch replied. "This will change everything."

"We are ready to begin, Riri," Len said, barely staying in place. No doubt a part of her still hoped that if this experiment worked, it might help her father.

The courier nodded, giving his assent. Cables linking the computers to the vat activated, while a plastic lamp projected a blue light above Sarin's gas form.

The Panda, thanks to his multiple fields of expertise, had managed to translate the Elixirs' Flux language based on the Alchemist's notes. The process would be simple, in theory. The group would use a system based on the Chronoradio to send signals to Sarin's Elixirs, guiding them into rewriting her DNA based on a new paradigm. One that followed Livia's ratio of Homo Sapiens and Neanderthal genes, cleanly separating the Psycho's powers.

"I worry about her mind, however," Dr. Stitch said. "Modifying her body on such a deep level will give her a brand new brain."

"She will remember," Alchemo replied absentmindedly.

In fact, she would remember *everything*.

"When the Elixirs bond with us, they see our thoughts and wishes, and translate them into Flux," Ryan whispered, remembering what he had read from the Alchemist's data. "True Genomes exist on two levels. The biological, and the immaterial."

Ryan should have realized it before. Of all people in the room, he alone existed in two places and eras at once. Two brains separated across the timestream, yet sharing a single consciousness. Henceforth, his neurons weren't the full seat of his intellect.

If a host's consciousness partly existed in Flux form, then it would also explain cases like Mr. Wave, Sunshine, Geist, and Sarin in particular. And in time, that ethereal consciousness grew in power, in wisdom, and strength, eventually becoming something too powerful for a body of flesh to contain.

It would ascend into a greater form of existence.

And since Ryan had safeguarded a copy of Bianca's molecular structure from his Meta-Gang loop, then they could ask her Elixirs to reshape her current self while taking this information into account. Sarin would regain her lost memories as she underwent her transformation. Hopefully.

"We're getting a signal," Len said, as the lamp changed color, from blue to red, from orange to yellow. "The Elixirs are communicating."

"Can you put on the loudspeaker?" Ryan asked, curious.

He wondered how Elixirs discussed inside their host. Perhaps they were trying and failing to repair the damage they had caused to their host, unable to understand what they were dealing with. Maybe they casually divulged ancient secrets of the universe, like one would discuss pop culture.

Len put on the loudspeakers, and an alien gargle quickly transformed into two digitized, and yet audible voices.

“—and I say more hydrogen!” Ryan winced at the words, though the voice sounded inhuman, the tone reminded of a hyperactive child.

“But that will make it more difficult to vibrate!” Another answered, and didn’t sound any more mature. *“How can our Homo Sapien defend herself otherwise if she cannot project energy? She’s almost died too many times already!”*

“You Reds, it’s all about energy with you! She wouldn’t need your shockwaves if you let me do my work!”

“If I let you act without supervision, you would have turned her into a cumulonimbus!”

“Look, our host wants to be free. Mastery of the gaseous state will fill her with happiness!”

“You don’t understand our host’s feelings! She wanted to be strong to defend herself, to shake down everyone who could threaten her! She doesn’t want to be free, she wants to be powerful!”

“Power is all you care about! Never us! I’m the one trying to make this situation work!”

A difficult, awkward silence settled among the researchers, as the Elixirs’ debate grew more heated and bitter.

*“You Oranges don’t get Homo Sapiens at all, and **you** are ruining our host’s ascension!”*

“You take that back, you heartless battery! I was here first! We were happy before you came into her life!”

“Of course I came in, she’s my Homo Sapien, and you completely misunderstood her wish! She would never

ascend under your care! Why can't you let me fix this?"

"The Panda..." The manbear coughed. "The Panda is having a tough family flashback."

"Me too," Len said, biting her lower lip.

Hanlon's razor.

Never attribute to malice, what can be explained by incompetence.

"I think your Elixirs should get a divorce," Ryan told Sarin. The cloud inside the vat briefly took a humanoid shape, hand raised with the middle finger upward.

"I have heard enough," Alchemo said, connecting to the control panel with neural links embedded in his syringe-finger. The light show inside the vat intensified, causing the Elixirs to interrupt their debate.

"Huh?" an Elixir said, the Red one from what Ryan had understood. "*We're receiving a transmission!*"

"Is that Eva? I hope it's Eva! Let me check..."

"*It's an instruction,*" the Red Elixir said, sounding astonished. "*Oh, we... we made a mistake?*"

"There are... two Homo Sapiens? Two Homo Sapiens in one flesh vessel? And we..." The Orange Elixir's voice turned from confusion to horror. "*And we ruined them?*"

The other, like any good partner, immediately blamed its fellow. "*No way, you didn't notice?*"

"I didn't notice because you distracted me!" The Orange Elixir fell silent an instant, before speaking up again. "*Aww,*

we favored our main host so much, that we completely forgot about the other one. The Ultimate Ones won't be happy."

"Eva said humans often divide into 'twins'... but I never thought our host could too! Their flesh vessels are so weird!"

Unlike Ryan's own Elixir, these ones certainly couldn't read their host's thoughts very well, and their understanding of human biology left much to be desired. It said something that an anti-life entity from the void like Darkling had a better grasp of the human condition than these two.

"So we each get custody of one Homo Sapiens?"

"I'm taking the younger one," the Red Elixir said, immediately chastising its kindred. *"You neglected her!"*

"If you hadn't ruined our main host's ascension, I would have noticed the twin earlier! I'm sure you will ruin her too!"

"I will show you! My Homo Sapiens will ascend before yours!"

And so, the divorce was consummated, each Elixir taking custody of a share of Bianca's DNA. The results immediately showed.

Ryan looked on with amazement, as Sarin's gas cloud body started to condense. Her substance grew dense, orange chemicals were shaken by reddish vibrations. When her gaseous body had occupied the entire vat a few seconds before, it visibly shrank at a quick pace.

The cloud took a humanoid shape smaller than Ryan himself...

And then the bones appeared.

"It's happening," Dr. Stitch muttered to himself, astonished.
"It's... it's working."

The others watched the scene in mesmerized silence, Ryan included. No joke came to his mind, as layers of flesh built upon the marrow, followed by a mantle of skin. Nails, hair, and eyes followed, one by one.

When the process ended and the light died out, a man and a woman stared at each other, separated only by a door of glass.

Somehow, Ryan had imagined Bianca as Vulcan's long-lost cousin, but he couldn't have been farther from the truth. His former vice-president was thin and small, no taller than one meter fifty and no older than thirty. Her hair was short and messy, a dark shade of green with an orange shade at the tip; her teary eyes a deep shade of gray. She looked as if she hadn't eaten in years either.

Bianca didn't open the vat's door from her side. She raised her hands and looked at them, as if they were foreign transplants. Her fingers then moved to her smooth white skin, brushing against her waist, her breasts, her neck, and shoulders... Bianca rediscovered her body, taking breath after breath like a newborn.

"Get that meatbag a dress," Alchemo all but ordered his colleagues.

"Y-yes!" The Panda immediately bolted out of the laboratory room to look for clothes.

Ryan softly opened the vat's door, letting fresh, conditioned air in. "Do you feel alright?" the courier asked, half-

expecting the woman to turn back into gas any moment. Considering the Elixirs' behavior, they might realize their 'mistake' and undo the cure.

"What's this thing?" Bianca asked, eyes closed as she hummed the air. Even her voice sounded different, deeper, and all so human. "That... that stuff."

"It's called smell," Ryan replied, making use of his nose. "The Panda's. He has quite the powerful presence."

"I had forgotten I had a nose," she replied, before kissing her own shoulder to taste the sweat. "I had forgotten *so much*."

Before Ryan knew what hit him, Bianca opened her arms and hugged him tightly. She buried her head on his shoulder, holding him close.

"Fuck," Bianca said, tears pouring down her cheeks. "Fuck... fuck..."

"It's alright," Ryan said, letting her cry to her heart's content and returning the hug. Many times he wished he had a friendly shoulder too. Len watched on from the control panel with a bright smile, Alchemeo turned away from the scene, and Stitch examined the data while muttering to himself.

"You fulfilled your promise," Bianca whispered so low the others didn't hear her, squeezing the courier tightly. "You *remembered*. You time-traveling asshole, you *did it*."

"If you remember too," Ryan said, stroking her hair kindly, "then you should know I always fulfill my campaign promises."

"How did you learn my name, jackass?" she asked upon breaking the hug, wiping away the tears. Her smile was awkward, but felt so raw and real. "I didn't tell you before that tin can of a Genius took a sample."

Yeah, he could see it in her eyes.

This was the same Bianca who had sacrificed herself to delay Alphonse 'Fallout' Manada and give Ryan time. The transfer had worked, and another friend had followed the courier through time.

"Let's say the Dynamis raid didn't go as planned," Ryan replied, as the Panda returned with a basic shirt and pants. "But we can discuss that around a coffee cup."

"I won't need clothes," Bianca replied, before glancing at the location of Ryan's most powerful weapon. "Undress."

The courier blinked, while the Panda covered his mouth in shock. "What?" the courier asked.

"You're deaf? I told you back then, the first thing I would do after getting my life back would be to jump someone."

"Hey, just because all my predecessors conquered the secretariat pool doesn't mean that I have to do the same!"

"This offer comes with a limited time, 'Mr. President,' so you better get decided within the next five minutes or reload."

Dr. Stitch's head perked up when he heard the last part, but Ryan remained firm in his devotion to Livia. "I'm sorry, but I'm married," the courier replied. "I have a spare cashmere suit though, which is the next best thing in the world!"

Bianca shrugged, finally grabbing the clothes offered to her. "You've got cigarettes? Alcohol?" She asked, as she put pants on. "Because I've got a lot of catching up to do."

It had taken many loops and years of suffering, but the Psycho condition finally had a cure.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)



Sorry for the ad, but, well, *The Perfect Run* ends on the 31st of this month on Patreon, so it's now or never XD

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Rectum Amaury michele calderoni Kirvin James Deziel
Magnus Steffen Nørregaard focus2x Nether_Lava
Marcus Pehan Art238 Bon Bon crownfall Richard
Barboza Alexander Charlie John Smith Doom
maltmana JT Max Lopo shawn Daniel Hernandez war

doggle martin Cole Rosenhein WowIExist Edwin Jose
Andrew Wilson Pooya Daravi Sunerl Steven Lindsay
Tyler Chesney Hazza Vanderbyl Kyle J Smith
Rommelfanger Bob Davvy chappie thkiw Alex Nimmer
Jordan McDonald JJ B Andrew Odom Danielle Warvel
Ivan Kal AdAstridPerAspera Thundabear95 Saysca
Nate Bunny Waffles John Johnson Matt Helsgarde
Harry Williams Alex Canavan Hobold the kobold Jason
Adam Johnston Daniel Aguirre Zach Hoeken Lance
Linked Chip Twothousandone KatarnK NOTOBOK Hi
Richard Davis II Heikki Aitakangas Jake
OccultOwlbear Eric jian TheBreaker Localthiccboi
Jonathan Caselli John Richard Lee Pariah PJ LeBlanc
Slade Schlaudecker Erik Sjöström Kelzennak
KingKuppa MaliMi Aleksander Z Michael Forrester
ZRhulad Cole Mathews Ethan Scott Bosse Dietz James
J Nonnuvya Bizniz John Bush Nock Kasan Fahad
Takked Kite7 Dargon Subliminary Jordan Antti
Huovilainen itzzzzzon . Minow Michael S.
evilperson41 Actaeix Deathburn edmuck Jason P
Gally George Ive Robert Dalton Cade Spence altus
Svend Mohammed Hajjaj Cosimo Yap Cliint Konrad2
Michael Yamashita charlyfu Hntpo William Johnson
John Evans Liark Lane HarbingTarbl Thordur hrafn
KilledbyBooks David Cox NLRUmbra hippityhoppity
Wancek Jonathan Kutz Weirdisaac Guy Incognito
Thelon TaoBio Iudi Wilhelm bengtsson Gaëtan Hillion
X4D8 Bernice0311 Trespitry Scipio Brody Brown
Andrew Rutherford Butler tom Aeon Sharath brett
thomas Thiago Ruiz Imran Comedy knight Gerrant
Anonmily William Brayer Cole Calderon Aehs Eric Liu
Conor lennon sedael Darien Benner Ligma Relai
Spartanstoryteller Colo T BedlamBlade MasterofNova
Walter Patrick Sylvester-Jose Philip Jones Goggy123
Escalatus Erostan Clemens Hochstädter Brandon
Stiles mars kiyu Jacob Barger Sam Paley mior mk

Aymeric Penven Dantalian **11 Harold Sandahl IV Kody Ihnat John Puri Iresan NeWorlDark Jacob Samuel Alexander Vall Andersen Rein Warner morganmoll Warper6 Andrew Holland Jdosnoen James Xerias Maalsc Devourerofwords Desert Wreck TTG Oliverthms Kai Uehara Siphor Malphas Nikhil Majumdar Leon Schultz Jeremy Minton Leaored Cipkenop MaikD Senki rmb123 Ervin Ughy Shaoraka sri kalyan mulukutla Winson Chan Slipperyfish Overlord_Grimm agoniste Olivier Edery Brycen Legler Jonathan Spaulding Erriballon Mani Hayden H. Scott The False Crab Sanjay Taylor Tilbury Bob le Poisson Rouge David Cullen Ashley Cameron Ivan Elyshev samuel baldauf NotAWeeb Joel Sasmad Bury nice Basiun Ryan Trueman Dominic Moreau Chris Roden Thomas Tessier M Clason Dark Chaos Alex Lindsay Sadinar The Knight Commissar Francis Chartier Daniel Everest Ausner Gentil bisque LinenZero Tomas Puskas Kyle Reese Zach Svarog Zachary Venne Ariel reyz Peter Christensen-Calvin Murphy Aji V Jeff Gault James Teeple Dom Ceremonia Max Collins Виктор Фон Стыценкофф David Hansson Thaco4 Mikkel Kolding Christensen Matthew Pixie Sands K BlackFire13th Kevin Ramos Deane L Uptegrove Jeremy Humphrey Israel Charles handgis cale lechmere closeded GenericKane charter James Short Maxwell Margetts Colby Arvid Hedebarh Hulg Gohen Sebin Paul Zadaine Audric CK Karthic 白酒鬼 Calvin Augustus PbookR DemonKingBaka Erik Levin Fischer Bob Smith Glader John Carroll Reviv3pls DenverDrew Manu quentin Corgi McStumperson RepossessedSoul Armo Daniel Mackie Chris M James Walsh Zack Tae Jim of Trades Seadrake Saul Kurzman Marc Claude Louis Durand Rhodri Thornber Dax Sam**

117: Making Waves

Bianca farted all the way back to the Mechron submarine.

Proverbially of course, but Ryan couldn't help but laugh at the sound she made each time she switched between gaseous and human form. Now, she was doing a live demonstration to the courier and the Carnival members deep in the submarine's mess. Most of the group sat around white tables, while Mr. Wave prepared cocktails behind a short counter.

Bianca's body, clothes included, turned into an orange cloud with a snap of her fingers. Unlike her time as a Psycho, the substance reminded Ryan more of faint colored mist than thick, toxic chemicals. When she touched the thrumming metal walls of the submarine, they didn't corrode into dust.

Ryan looked at his traveling circus. Leo Hargraves had taken back his sexy, handsome human form, and didn't hide his joy. Stitch scribbled notes on a journal. Matty kept his arms crossed with skepticism, and their new recruit, the Panda, acclaimed Bianca with his paws.

"So?" Bianca asked as she returned to her human form, her cloud coalescing into flesh, hair, and clothes. Terrible clothes, by the way. How could she live with herself wearing only shaggy jeans and a tank top the courier would never understand.

"So I will introduce you to your lord and savior, Wardrobe," Ryan replied. "I can't, in good conscience, let you run around dressed like that."

"Still better than a hazmat suit," the young woman snickered, searching her pockets for a cigarette and a lighter.

"The corrosive aspect of the gas was probably the result of synergy," Dr. Stitch said. "Now your powers act independently. You can switch back and forth between solid and gaseous, yes, and your chemical compound no longer degrades metallic material."

"I ain't going to rust any metal tool I get my hands on?" Bianca asked with a scoff, causing her cigarette to vibrate. Unlike her Orange power, the Red one worked shockingly the same. "Yeah, I won't miss that part. Might need to change my name though."

"May I suggest Lady Flatulence?" Ryan asked mirthfully.

Instead of pinching him, his former Vice-President answered with a joke of her own. "Only if you change your name to Butthole," she said. "Wouldn't we make quite the pair then?"

"How about Ass and Fart? You intoxicate them, I smother them. We will call our new superhero team 'The Cheeks.'"

"Better than 'The Buttkissers.'"

"Sifu, could I join?" the Panda asked enthusiastically.

"Of course," Ryan replied. "I shall grant you the honorable name of Ass-Kicker!"

Shroudy Matty kept his arms crossed. Though he had championed the treatment for the Psycho condition, seeing it in action filled him with doubt now. "I hope you all understand what this discovery means," he said. "While it is preferable to having a psychopath with two powers, this means anyone can technically receive two powers now. The number of would-be Augustus wannabes will increase."

"I doubt so," Sunshine replied with optimism. "With Eva Fabre dead and her facility destroyed, nobody can make true Elixirs. Once the Mechron bases are destroyed and Dynamis is dealt with, Knockoffs will become a thing of the past."

"Never say never, Sunshine," Ryan replied, knowing that someone could always develop the right power to make more of them. "But I agree. The Elixir well will eventually dry up, and the problem with Lightning Butt isn't the fact he has two powers. It's what those two powers can do combined."

Sunshine nodded in agreement. "Invulnerability and his destructive lightning make Augustus a danger to human civilization, but among the thousands of Psychos we encountered, only Bloodstream possesses a truly cataclysmic power combination. There will always be the likes of Mechron and Adam the Ogre, Psycho condition or not."

"Point taken," Shroud conceded.

"Considering the data we gathered and the projections on the Elixir distribution," Stitch said, "Elixirs will more or less vanish from circulation within ten years. New Genomes afterward will be born, rather than made."

The Elixirs that remained would be like buried treasures lost to time. The Alchemist had planned for Genomes to

overcome Homo Sapiens, and they would do so. With a stable genetic code, former Psychos will also be able to reproduce, bolstering the new breed's numbers further.

"I won't speak for all Psychos out there." Bianca lit her cigarette and enjoyed the taste of incoming lung cancer. "But I ain't starting any more trouble, unless the nerd asks me too."

"*Moi?*" Ryan asked, switching between his native tongue and French.

"You gave me my life back, jackass," she replied. "I owe you a debt I can't ever repay. Whatever you want from me, you'll get it. But I'll still punch you in the arm if you push your luck."

"Would you submit to a trial?" Leo Hargraves asked.

"Yeah... yeah, I guess I would." Bianca let out a cloud of smoke from her nostrils. "Will I be convicted?"

"Your crimes are nowhere near as severe as Adam or Psyshock, and you helped us a great deal," Sunshine replied with wisdom. "I believe in second chances. Your captured teammates will be treated the same."

"Only Geniuses with our resources and combined expertise can make this cure work though, sir," Stitch pointed out. "We will need support to expand it across Europe."

"Nidhogg's?" Shroud asked.

"Dynamis'?" Ryan replied jokingly. "Get the best privatized healthcare in the world? Which isn't saying much."

His transparent teammate grumbled, as if a pigeon had assaulted his windshield. “They already have the infrastructure, Ryan, but none of the ethics required.”

“We could work with Enrique Manada, but not the rest of his family,” Leo Hargraves replied. “There is still time to think about the future. Let us first cure the Meta-Gang members in captivity, and see if the treatment sticks.”

Ryan left his allies to debate how to mass-produce the cure to sit behind the mess’ bar counter. Mr. Wave gave him a purple cocktail, with a tasteful blue drinking straw. “What is this?” the courier asked.

“This is the Virgin Wavemojito,” Mr. Wave pitched the cocktail. “Mr. Wave can make people drunk on non-alcoholic beverages.”

Ryan took a sip, closing his eyes in pleasure as the taste washed over his mouth. Such a perfect mix of grape juice, honey, and so many secret things! His idol’s exquisite tastes didn’t stop at fashion. “Delicious.”

“Mr. Wave only accepts the best,” the Genome replied, a hand on the counter. “The Sun told Mr. Wave that you wanted to talk to him?”

“Yes, I did.” The noise of their allies’ debate drowned Ryan’s voice, as he dropped the bomb without warning. “I’m a time-traveler.”

The courier expected questions, but Mr. Wave was too good for that. “One cannot travel through time. Time waits for Mr. Wave, but only after he counts to infinity. And when Mr. Wave kills time, it stays dead.”

"Obviously," Ryan replied. "Do you remember the day we met? You saved me from an explosion."

The superhero joined his hands. "Mr. Wave has had that pleasure, yes."

"You saved my life more than twenty times," Ryan said, as he sipped the cocktail. "I lost count afterward. Sometimes I tripped, sometimes I dived down. You couldn't save me all the time, but you always at least tried. When I die, I often remember the feeling of your cashmere suit pressing against my face to shield me from the flames."

Mr. Wave listened in respectful silence, his wavelength head lacking anything like facial expressions.

"You were always present when I woke up," Ryan continued his tale. "Sitting at my bedside, as if you had a responsibility towards me."

"Mr. Wave had one," the man replied. "If Mr. Wave had seen you earlier, you wouldn't have ended up in the hospital in the first place."

"If you had, you would all be dead." And Ryan himself too. "Whenever I woke up, you always tried to help me in any way you could. At one point, you even toured all of Italy's coastline at lightspeed to try and find Len."

"There is no lightspeed. Light travels at Mr. Wave's pace." The colorful Genome's voice turned from amused to serious. "Why did you run away, Ryan?"

"I wasn't in the right state of mind," the courier admitted. "You know the five stages of grief? I think I was stuck at the depression part for... thirty years? At least twenty. Took me a stay in Monaco to reach acceptance and enjoy the ride."

"Mr. Wave has discussed this with Simon. You saved a great many souls from a terrible place, Ryan."

"Yes, but it took a while. These guys needed a hero to get them out of hell, and... well, when I tried to think of one, you were the first that came to mind. My parents died when I was young, and Bloodstream was no one's idea of a parental model."

"Mr. Wave can imagine."

"So I guess I tried to become a little more like you," the time-traveler said, letting the truth off his chest. "I want to say thank you. You inspired me in my darkest moments, and I owe you my life more than ten times over."

"You owe me nothing, Ryan," Mr. Wave replied, his tone almost paternal. "I am proud of you. I've been keeping up with your adventures when I could, and you have saved more lives than you think."

This made the courier's head perk up. "You did?"

"Yes, though I wonder why you crashed a plane while making a delivery," Mr. Wave replied with a shrug. "Even I didn't go that far."

"I swear, the alternative was worse!" Or at least Ryan hoped so, as he played with his drinking straw. He didn't fully remember that particular run, truth be told. "I thought the first person couldn't contain your almighty power?"

"I was a comedian before I became a living spotlight," Mr. Wave replied, breaking character. "Life on the road is hard. Out of our group's newbies, one out of four usually dies before the mission is done. Leo still feels guilty about not being there to save the Costa family from Augustus, Mathias

watched his mother become a vegetable, Ace has her own demons, and even the good doctor feels down sometimes. It's depressing when you think about how fragile life is... so I make sure that my teammates never do it."

Ryan sighed. "When everything goes to shit, the only way to go on is to laugh off the pain and power through."

"Exactly. Someone has to carry on the show when everyone else feels down." The living wavelength glanced at the Carnival, and most specifically at Bianca. "The challenges are different when you move from one-man shows to a troupe, but I think you're doing very well for yourself."

"I had my fill of one-man shows. I love the spotlight—"

"But you hate solitude more?" Mr. Wave guessed.

Ryan nodded. "You knew about the time-travel part."

This made him laugh. "Only half of my boasts are exaggerations, Ryan," he said. "I keep the real stuff secret, because nobody would believe them. I've seen *way* crazier things than time travel. Have you been to Quebec?"

"No, but I'll probably invade Canada when I get elected president of the free world again."

"Whatever you do, Ryan, don't go to Quebec."

Shortie's voice echoed through the mess' loudspeaker. "*We're approaching Italy's coasts,*" she said.

"Ooh, I will have phone coverage again!" Ryan said happily, leaping from his seat and leaving an empty glass behind.
"Sorry, I need to call my girlfriend."

"Mr. Wave understands. He has his fangirls too." Mr. Wave raised an index at Ryan, like one of those 'Uncle Sam wants you' posters. "Don't let her go, Ryan."

He wouldn't.

Ryan walked out of the mess and through the submarine's metal corridors, making its way to the exit. No sooner did he open his phone, than he received a message from Livia.

LiviaLove: Ryan? Ryan, are you alright?

They must have reached the Mediterranean Sea.

PlushieTamer: Hi princess. I'm fine.

LiviaLove: Hearing from you is a relief, my knight. Is everything going well?

PlushieTamer: My mission was a total success.

LiviaLove: That makes one of us :(

PlushieTamer: What happened?

LiviaLove: You will understand when you see New Rome's coast.

LiviaLove: I... I tried to stop it, Ryan. I tried, but I couldn't. He won't change. He won't ever change.

A chill went down Ryan's spine, as he realized what had happened.

PlushieTamer: Where are you?

LiviaLove: I'm in Sorrentos with Narcinia and Fortuna. Come back soon.

LiviaLove: I miss you :(

PlushieTamer: I miss you so much too :(I'll be there soon.

LiviaLove: I can't wait. I want you, Ryan. I need you.

PlushieTamer: I'm coming.

Ryan closed his phone, before crossing paths with Alchemo in the corridor. "Sending nudes again, meatbag?" he asked.

"How did you—"

"Because I understand your vile thought process, you hormonal hominid," the Genius replied with annoyance. "I have a breakthrough to report."

"Go ahead, Father Brain."

"We now know that a Genome's consciousness exists in an intangible Flux state. Your gaseous groupie confirmed it. Now, with this information in mind, I believe I can refine the Chronoradio mechanism which the Underdiver developed to send minds through time. Make the signal more efficient."

Ryan immediately caught on. "You could send more than one mindmap back."

"Yes."

The courier couldn't keep his excitement in check. "How many?"

"I would say... five? *Maybe* six, but I don't guarantee it." Ryan didn't hide his disappointment at the answer, causing Alchemo to shrug. "The more mindmaps are sent back, the

harder the computations. Even my boundless intellect can only do so much on that front.”

Ryan would have hoped for more, but this still changed everything.

The original plan relied on transferring Livia’s mind back in time, recreating the brain-scanning machine, and then using her stored brainmaps to help their allies remember. This, however, significantly delayed the assault on Mechron’s bunker. Big Fat Adam sent captured denizens of Rust Town to their demise in his attempt to unlock Mechron’s bunker, and a day lost meant dozens of innocent casualties.

But if Ryan could bring more people, then a team could confront the Meta-Gang as soon as he reloaded.

Who could he bring though? Sunshine? Even if he received his future self’s memories, the Living Sun would be hours away from New Rome, and each minute lost increased the Meta-Gang’s death toll.

Shroud was already active though, and a safer bet. It would also end his assassination campaign before it began.

Livia and Shortie would get a time-travel ticket, which left two to three spots available. Having Bianca onboard would make taking down the bunker easier, but if Ryan could secure someone in Dynamis too...

“I need to think about this,” the time-traveler said. “Can you send anyone?”

“Of course I can,” Alchemo replied arrogantly. “Brain matter is no longer mandatory, though I would suggest bringing a few Geniuses.”

“Do geniuses with a small ‘g’ count?”

“Your funeral.”

Ryan climbed out of the submarine’s tower, taking a breath of fresh air. The Milky Way’s stars shone brightly in the skies above the courier’s head, while the moon made him hungry for a French croissant pastry.

Felix already beat him to the observatory spot, sitting at the tower’s edge. He glanced in the coast’s direction, noticing the lights of New Rome in the distance.

“I thought cats were afraid of water, Atom Kitten?” Ryan said, sitting next to Felix.

“I never crossed the ocean before,” he admitted. “I never even left Italy, and now I moved halfway through the world and back.”

“Next episode, we will go to Australia. Then you can call yourself Atom Kangaroo.”

“You can’t fathom how much I regret choosing that nickname,” the young man replied, his beautiful blue eyes examining Ryan carefully. “Who are you, really?”

“A time-traveler from the future. Or the past, if you look sideways.”

Felix squinted, considered his fellow Genomes’ words, and then reacted with denial. “I don’t believe you,” he said.

Unsurprising, but disappointing. Atom Cat had accepted the truth pretty quickly in a previous loop, but this current iteration hadn’t bonded much with Ryan. “Then how else do you explain, well, everything?” the courier asked.

"Livia. You're clearly working with her, *dating* her, and it wouldn't be the first time she makes one of these circuitous plots work. Though I can't explain the endgame you're aiming for."

"Saving the city, and overthrowing my future father-in-law." Ryan made a note to officially duel Lightning Butt for his daughter's hand in marriage, if appropriate.

"Livia would never do that," Felix replied with scorn. "She's her father's daughter, trying to mitigate Augustus' damage rather than stop him."

"And yet, she helped me save your skin from your parents, and form an alliance with the Carnival," Ryan shrugged.
"Things aren't black and white."

"Doesn't change the fact that you can't be a time-traveler."

"I can literally stop time for the entire universe, and you think turning it back is implausible?"

"Then prove it," Felix said. "Take me back, if you can."

"That's a bit harder than you think, so let me suggest something else." Ryan looked at the crescent moon. "Once, while you and Jamie were still friends, intelligent rats stole Bliss batches from Mercury's division. You tracked the animals to their mistress and... it was a horrible sight."

Felix looked at the courier as if horns had sprouted from his skull, which only encouraged him to carry on. "Ki-jung was squatting in an abandoned apartment infested with rodents, suffering from an overdose of Bliss. Blood poured out from her nose and eyes, and mold grew on her skin."

Felix's hands clenched into fists. "Who told you that?"

"You did," Ryan replied. Even now, he could remember that conversation word for word, like so many lost to time. "You rushed to the hospital, and the first thing Ki-jung did upon waking up was to ask for more Bliss. It was, in your own words, a wake-up call. You tried to get Narcinia out of the business, but her parents always pulled her back in."

"What did they say?" Felix asked, his voice turning distant.

"It's for the greater good of the family, honey," Ryan quoted. *"'Addicts kill themselves because they can't help themselves."*

Atom Kitten spent the next few minutes considering the courier's words in grim silence. Many emotions flashed on his face, from anger and doubt, to grief. Taking a page from Mr. Wave's book, Ryan let his friend process his feelings in respectful silence.

"It's too vivid," Felix said. "Livia would have gotten the details wrong, and I never told the full story to anyone. Either you can read my mind in addition to stopping time, or you're really a goddamn time-traveler. I don't see what a mind-reader would have to gain from telling such a nonsensical story."

"Hey, my life makes sense in its context!" Ryan protested.

"I have doubts," Felix replied dryly, a sad smile forming at the edge of his lips. "How does your power work?"

"I create a save point, and when I die, I live again," Ryan replied. "I believe it is my sixteenth time reloading in New Rome."

Felix scoffed. "That's messed up."

“By my standards, it’s quite the safe zone.”

Felix squinted at Ryan, as if suddenly figuring out the implications of the courier’s words. “We were close,” he realized. “I wouldn’t have told you so much if I didn’t trust you with my life.”

“We formed a team called *Quicksave the Pandas*, as formidable as it was stylish.” Ryan closed his eyes in mourning. “I miss Yuki so much.”

“I can imagine the two of you getting along,” Felix mused, before frowning. “Wait, did she force me to wear a new costume?”

“Unfortunately, you remained a fashion disaster to the end.” Ryan looked at his former sidekick in the eyes. “Your sister died to save your life during that loop.”

Felix’s hands clenched. “Father?”

“Pluto. Or Cruella, if you prefer.”

The superhero looked down at the dark sea. “Augustus is always going to send someone after me,” he said. “And people will die in the crossfire.”

“Not if I have my way.”

“I... I never made up with Jamie and Ki-jung,” Felix said, his voice breaking. “I slammed the door behind when... when they chose to support the Bliss business. I still think I was right to do so, but... but they still died trying to protect me. The last thing I did was to condemn them, and now that they’re dead, I can’t take my words back. They died thinking I hated them.”

Tears formed in the young hero's eyes. "Hey, kitten, it's alright," Ryan said, putting a hand around his friend's shoulder. "You couldn't know."

"No, I..." Atom Cat closed his eyelids and wiped away the tears. "I loved them, man. They were my friends. Jamie was my best friend, and Ki-jung, she was such a caring woman. I wanted them to do the right thing, take a stand against that soul-destroying drug, but I... I never wanted them to *die*."

Ryan hugged his friend, consoling him. "It's not too late," the courier said. "I will give you another chance to make this right."

"Why are you telling me this now?" Felix asked, before pushing the time-traveler's arm away. "If I don't remember any of it, then it means you didn't bring me back with you the first time."

"I couldn't bring back your memories through time in that old loop," Ryan replied. "But I might do so now. It took a few tries, but we have the technology for it."

Felix didn't answer immediately, instead glancing at dancing lights on the horizon. "Do you think it's too late for me to make up to them?" he asked Ryan.

"I think they can turn away from the Augusti with the proper nudge." Jamie and Ki-jung reminded Ryan of Bianca, who had followed Big Fat Adam partly out of fear, and partly out of denial about her boss' true motivations. Zanbato and Chitter had taken a stand to protect Atom Cat, unlike his own parents, showing their loyalty to the Augusti wasn't unshakeable. "But they will need your help, kitten."

"I.... If I have any chance to make this right... if I have any chance, I must take it." Felix's eyes turned determined.

"That's why you and Livia are working together. This kind of mess happened before, and you're trying to avert it."

"Livia is a better person than you think, kitten," Ryan replied with fondness. "It took a while, but all the pieces are in place. Our happy ending is finally within reach."

"Can I help?"

"Yes, but I won't lie, we're probably going to fight your parents, your godfather, and dozens of villains before we can call it a day. This is going to be a boss rush, and half of them will be people you know. You better sharpen your claws."

"The good thing is, I hate almost everyone I know." Felix's gaze turned determined. "Where do I sign up?"

The submarine approached closer to the coast, the light getting brighter, the smell of smoke filling the air.

"Wait," Felix said with a frown. "Something is wrong."

Ryan had noticed it too. The bright colors, the hue reflecting in clouds above the coast. He had seen this picture two times before, as events repeated again and again.

These weren't the lights of glamorous casinos, but the brightness of flames.

New Rome was on fire, and Ryan only had one word to say in response.

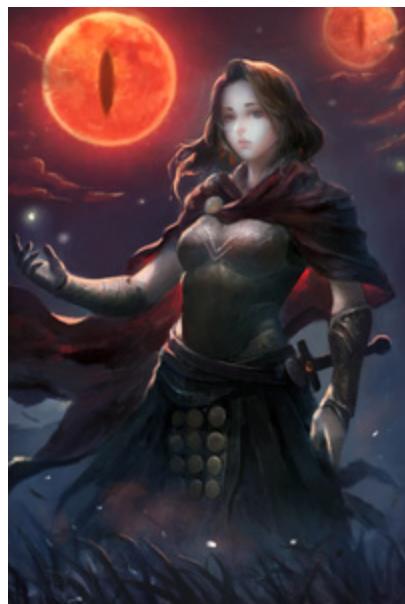
"Again?!"

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Hi guys, the **Perfect Run** has officially concluded on **Patreon**! I will continue updating it on Royal Road until its conclusion on the platform around mid-October, after which **Underland** will take over as my new web serial.

As my good friend Selkie kindly gave the Perfect Run a huge shout-out on their discord, I'm returning the favor by posting a link to their story here:

<https://www.royalroad.com/fiction/36299/beneath-the-dragoneye-moons/chapter/561246/chapter-1-rebirth>; check it out if you're interested in some high fantasy fun ;)



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Wartemberg The Dargon Alzein Paul Krause Adam
Stember Sam4005 Nicholas Pankratz b0urne78
Kinowin Sir Walrus Karibibite Philipp Münzing Bobs
Muhammed Hussain Frostbound slammer evan peat
Baron Inara Matei Atimariti Alaine Kristof Dohrmann
Gian Mabilin Craig Morris RA Lucy R Brantley AGENT
KB Logan hensley Stormblessed Mattes Büscher
Andrew Petrucci Garrett Hazard Justin Firestone
TurncoatTurnus Arthur Meyer Nicolas Grundmann
Jason kunsa Bobby Harley Houston Shockley
BrokenStorm Torin Smith Anthony Falabella isaiah
Ilwast Ben Hunter Bob Dorian arty Hong Yee Kiat
Nicholas Dynami Exypnada Niloc Rem Kosluchar
Skeln Ben Cole Westeller Musicarna Kyle Pemberton
John Brodrick Mi Boltaruas Avista Askenazu
Iwritestrangethings Xdragon James Peebles James
Mullen Alexander Rodriguez skewness7 Enzo Elacqua
Chaos' Crowl Kanigami Stefan Adrien Matricon Lohis
giom Slim Dakhch Brennon Shippee Bodoroo**

TargetDrone Reed Montemurro The Human Siolfer
Nobility Billy bob David Cohen Michael Fee lukas
bonnesen James Heney Miran 41 Matthew Lewis
Worthington Tom Mugician RandomAnkle RageBone
Geminus Mathias Nielsen Joshua Turnbull Adwait
Gautam Prinz Valium Tom Xiaoding Wen William
Martinez Gimro Thrackie Gregory Douglas Hoeflin
Dennis West Zack Crum Mr. Book-Stash confusion Tre
Nathan Fahrenbach Armand Sellier styww2 w Dominic
Ferreira Ulthar Steven Mcneeley Phoenix Van
Wagoner Orange Johnny2by4 John Parry Sportpix
PleaseDontStep KingGoomba Ken Ip Icqewby andrew
barnes Daniel Hepburn Jebril Alan Calingasan
AsianEyezQ Barry Pritchard Zebidizy Ho Jak Noah Jon
Morehouse Will H Jonathan Gooch Ursae Ganskvis
nathaniel everett Dirkk Diggler Fat Frog Sandworm
Oxylus Blorcyn Connor Beeson Alexander Goldfarb
campbell tyson Patrick Erdmann Jannik UnluckyDeath
Domini andy Kierindoongo Ab9999 Eugene Chick Pea
Mathew Moran Rageflare Sterban Friz grinning panda
DHNightshadow Jeppe Lund Conor King kyle hirshson
Robert Garrett daz Sebastian Larsen Tim C Argivian
Gary Ethan Brendan Roberts Trucinox Alex Cotter
Karolingia Sahil Box Slayer Jacob Andrew Jake Warren
Warior1411 Håvard Betten Impetusin Luke Boughan
Anton Selling Kageryu LT Joseph Catanzaro
Pipsqueak233 Julian Andrade dangerous mob Zipper
Houston Cypernetic Peter Kim Dr HungHorse Daniel
Taller Carter Hadley Glen Anderson William Beyer
Sebastian Lachs Oiva Metsola Luis Wattrodt TheFool
Justin Kwang Liam Farrell Max Bardsley BoB JmB
Andrew Warfield Eitan Davidson Alon David Philip
Kessler Andres Montemayor Thomas Wolf DinnerTime
Mr McGuffin Tristan A Mr. Finch Brad Casey Gillespie
HeavenDragon John Test Dominic Johnson Andrew
Liess Samuel Kirkpatrick Blaffey Dave_S Greenboy676

Cal Fiala Ryan Brudnicki King Lokajad Mortal Complex
Username Jonathan Hemlin Bob Reid POWA Jarrod
Young Sir Sloth John McCarter Lee Moffat GuGuy
Anton Lupalov Raycn Nikon 290x guy Josh Enterman
Ronan Magical_Duck Sam Vinh Pride TacoWasTaken
Lu jimi robert-jones Andreas Finn Apostolos Piperis
Timothy Felker v William Fullerton Max Müller Won
Jun Choi Torphin Jam Jymbo S T JustAUUser Dale Tucker
Denis Gelrud Zmelk S.R. Williams Alex Kentwell Julius
Dubasas Travis Vasquez Fatih Altunbasak Alex
Anderson Deltoren kNevik mikespelun abele a Toucan
PJ Thum Caucasian Malaysian Anthony L Joshua
Donahue Garasou Deepsealife Kristian Huse Rory
Daniels mikeju Sam Miller Phantom lockx Psylekin
Julien Fellegara redslash5 B. Gazzola Nikron
NightWhisper Samuel Smith Samm Jarrod Broome
Callum Brocklehurst Samuel Borges Joe Dardy
Noongar Joe Giannuzzi Stuart Dye Hades the god
Grosbilljunior Joseph Abhichon chandrasen Matt
Labrum TKLD Eric Vistnes Jose Omega Øyvind Birknes
Langhelle maniac_ian BluEarth Lloyd kostuik Loki
Pierre Come Gianni Ghiribelli Jay Eskew David
Alexander Dupree Josh Delgado42 Domenic Stritzl
Not N. Octopus Hoobie Gomez Messe Paul Rettig
Mikołaj Wiszniewski Phillip Ingram lione pouet
Nicolas Marty Young Youghurt ScottDR Kyle Wong
Aqua Bejan Bosc Ivan Delgado Ploxzer Christian
Matthew Marcus Österberg Alex Kaleb Uden
Fluffywolf Michael Frankford gamerthemage Athur3s
Brent Pretentious Slime Slimreaper Derrick McDowell
Dorian Lee Orion BB King Marcus Random Borisalv
HollowIce Blah64 Hamis TipTop Brenden Adrian Engel
Bieu Daniel Sanchez Massgamer afgasd adgasd Finn
Ryan Nicolas Jensen T T Deinos AlthePal Dylan
Rectum Amaury michele calderoni Kirvin James Deziel
Magnus Steffen Nørregaard focus2x Nether_Lava

**Marcus Pehan Art238 Bon Bon crownfall Richard
Barboza Alexander Charlie John Smith Doom
maltmana JT Max Lopo shawn Daniel Hernandez war
doggle martin Cole Rosenhein WowIExist Edwin Jose
Andrew Wilson Pooya Daravi Funeral Steven Lindsay
Tyler Chesney Hazza Vanderbyl Kyle J Smith
Rommelfanger Bob Davvy chappie thkiw Alex Nimmer
Jordan McDonald JJ B Andrew Odom Danielle Warvel
Ivan Kal AdAstridPerAspera Thundabear95 Saysca
Nate Bunny Waffles John Johnson Matt Helsgarde
Harry Williams Alex Canavan Hobold the kobold Jason
Adam Johnston Daniel Aguirre Zach Hoeken Lance
Linked Chip Twothousandone KatarnK NOTOBOK Hi
Richard Davis II Heikki Aitakangas Jake
OccultOwlbear Eric jian TheBreaker Localthiccboi
Jonathan Caselli John Richard Lee Pariah PJ LeBlanc
Slade Schlaudecker Erik Sjöström Kelzennak
KingKuppa MaliMi Aleksander Z Michael Forrester
ZRhulad Cole Mathews Ethan Scott Bosse Dietz
Summercat James J Nonnuvya Bizniz John Bush Nock
Kasan Fahad Takked Kite7 Dargon Subliminary Jordan
Antti Huovilainen itzzzzzon . Minow Michael S.
evilperson41 Actaeix Deathburn edmuck Jason P
Gally George Ive Robert Dalton Cade Spence altus
Svend Mohammed Hajjaj Cosimo Yap Cliint Konrad2
Michael Yamashita charlyfu Hntpo William Johnson
John Evans Liark Lane HarbingTarbl Thordur hrafn
KilledbyBooks David Cox NLRUmbra hippityhoppity
Wancek Jonathan Kutz Weirdisaac Guy Incognito
Thelon TaoBio Iudi Wilhelm bengtsson Gaëtan Hillion
X4D8 Bernice0311 Trespitry Scipio Brody Brown
Andrew Rutherford Butler tom Aeon Sharath brett
thomas Thiago Ruiz Imran Comedy knight Gerrant
Anonmily William Brayer Cole Calderon Aehs Eric Liu
Conor lennon sedael Darien Benner Ligma Relai
Spartanstoryteller Colo T BedlamBlade MasterofNova**

Walter Patrick Sylvester-Jose Philip Jones Goggy123
Escalatus Erostan Clemens Hochstädter Brandon
Stiles mars kiyu Jacob Barger Sam Paley mior mk
Aymeric Penven Dantalian11 Harold Sandahl IV Kody
Ihnat John Puri Iresan NeWorlDark Jacob Samuel
Alexander Vall Andersen Rein Warner morganmoll
Warper6 Andrew Holland Jdosnoen James Xerias
Maalsc Devourerofwords Desert Wreck TTG
Oliverthms Kai Uehara Siphor Malphas Nikhil
Majumdar Leon Schultz Jeremy Minton Leaored
Cipkenop MaikD Senki rmb123 Ervin Ughy Shaoraka
sri kalyan mulukutla Winson Chan Slipperyfish
Overlord_Grimm agoniste Olivier Edery Brycen
Legler Jonathan Spaulding Erriballon Mani Hayden H.
Scott The False Crab Sanjay Taylor Tilbury Bob le
Poisson Rouge David Cullen Ashley Cameron Ivan
Elyshev samuel baldauf NotAWeeb Joel Sasmad Bury
nice Basiun Ryan Trueman Dominic Moreau Chris
Roden Thomas Tessier M Clason Dark Chaos Alex
Lindsay Sadinar The Knight Commissar Francis
Chartier Daniel Everest Ausner Gentil bisque
LinenZero Tomas Puskas Kyle Reese Zach Svarog
Zachary Venne Ariel reyz Peter Christensen-Calvin
Murphy Aji V Jeff Gault James Teeple Dom Ceremonia
Max Collins Виктор Фон Стыценкофф David Hansson
Thaco4 Mikkel Kolding Christensen Matthew Pixie
Sands K BlackFire13th Kevin Ramos Deane L
Uptegrove Jeremy Humphrey Israel Charles handgis
cale lechmere closeded GenericKane charter James
Short Maxwell Margetts Colby Arvid Hedebarke Hulg
Gohen Sebin Paul Zadaine Audric CK Karthic 白酒鬼
Calvin Augustus PbookR DemonKingBaka Erik Levin
Fischer Bob Smith Glader John Carroll Reviv3pls
DenverDrew Manu quentin Corgi McStumperson
RepossessedSoul Armo Daniel Mackie Chris M James

**Walsh Zack Tae Jim of Trades Seadrake Enaz the great
Saul Kurzman Marc Claude Louis Durand Rhodri
Thornber Dax Sam**

118: The Last Quest

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Any perceived slight to specific people or organizations are unintentional.

This loop would end like the previous one, in Sorrentos.

At least a horde of bloody mutants didn't pursue Ryan this time around, but the realization left him bitter. He knew that causality had a tendency to reassert itself, and though the courier would break that chain of destruction, he had spent weeks, if not months in New Rome. He had befriended dozens of locals, heroes, and villains. Watching the city on fire again filled him with anger.

The courier hadn't felt so determined to save these people since his first Perfect Run in Monaco.

Only Shroud, Felix, and Sunshine had been allowed to follow him to the meeting point: the exact same building where Ryan reloaded after the last loop's disastrous end. The group bypassed a defensive perimeter of hundreds of Vulcan-made turrets without any problem.

Only Atom Kitten and See-Through came in full costume; Leo Hargraves panted as he walked in human form, while Ryan came with a dashing suit granted by Mr. Wave.

"Have you forgotten how to walk?" Ryan asked Sunshine, who lacked endurance. "I'm sorry, but I only carry damsels in distress in my arms, or lost kittens."

"How about Atomic Hound?" Felix asked. "How does that sound, as a new name?"

"It sounds like Atom Puppy to me," Ryan replied. Felix let out a sigh, realizing that there would be no escape from mockery.

Hargraves smiled, though there was little joy in it. "The longer I use my power, the less I want to become a man again," he confessed. "Sometimes I spend weeks without returning to normal, and often forget that I can."

"Your power impacts your mental health?" Felix asked, as they reached grey, reinforced doors. A camera observed them.

"In a way," Sunshine admitted. "A part of me wants to shed my humanity, and become a radiant sun full-time. I didn't understand why, but meeting the Alchemist quelled my doubts."

"It's not a bug," Ryan said. "It's a feature."

Sunshine shared an extremely strong connection with his Elixir, perhaps as much as the courier himself. Both were closer to this 'ascension' than most. Ryan still didn't fully understand what the process would imply, but transforming into a denizen of the colored realms was a part of the package.

Hargraves might end up becoming a true sun one day, leaving Earth to illuminate some dark corner of the universe. Ryan considered it a better alternative than him burning their planet's atmosphere, or worse.

"Yes. That's why I try to stay a human when my power isn't needed. If you spend all your time in the air, you stop relating to the people on the ground." Sunshine narrowed his eyebrows, as a thought crossed his mind. "I wonder if Augustus is in the same situation. Unlike me, he cannot revert back to his human state."

"If half the tales we learned about him are true, he was a nasty piece of work from the start," Shroud replied.

"I know," Hargraves said with a sigh. "But a part of me hoped that human nature wouldn't be capable of such cruelty without outside factors."

Ryan remembered his first date with Livia, and how he had found Discount Zeus posing as a statue in his own kitchen. The courier had blamed senility back then, but in hindsight Lightning Butt probably suffered from a similar syndrome as his nemesis. The power slumbering inside him wanted to become a statue of indestructible, inviolable metal, and it became harder to resist the urge with age.

The building's doors swiftly opened, a golden retriever in human form immediately latched onto Felix. The poor kitten let out a gasp as the vile creature squeezed him like a fruit, while Ryan's judgmental gaze appraised her white ensemble. Six out of ten, maybe seven.

"You fool, you idiot, you moron!" Fortuna said so many flowery insults in such a short amount of time, that Ryan's mind automatically censored half of them. "You heartless little..."

"Hi, sis—" Felix didn't finish his sentence, as Fortuna slapped him on the cheek with enough strength to crack his mask. "Hey!"

"You deserve worse!" she replied, before hugging him again with tears in her eyes. "You idiot... you almost died... if you had died, I..."

Atom Cat said nothing for a moment, before hugging his crying sister back. "I'm sorry I worried you," he said, and he meant it.

Two other girls emerged from the building, a teenage spitfire and an elegant lady. "Felix!" Little Narcinia immediately joined the group hug, overjoyed to see her adoptive sibling again. "Thank God you're alive!"

"I'm here, Narci," Felix whispered. "I'm here."

Though Leo observed Narcinia with a sad frown, Ryan didn't pay much attention to her. He only had eyes for his own lady.

Livia walked out of the doors' threshold, wearing the black coat and dark ensemble that she loved so much. The dress highlighted her pale skin and hair, and the red around her eyes.

She cried, Ryan realized. She cried for New Rome.

Neither said a word. They didn't need to. The couple simply hugged tightly, and let their hands do the talking.

Meanwhile, the Veran siblings had separated, and Fortuna finally noticed her boyfriend's presence. "Mathias."

"Fortuna," he replied, removing his glass helmet with his power. "I'm glad you're—"

She kissed him on the mouth before he could finish. At first surprised, Shroud put his arms around his girlfriend and shyly embraced her back.

While Leo, Livia, and Ryan smiled at the sight, Fortuna's siblings reacted with distress. "Ew," Narcinia complained, while Felix looked weirded out.

"Don't 'ew' my future husband!" Fortuna said upon breaking the kiss.

"Husband?" Mathias asked, horrified.

"You're marrying me," his girlfriend answered, as if it were obvious. "I had some doubts left about our relationship, but watching you help save my brother dispelled them. We are meant to be together, and this time, I'm not letting you leave. Ever."

"Wow, you're skipping a lot of steps," Mathias replied, though he didn't protest as much as Ryan had expected.

"But you already have the ring!" Fortuna protested. "You only have to make your proposal!"

"I don't have a..." The squeegee man magnet froze in place, examined his glass armor, and noticed a golden ring accidentally stuck in it around his waist. He let out a loud sigh. "So that's how it is."

"No way out, Invisiboy," Ryan warned him.

Mathias rolled his eyes, before pushing his girlfriend back kindly. "Let's do it properly, alright?" he asked her. "Take it

slow, see if we can make it last a few years?"

"Oh, sure," she replied with confidence. "I *know* it will work out."

Ryan chuckled, before glancing at his own girlfriend. "You're under house arrest, milady?"

"They are," Livia said upon breaking the embrace. "But I am not friendless. Uncle Silvio sent the guards away for today."

"Neptune?" Shroud asked, his girlfriend putting her arms around his left one. "Why would he let us have this meeting?"

"Because I told him this was the only path to peace that I could see," she replied with a sigh. "He is the only sensible head among my father's close collaborators."

"What happened in our absence?" the glass man asked.

Livia looked down on the ground, her hands reaching for Ryan's. Her boyfriend held her fingers into his own, and she squeezed them.

"After you fled, Father reached the conclusion that you and Dynamis were allied, and so..." The Augusti princess looked in New Rome's direction. Even kilometers away from the metropolis, one could still see smoke in the skies. "And so he decided to launch an offensive. I did everything I could to stop an escalation or delay it, but..."

"Augustus had made up his mind long ago," Shroud guessed. His mother's prophecy stated that Lightning Butt would go ballistic at one point, and causality would not be denied.

"Yes," Livia said sadly. "My father always intended to strike at Dynamis. When the Bliss Factory fell and Felix attempted to take Narcinia away, the conflict became inevitable. Hector recalled Fallout before granting him command over his corporate army, and now the war will engulf Europe."

Ryan could almost taste the guilt in her voice. Since she had helped her boyfriend destroy the Bliss Factory, she blamed herself for the war that resulted. "It's not your fault, Livia," the courier reassured. "You did all you could."

"I didn't," she replied with remorse, while Felix observed her with a strange gaze. "I had *years*, Ryan. I had years to take more drastic measures to prevent this disaster. I thought... I thought that if outside circumstances changed, my father wouldn't unleash such destruction. Because he treated me with kindness, I excused his cruelty towards others. I looked the other way, and I was wrong. It's him, Ryan. It's all *him*, and he will never change."

Narcinia noticed Sunshine gazing at her, making her anxious. "I'm Leo Hargraves," the shiny paladin introduced himself, his voice kind and warm. "Some people call me Leo the Living Sun."

"I know," Narcinia said, a bit intimidated. "My parents hate you."

While Shroud winced, Leo shook his head. "No, they didn't," he said, his voice heavy. "Your parents were my friends."

He searched into his clothes and brought out an old picture, showing it to Narcinia. Ryan glanced at the photo, which represented a couple and their baby child. The man, built like a woodsman, had black hair and familiar blue eyes, but the woman... the brown in her hair, the freckles on her cheeks, the smiling face...

Though she had only inherited her father's eyes, the resemblance between Narcinia and her mother was uncanny.

"This is your father Bruno Costa, and his wife Julie. Some of the nicest people I ever met. And this baby..." Leo put a finger on the child. "This baby is you, Giulia."

Narcinia took the photo without a word, while her siblings looked on. Felix could barely suppress his anger, while Fortuna clearly didn't know what to say.

"You were born long before I met your parents, but I held you in my arms when you were only a few years old," Leo continued. "Your parents... your parents were heroes. Your father was a Yellow who could cut through anything, and your mother was a Green with the power to alter life. Together, they were trying to make this scorched planet green again, until Augustus slew them and took you away."

"No." Narcinia refused to accept it. "No. It can't be. My parents, my true parents, were raiders. They *deserved* to die."

"He speaks the truth, Narcinia," Livia said, looking at the photo with regrets and remorse, as if she had done the grim deed herself. "These are your true parents. Mars and Venus lied about everything."

"It can't be!" Narcinia protested, looking at her elder sister for support. "Fortuna, say something!"

"Narci, Livy is never wrong, and our parents... our parents tried to murder Felix, because Godfather Janus asked them to." Lucky Girl tightened her hold on her boyfriend's arm, while her brother looked away in silent rage. "If they can do that, they're capable of *anything*."

"Augustus murdered your parents," Leo continued, the pain raw in his tone. "He... he killed them while I was away, and took you with him. Afterward, he had Bacchus shatter your mind, so you would forget your family, and gave you to Mars and Venus when they struggled to conceive a third child."

"Augustus also slew the fifty people who lived at your mother's farm," Shroud added with disgust. "He burnt the crops she had made with her power, plants that could have helped erase famine and clean up radioactive areas of the globe."

"Why?" Livia asked, while Narcinia covered her mouth with one hand in horror.

"Because your father is not an emperor, but a deranged warlord. He offers no future, believes in nothing but strength. *This*." Shroud pointed a finger at the smoke clouds in the skies. "*This* is his ideal world. Fire and ash."

"I know," Livia replied, her tone icy. "I *know*."

Leo Hargraves locked eyes with the Augusti princess, and the empathetic sun understood what made her feel ill-at-ease.

"What happened to Juno was a mistake," Leo Hargraves said. "I will not apologize for it, because nothing will ever excuse an innocent dying. The ends never justify the means employed. On that front, you are right to despise me."

"I don't have the strength in me to forgive you for killing my mother, Mr. Hargraves, even accidentally," Livia said with a long and heavy sigh. "But my father has to be stopped. What he has done today is monstrous, and cannot be justified... however a part of me wants to. I will not make excuses for him. Not anymore. You are right, nothing can

excuse slaying the innocents, and my father killed countless more than you ever will.”

“So you will help us take him down?” Shroud asked, causing Livia to nod firmly.

“You have my word that once your father has been stopped and his organization dismantled, I will submit to whatever trial you see fit for your mother’s death,” Hargraves promised to the Augusti princess.

“*If we can stop him,*” Shroud replied, before glancing at Ryan.

“Leave this to me,” the courier replied. “Jupiter won the first round, but Saturn is back in the game.”

Livia didn’t answer, causing Narcinia to look up at Hargraves. “Tell me more. About my...” The young girl coughed. “About my parents.”

“I will,” Sunshine promised. He had waited years for this.

Leo Hargraves started regaling Narcinia with tales about how he met her true parents, while Mathias took Fortuna aside, holding her hands. Ryan guessed that his translucent friend needed to come clean about how he saw their relationship.

Which left only Felix, who exchanged an awkward glance with his ex. “Livia?”

“Felix,” Livia replied, half-icy, half-embarrassed.

“I’m sorry I dumped you,” he declared bluntly, before thinking it over. “Well, no, not quite. Let me reword that.”

Damn, he made Len look like a smooth-talker.

"I still think that quitting the Augusti was the right decision, and I stand by it," Atom Cat continued. "But I could have done it less harshly. I knew you were under a lot of pressure to smooth things out with the organization, and when I saw New Rome burning... I realized that you were trying to prevent this disaster."

"No, Felix." Livia shook her head, her voice breaking. "You were right to leave this rotten empire. I know how you felt about me. It's... I understand why it could never work between us. Our parents pushed us into something we weren't ready for."

"But it wasn't right to condemn you for being in an impossible situation. If you had left, Augustus would have lost all fetters. I can blame Jamie and Ki-jung for looking the other way, but I see that you were trying to stop your father from the inside." Felix awkwardly scratched the back of his head. "All of this to say that... I hope we can stay friends, even after all of this."

"We can," Livia replied with a small smile. "But now is not the time to discuss rebuilding burnt bridges."

"No, no of course not." Felix glanced at Ryan with embarrassment. "Sorry, Quicksave, I realize this discussion must feel awkward, considering the two of you are dating now..."

"Heh, jealousy is for those who don't trust their partners," Ryan replied, making Livia blush briefly. "It's alright, kitty."

Felix sheepishly looked away, before straightening up.
"Good luck."

Atom Kitten hastily left the couple alone to join Leo and Narcinia, while Matt and Fortuna had a heart-to-heart talk a few feet away. Ryan was glad that Felix made an effort to reconnect with the people he left behind; the courier still thought that the kitten had a right to leave a toxic family environment behind, but he had thrown the good aside along with the bad.

“You know,” Ryan whispered to his girlfriend, “when we met, I never thought you and Sunshine would end up on the same side.”

“I don’t like him,” she replied while leading him inside the building. “But I trust you.”

He followed her through the corridors and into a private bedroom with painful yellow walls, and a painting facing the bed. Though unfinished, Ryan recognized his own torso, holding Livia in his arms bridal-style. His girlfriend must have started it a few days before the courier returned from Antarctica.

“I missed you, Ryan,” Livia said as she closed the door behind them. “It was hard without you.”

“I told you,” he replied warmly. “I will always come back.”

“How were your winter vacations?”

“Didn’t you receive my messages, princess?”

“I did, but I want to hear it from your sweet, sweet lips.”

“The trip was pretty good,” he answered while stroking her hair. “I destroyed the Illuminati, the Reptilians, and raided Area 51.”

"You destroyed our government's secret masters without taking me with you?" She pouted. "Though I guess you left us the CIA."

"Would the Dynamis military-industrial complex count?" He moved his forehead against her own, until he could smell her warm breath. "You wanted to tell me something when I came back."

She blushed, before averting his gaze. "It's going to sound cliché."

"Can't you subvert my expectations?" Ryan asked, causing Livia to chuckle. "Nah, I'm kidding. There's no such a thing as a bad cliché, just a bad execution. It's all about saying it with the heart."

Livia moved in front of him, put her arms around his neck, and locked eyes with her boyfriend. Ryan held her by the waist, and studied her expression. Her cheeks turned bright pink and she bit her lower lip, trying to muster the courage to speak. Eventually, the Augusti princess took a long deep breath, and said four words.

"I love you, Ryan."

And her boyfriend didn't know how to answer.

"Oh my, you are actually speechless," Livia said with a sheepish grin. "You didn't expect it?"

"No, I didn't," Ryan admitted, his heart having skipped a beat. He... he hadn't heard those words in a very long time. "I expected the worst, like '*I don't like your car,*' or '*I'm pregnant.*' We didn't take any precautions on that front."

"Ryan, I have been on the pill since our first date."

"Wait, you knew we would end up playing Bill and Monica in the oval office?"

"I..." His princess looked so cute when she was embarrassed. "I didn't *know*, but I... I kinda hoped that we would from the start."

"And you never said 'I love you' to anyone else?"

"I said '*I love you, Dad*,' '*I love you, Mom*,' '*I love you, Felix*'... but never '*I love you, Ryan*.'" Livia's cheeks somehow reddened further, and her expression turned into a sheepish smile. "I'm so sorry, it sounded a lot better in my hea—"

Her boyfriend kissed her on the mouth before she could finish. Ryan embraced her ferociously, making up for the weeks they spent apart, and she matched his own desire. When at long last their lips parted, the courier whispered words of his own into her ear.

"I love you too, princess."

Ryan lost himself in her blue eyes. He loved the sight of her hair, so blonde-platinum that they might as well be silver; he loved the taste of her lips, her sweet voice, her kindness, and the adorable faces she made; he loved that she laughed at his jokes, making him feel less like a lone island of culture in a sea of ignorance.

"Perfect delivery," Livia said, her fingers moving to his hair. "Maybe we should do a double-take?"

They did, and then made a third take just to be sure. Then he lifted her on the bed, to film the uncensored director's cut.

"I know it hasn't been long since we met, but..." Livia's hands trailed against his shoulders. "I haven't felt that way for a boy in a very long time."

"I have loved too," Ryan replied, holding her gently. "But this is the first time I get the feeling it will last."

"I want it to last," she said, in-between kissing his neck. "I want us to go through the next loop and prevent that horrible tragedy. I want us to share an apartment, and make breakfast together. I want to go skiing with you, and to the beach too. I want to be with you."

"I missed you," he answered. For a blissful moment, Ryan completely forgot about the Carnival, Bloodstream, Dynamis, Augustus, and everything else.

He could only think of her.

Like all good things, it was over too soon.

"We have to go," Livia said, as she finished putting her black coat back on. "They will wonder what we're doing."

"We'll tell them it was a private projection," Ryan said with a shrug, before charmingly helping her comb her hair. "I think we're ready for the grand opening."

"You said you could bring six people with you now?" Livia chuckled. "One for each color? Should we call ourselves the Rainbow Warriors?"

"The Colorful Eight?" Ryan replied.

"You're pretty bad at math, aren't you?"

“It’s a cunning strategy. That way our foes will always wonder who is the missing member. It will inspire fear. For all they know, our eighth Genome could be Mechron.”

When she had finished dressing up, Livia sat on his lap while he rested on the bed. “So?” His girlfriend asked. “Who will be on the winning team?”

“I’m open to suggestions. Maybe Narcinia? We’re missing a tagalong kid.”

“My plan was to make a mind-map of her now, but not to transfer her mind,” Livia said. “If Felix and I ask her to, she will submit to the memory upload in the next loop willingly.”

“Livia, we can’t leave a priest, drugs, and a preteen on an island without supervision,” Ryan joked. “It’s a recipe for an FBI raid and a True Crime video. And that’s not mentioning the people in the basement...”

“To save the Bliss test subjects, we will have to strike the factory early with Narcinia and Bacchus inside. I can inform Narcinia of that secret room, and she will give the victims medical assistance, but Bacchus will ground her in response. We will have to extract her from the island by force.”

Ryan considered it a plus. He had sworn to bury Bacchus beneath his facility, and intended to deliver.

“So, here is the timeline so far.” The courier tried to put everything in order. “I call Braindead as soon as I reload, so he arrives in New Rome as soon as possible. I give Ghoul the grave robber treatment, finish my delivery—”

“Is that part necessary?” Livia asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Quicksave always delivers, no matter how many tries!”
Ryan was proud of reforming the postal service, one explosion at a time.

“Do you have a twenty-four hour delivery offer?” Livia asked with a sly smirk. “I could take you up on it.”

“I have one,” he said, putting his hand on her chin, “but only for the right person.”

She exploded into laughter, the most wonderful sound Ryan had heard so far in his long, long life. “Alright, Ryan,” his princess said with amusement. “So afterward we meet at the bunker with anyone you could send back, and we deliver a one-sided thrashing to Adam the Ogre.”

“I love it when you speak my language.”

“Since we attack the Meta-Gang within mere hours of your reload, we should be able to save every Rust Town denizen that they captured,” Livia added.

“I’m hesitating about the planning afterward though,” Ryan admitted. “Should we strike the Bliss Factory and then Dynamis?”

“I suggest taking one organization at once,” Livia said. “If neither the Meta-Gang nor Felix make waves, my family will stay more or less dormant until the Olympian meeting. So I propose that we take over the bunker, build that dashing armor of yours, cure the Psychos—”

“And break the Dynamis monopoly?”

Livia nodded. “If their Knockoffs’ true nature is exposed and the supply destroyed, the organization will collapse. We can ensure both Hector Manada and Fallout are removed from

power, and leave Enrique in charge of reforming what remains. Alphonse Manada will fight to the bitter end though, and there is the question of your adoptive father.”

“In the end, Len will choose what we do with Bloodstream,” Ryan replied. “I want her father dead for the good of everyone else, but I owe her that much. A choice.”

Livia nodded. “There is also another reason to target Dynamis first. Their Gravity Gun.”

“Their anti-Zeus weapon?” Ryan suspected it used the same technology as Mechron’s variant. “You said it wouldn’t work in your visions.”

“It won’t work with Dynamis, but you have a way of making my visions lie,” Livia replied. “With Dynamis out of the picture... we can focus on my family. We will need to act quickly, as Dynamis’ collapse will embolden Dad. We will have to strike before he can mobilize his organization to take over the city, and for that, we need to decapitate its leadership.”

They would have to take down the Olympians, and then top the rampage by bringing down Mob Zeus.

“Are you sure you want to be involved in the demolition?” Ryan asked. “You can leave this mess to me.”

Livia silently looked at him, her eyes heavy with concern.

“What bothers you?” the courier asked.

“What if *he* kills you?” His girlfriend asked with concern. “What if my father kills you? Or Aunt Pluto, or Cancel? Or Adam and Fallout?”

“They won’t.” Though deep down, Ryan remembered that all his encounters with Augustus had ended with a thrashing so far. The courier had yet to defeat Fallout in a fight either.

“They can,” she replied, unconvinced. “And if you perish without sending my mind back, I may not trust my notes and submit to the memory transfer.”

Ryan tried not to think of that possibility. “If I die, and if I reload, I will come to you, and we will find a way.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” her boyfriend admitted, “but I will find a way. There is no such a thing as a plan guaranteed to work, and I...”

“You what?” Livia asked with a frown.

“I watched you die before,” Ryan replied, remembering the time Big Fat Adam blew up the Bliss Factory alongside Len and Livia. “I watched almost everyone outside die at least once. I can’t let that happen again. Even for the sake of memories.”

“That’s why I can’t let you fight my family alone, Ryan. The risk for us to lose everything is too great.” Livia gathered her breath, trying to process her feelings. “I can’t continue making excuses either. Not after watching this pointless bloodbath unfold. I... I love my father, and my aunt, but they are so few, and they will kill so many. I can’t close my eyes on this truth, even if it hurts.”

Instead of speaking a word, Ryan moved his arms around his girlfriend’s hips and hugged her. Livia rested her head against his shoulder, eyes closed.

"Thanks for being there, Ryan," she said softly. "I... you can't imagine how good it feels. To have someone there to support you, no matter how harsh the circumstances."

"I return you the sentiment," he replied, kissing her on the cheek. "Thanks for helping make this right, partner."

She looked at him, and smiled.

Ryan prayed he would see that face again, for many years to come.

"So," Livia said. "Knowing this plan, who will you take with you?"

"You and Len, obviously," Ryan replied. "Bianca, because it will make the ogre hunt easier. Atom Kitten, because he will do something stupid otherwise, and Shroud, because I need a new windshield."

"This leaves one spot open," Livia said. "I can bring Fortuna as reinforcements, even if her mind isn't sent back in time, so we need to pick the right ally."

"Wardrobe," Ryan said immediately.

Livia looked a tiny bit jealous, to his amusement. "Seriously, Ryan."

"The Panda."

"You're sure?"

"Certain." After all his achievements, Ryan's Pandawan deserved a spot on the team. Besides, he could help strike the bunker early, unlike Leo Hargraves or even Mr. Wave.
"Although..."

"Although?"

"I usually have 'joyride runs' before wrapping things up," Ryan said. "To try all the things I won't be able to do after my Perfect Run. Like, you know, prank your dad, send Luigi to space... we could do that together."

Livia shook her head. "No, Ryan. It's kind of you to propose that, but no."

"You're sure? It would have been amazing."

"I know, Ryan, but you need to die with each reload. And even if we find a way to make the memory transfer painless, each new loop increases the chance that you perish early and that I... that we have to begin again." She took his hands into her own. "I care more about *us* than having fun."

So did he.

"Or..." Livia smirked. "Or you could save right after we send everyone's memories back in time. That way, everyone will keep their memories, even if you die and reload forcefully."

Ryan frowned, and gave the idea some thought. "The problem is, if I save and I missed something-

"You will save within ten seconds of the reload," Livia interrupted him with a chuckle. "What difference could ten seconds make?"

Good point. It wasn't something Ryan usually did, but well... he was open to new experiences, and it cost nothing to try.

It was time to begin his *Perfect Run*.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Yep guys. Onward to the final arc.

Ps, added the copyright notices due to problems with amazon and pirate websites, which are causing me a lot of headaches lately.

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119: The Last Save

Next loop would be the one.

Ryan could feel it deep within his bones. Even though the Saturn Armor and its additional harness weighed down on him, a sentiment of profound liberation spread through his muscles.

Alchemeo had fashioned the courier a throne of metal and cables within the depths of Mechron's submarine, linked to six helmets and special chairs for the would-be time-travelers. Everyone was busy preparing for the procedure. Felix bade goodbye to his sisters, all of them crying; Livia memorized everyone's freshly recorded brain-maps, from Sunshine's to Narcinia's; Mr. Wave and his sidekick the Living Sun prepped Shroud for the trip; Len and the other Geniuses oversaw the computations on complex computers, while Bianca complained as her own preparations took longer than usual; Stitch watched everything from afar; and a lone panda felt post-heroic blues.

"This is my first time-travel," the Panda said, anxiously biting his fingernails in his human form. He had strapped his helmet first among all the would-be travelers, and as usual, immediately believed all of Ryan's tales. "What if it goes wrong?"

"It won't," the courier replied calmly. "Besides, you're a panda, nothing can harm you."

"But Sifu, when I come back, I won't..." the poor manbear narrowed his head in shame. "I won't learn..."

"You have learned enough, and since you've won the cosmic lottery once, you can drink the Elixir again. Only you can make Elixir bigamy work!" Well, technically, anyone could with their cure. Early tests on the captive Meta-Gang had proved the method's effectiveness.

Though in Secret Agent Frank's case, Ryan kinda preferred him as a Psycho.

"But what if the Panda gets a crappy superpower this time around?" his pandawan asked. "The Panda... the Panda doesn't want to be useless."

"You were *never* useless," Ryan replied firmly, causing the poor manbear to look up at him with hope. "*Never*."

"N-never?"

"*Never*," Ryan confirmed. "And Elixirs grant wishes, though not always well. If you want to learn, there's no reason why the Blue Elixir won't listen."

The courier suddenly wondered what kind of wish Mosquito had made though. It must have been poorly worded.

"I... the Panda wanted to be loved when he drank his Elixir," the manbear admitted sheepishly. "To have everyone look up to him."

"And it worked, but not thanks to your power." Ryan managed to raise an armored hand, putting his index finger on the Panda's chest. "Thanks to this."

"The... the heart?"

"You know, what I admire the most about you is that in spite of all the difficulties, you remain as optimistic and determined as the first day." In a way, Ryan saw himself in his young pandawan. "I mean, your tragic backstory was one of the darkest things I have ever heard. Very few people would have stayed innocent after that, and it takes strength."

His words seemed to have reached his disciple's heart, for he stopped biting his nails and nodded to himself. "Thanks, Sifu," he said with deference.

Ryan raised a thumbs up, while Len and Bianca each took their place around the machine throne.

"It better be fucking worth it," the latter complained, as Alchemeo put a helmet on her face. "I didn't work years as a living cloud to get a few days of vacation as a human. This ain't an eight-to-five job."

"Your case is the most uncertain," Alchemeo warned. "Your unique chemistry makes the transfer a coin toss."

"It will work," Len said, closing her eyes while the helmet hung heavily on her head. With two reloads under her belt, she had grown almost comfortable with the procedure. "It must."

Felix and Shroud followed suit, though the latter's girlfriend hugged him one last time before he could put on his own helmet. "How do the priests say it?" Ryan mused, as the vigilante's teammates helped him put on his harness. "Until time does us part?"

"I promised that, whatever happens next time around..." Shroudy Matty cleared his throat. "That I would do it right."

“Do *what* right?”

“Date her. No more vigilante work behind her back, no more lies. I will be honest from the start.” Shroud sighed, though Ryan noticed a thin smile at his lips’ edge. “Wherever it leads us.”

“We will come to New Rome as swiftly as possible, if Shroud asks,” Leo informed Ryan after helping his teammate get comfortable with his seat. “But not before a few days.”

“Mr. Wave was busy killing Nazis on May 8th,” Mr. Wave explained rationally. “*Undead* Nazis. Exorcising the Third Reich takes time, even at lightspeed.”

So they wouldn’t help with the bunker raid. Ryan had expected as much. Though Mr. Wave helped Alchemo attach Felix’s helmet, Sunshine quizzed the courier. “The ace in the hole that could give you an edge over Augustus, and allow you to defeat Geist...” he whispered. “It comes from this Black World, doesn’t it?”

“I wield the majority’s power in one hand, and the minority in the other,” Ryan replied.

“I do not understand that joke,” Sunshine replied, his expression serious. “When we fought Mechron for the final time, he opened a portal to the Blue World in a failed attempt to enhance his power... or so he tried. Instead, he contacted a darker place.”

“The Black World?”

“The creature beyond his portal destroyed Mechron. Annihilated him, and nearly did the same with all of Sarajevo. There had been no malice in that entity’s action, only careless curiosity.” Sunshine let out a sigh. “What I’m

saying is, if these entities can casually violate causality and destroy our reality by inattention, then your ability could have unforeseen side-effects or consequences. You should use it sparingly.”

“Everything else failed to harm Augustus,” Ryan replied. And if he could trust his girlfriend, everything else *would* fail. “And you’ve seen what happens if nobody catches the lightning in a bottle.”

“Augustus’ death is not worth destroying our world, however much he may deserve it,” Leo warned, arms crossed. “But I suppose the choice is up to you in that case.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, I promise,” the courier said, joining his hands. “You know, I’m glad you aren’t pushy about this. I thought you would try really hard to make me join your circus and use my power to assist you.”

“I don’t believe in forcing people to join us,” Sunshine replied with a kind gaze. “True dedication only comes when freely given.”

Damn knight in shining armor... looking at him made Ryan teary inside.

“We are ready to begin, meatbags,” Alchemo said, typing on his computer.

Last but not least, Livia took her place right next to her boyfriend’s left. Her hand reached out for his own, and he swore he could sense her fingers’ warmth beneath the Saturn Armor’s steel.

“Anxious?” Livia asked Ryan.

"No," her boyfriend replied, squeezing her fingers. "I waited seventeen loops for this."

Time froze as he activated his power, and the procedure began. Violet particles appeared around him alongside many black ones, duplicating at an accelerated rate. Ryan briefly noticed a white rabbit's ears rise behind Alchemeo's shoulder, before the particles swallowed the cranky Genius too.

Ryan expected an immediate return to the past, but to his surprise, the phenomenon carried on. More and more Violet Flux blinded him to the reality around him, overwhelming even the Black spots among them.

Then the purple veil split in half, a window through time and space. Through this door, Ryan distinguished hints of a pure violet place, and a triangular shadow moving closer to him. The shape became clearer, revealing strange eyes filled with burning stars.

The Illuminati pyramid looked down at the courier with its alien gaze, and all wen—

It was May 8th again, hopefully for the final time.

Ryan immediately drove through the streets of New Rome, aiming straight for Renesco's bar. By now, he knew the way like the back of his hand.

Though he wouldn't advise anyone else to do it, the courier kept control of the wheel with one hand and seized his cell phone with the other. He quickly received confirmation text messages from multiple people before he was even halfway through his destination.

Unknown Caller: I'm back, Sifu, I'm back!

Unknown Caller: Already on my way to the Junkyard, Quicksave.

Unknown Caller: I can't believe you were telling the truth. I'll catch up to you ASAP.

Unknown Caller: I'm here, my knight.

Timmy, Mathias, Felix, and Livia.

Len quickly made her presence known by hijacking the Chronoradio the moment Ryan put it on. "*Riri, I made it. A bit groggy, but... but I'm here.*"

"So did the others," Ryan said with joy. "Success!"

It had taken centuries, but the courier had finally expanded his time-traveling postal service!

Only Bianca hadn't sent a message, and considering her current location, she couldn't do so even if she wanted to. Ryan hoped that the transfer had worked out for her.

"I'll take care of Ghoul, meet up with the others, and hit the bunker through the front door," the courier informed his best friend. "Wait near the backdoor, and take the water gun. It's time to get Psypsy wet again."

"*With pleasure,*" she said with a hint of enthusiasm. She hadn't forgotten the Meta-Gang's repeated assaults on her orphanage. "*Take care, Riri... and good luck.*"

"You too, Shortie," Ryan said before his adoptive sister went silent.

Since multiple people had successfully traveled back in time, it was time to test Livia's theory. If Ryan saved now, he could safeguard his allies' memories of the previous loops, even if this one ended prematurely. Though it was usually a big no-no in his book, the courier had already broken all his usual rules so far.

What was one more?

Ryan froze time, letting the universe turn purple. His car froze in the middle of the road, alongside all others.

One second passed, and then another. Ryan held his breath as he counted them, waiting for the final countdown.

Then he sensed an opposing force pushing back against his power, and time resumed before the fateful tenth second.

Ryan almost veered off the road in surprise, though skills honed through countless iterations allowed him to quickly regain control of his vehicle.

The courier attempted to save again, but events repeated themselves. His power refused to go past ten seconds, letting time resume before the past could be set in stone. A shiver went down Ryan's spine, as a horrible realization dawned on him.

He couldn't save.

Why? Why?! Did his Black power interfere with his Violet one? Did the Alchemist tamper with it before her demise?

Fear overtook Ryan's heart. If he couldn't save... if he couldn't save, would he be trapped in this city, always brought back to the past? Unable to die, unable to move on?

A voice came out of the Chronoradio, but it didn't belong to Shortie.

It was *Livia's*.

"*What difference could ten seconds make?*" Ryan's girlfriend asked, an echo of the past timeline.

"*Which is surprisingly a lot,*" Geist's voice answered, as bored as a tombstone.

Then came Felix's mocking words, from a distant loop long gone. "*So you don't know everything.*"

Ryan's fingers tightened around the driver's wheel. He had already been in a similar situation, when he tried to make first contact with the Violet Ultimate One. Echoes of the past had guided him and Shortie on the path to find the mind-transfer technology.

Though it couldn't force a reload, Ryan's Elixir could prevent him from saving, as it did in Monaco. Back then, it had done so to prevent the courier from getting locked in a place with no way out and ruining all future runs.

Was this a similar situation? Had Ryan overlooked a detail that would make saving now dangerous, causing his guardian angel to intervene? Was this Perfect Run ruined from the start?

It was Ryan's own voice that answered his silent questions. "*Some say I should persevere,*" his words echoed through

the Chronoradio, before twisting into Fortuna's. "My power will guide us to victory!"

Ryan scoffed. "I hate railroading."

"Don't break your back climbing the hill," Simon's voice encouraged him, and the Chronoradio fell silent.

Alright.

He had to see this run through, and see what awaited him at the end.

Ryan finally reached his destination, and parked his car near Renesco's bar. As he waited for his favorite Bone Daddy's arrival, the courier noticed his phone beeping. Ryan picked up the call, upon identifying the number as Livia's. "Love?"

"My knight, where are you?"

"I'm on my way to the bar," Ryan replied. "Is everything alright?"

"No," she answered with panic, to his astonishment.
"Something is wrong."

The courier immediately worried. Did Psypsy hijack Len's brain again? Or did one of the transfers go wrong? "What's happening?"

"I can't see Geist anymore."

Ryan blinked behind his mask, while he noticed the hooded Ghoul approaching the bar from a street corner.

"I don't know, he was fine a few minutes ago and then vanished without a trace. Bacchus has tried to contact him again, to no avail. It's as if..."

"As if he had passed on," Ryan finished.

Darkling had warned him. His Black power fed on deleted realities and paradoxes, each use of it strengthening its influence over reality.

Two loops.

Two loops had made Ryan's Black power so strong that it could act retroactively.

Which meant that if he accidentally slew anyone with it, even Augustus...

"Ryan, what did you do?" Livia asked, half scared and half astonished. *"I can't even see him with my power."*

"I'm not sure, princess," Ryan admitted. Were the effects permanent, or would they fade out with another loop? Was that why he couldn't save? Did his Black power interfere with his other ability? Or did it risk permanently damaging the timeline?

Sunshine had been correct, he didn't understand his own ability enough.

"We must proceed as planned for now," the courier said. "Each second counts. We'll see what's up with Casper afterward."

"I... yes, you're right." Livia cleared out her throat. *"I will be rushing to the Junkyard with Fortuna. See you soon."*

"See you soon," Ryan replied warmly, before ending the call right as Ghoul walked into the bar.

Damn it, this run had barely begun and already he would have to adjust his timing!

Putting his phone back in his pocket and smashing the accelerator, Ryan opened his Perfect Run by ramming his car into Ghoul's back.

Somehow, that never got old.

The bar's entrance wall crumbled behind the Plymouth Fury, and Ghoul crashed into the ground head-first. The barman retreated behind the counter, while the clients screamed and ran away.

Ryan calmly stepped out of his car, moved to the trunk, and grabbed the briefcase he had been hired to deliver. Then he waltzed through the bar like a child through a candy store.

"I'm calling the Private Security!" Renesco complained behind the bar counter.

"It's okay, it's the postal service!" Ryan replied, before smashing Ghoul's skull with the briefcase while he was still dizzy. "I've come to deliver the mail!"

"Get the fuck out of my ba—" Renesco didn't finish his sentence, as Ryan all but tossed the briefcase and a colossal Euro bribe on the counter.

"Quicksave always delivers, no matter how many tries," Ryan said, as Renesco quickly counted the money and barely paid attention to the briefcase. "We offer top-notch insurance services against property damage."

"It's enough to pay for the repairs," Renesco said, before peeking over the counter to look at the dizzied Ghoul. "What about him?"

“Don’t worry about this bag of bones,” the courier said, as he glanced at his favorite undead. Ghoul struggled to rise back up, trying to use a chair as a foothold to do so. Ryan kindly kicked it out of his reach. “He’s what we call a freebie.”

“Who are you?” Ghoul rasped, as he managed to get halfway back on his feet on his own.

It was perhaps the last run where the courier could mess with his favorite undead chew toy, and now was the perfect moment to blow off steam. Since his girlfriend had forbidden him his usual joyride suicide runs, the courier decided to have some fun while he could.

He would release all the accumulated tension, before starting his Perfect Run rested, calm, and well-adjusted.

“You know, Ghoul, this might be the last time we can have a heart-to-heart conversation, so I thought I should tell you how I feel.”

The courier took a long, deep breath.

“You were almost like a Luigi to me.”

Ryan grabbed the undead’s skull by surprise.

“That’s why I’m going to send you to space!” The courier announced with a maddened light in his eyes. “You’re going to board a rocket, Ghoul! I’ll put you into a rocket, and we’ll call it Jeff! You’re going to space, Ghoul, *space!* The final frontier for bones and men!”

“What the hell are you—” Ryan kicked his skeletal chew toy in the leg and released his hold over the head, making him collapse.

“I’m going to send you to Mars, or maybe Pluto because I don’t care what others say, it’s still a planet!” Ryan continued his rant, and fear started to overtake the Psycho’s heart. This only encouraged the courier to further feed on his victim’s misery. “It’s round and orbits around the sun, and there’s an alien base on it! They pay you with seashells, and they drive their UFOs like drunk lemmings! They’re daltonians, Ghoul, ***daltonians!***”

Ghoul attempted to escape by crawling away, but Ryan grabbed him by the leg and pulled him in his direction. Then he moved on all four and invaded the undead’s personal space.

“You’re going to be the first corpse in space, Ghoul! The first undead astronaut in the entire universe!” By now, Ryan was shouting so loud that he made his Luigi substitute wince with every word. “But first you will train for the mission with Henriette! She’s going to chew you, and baptize your skull as her litter box! But it will make you strong, strong like a Russian cosmonaut! And Len will like it because it means we’ll be exporting communism beyond our solar system!”

Ghoul cowered, as he realized the nightmare had only begun.

“You will bone the martians, Ghoul!”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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120: Speedrunners

Ryan picked up two ladies in Rust Town, with a skeletal zombie chained to his car hood.

“Seriously?” Ryan asked his girlfriend with skeptical eyes. While Fortuna came to the mission with her sensual, white-latex catsuit, Livia brought a pair of jeans and a *blue hoodie*. “I’m not letting you in.”

“I’m sorry, it’s the only practical clothing I could grab in an hour,” Livia apologized. Ryan’s loops began while she was having a girl’s day out with Fortuna, and although it allowed the two to slip away from the Augusti undetected in spite of Geist’s sudden disappearance, it didn’t give them enough time to find the perfect outfit. “But it’s cotton!”

“Passable,” Ryan replied with a shrug, before reluctantly letting them in. The courier had come fully prepared, with the *Fisty Brothers* gauntlets and two submachine guns waiting on the front seat. He had even gotten the bowler hat out of storage, ready for war, and convinced Paulie to hand over his secret weapon.

It was amazing how much one could achieve in an hour with the perfect timing and little traffic.

Ryan would rather have more time to prepare, but they couldn’t wait any longer. Big Fat Adam was about to throw his captives into the meat-grinder any second now.

"Livy, you should have told me," Fortuna said as she and Livia climbed at the back. "I had a back-up suit!"

"I know, but..." Her best friend responded with an awkward smile. "I find it a little indecent..."

"I-it's not indecent, it's *gawking!*" Fortuna complained with a blush, as Ryan drove through the district's desolate streets. "And is that a real skeleton on the car hood?"

"Help!" Ghoul suddenly screamed at the car's front, startling Fortuna. The Psycho had lost both his legs and hands, leaving only the head and rib cage chained below the windshield. "Help me, he's mad! He's mad!"

"Shush, my little astronaut," Ryan said with a soft, gentle tone. It made the undead Psycho cower in fear. "Living people are talking."

"Don't worry, he deserves it," Livia explained to Fortuna, before glancing at her boyfriend. "Felix and the others will arrive a few minutes after us."

"Good, I can make a great first impression then." Ryan smashed the accelerator, and aimed straight for the Junkyard. Ghoul screamed, as the district's toxic wind battered his naked eyes.

"Felix is coming too?" Fortuna asked at the back, eminently curious. Since she acted as Livia's bodyguard and trusted her best friend absolutely, she must have come without asking many questions. "He's coming back to us?"

"No," Livia replied, "but Ryan convinced him to make an effort and keep in touch."

“You did?” Lucky Girl glanced at the handsome driver with renewed respect. “You know, I was about to say Livia was too good for you, but I take it back!”

“Thank you, thank you,” Ryan said, as he noticed the trash walls of the Junkyard appearing in the distance. “Where is my payment?”

“The ammo?” Fortuna gave Ryan a handful of pointed, arrow-shaped bullets. Ryan grabbed a gun while the Plymouth Fury drove by itself. “You’re in luck, the gunshop had some in stock! What did you need these bullets for?”

“Whale hunting,” Ryan replied, as he loaded the ammo in his gun and showcased it to his girlfriend. “Sixteen rounds, 9mm. It can quickly fire round after round without pause.”

“Hard question.” Livia gave him a playful look. “Does it ever jam?”

“Never, nor does it overheat. It can keep pumping out rounds all night long.” Ryan gently caressed the tip of the barrel. “Though I often need help with the safety catch.”

“Good, I have a firm but gentle handle on these things,” his girlfriend said with a coy voice, as she grabbed the *Fisty Brothers* and put them on. “I could help with the... fingerwork.”

“Be gentle though,” Ryan warned, as he put his weapon inside his trench coat, right between the sleeping Plushie and the Bliss inhaler. “The barrel is one of a kind and the trigger is very sensitive. One wrong move, and it’ll fire too soon.”

“Are you talking about weapons or *something else?*” Fortuna asked, as red as a tomato.

“I have Paulie’s rocket launcher below your seat, if you want to try a heavier caliber,” Ryan said innocently. “I hope you’re open to new experiences, because your target is a she.”

Before Fortuna could protest, Len’s voice came out of the Chronoradio. *“I’m in position, Riri.”*

“What about Henriette and Eugène-Henry?” Ryan asked back, as they came into view of the Junkyard. Hills of trash and stacks of cars overshadowed a fence, shielded by the Reptilian and Gemini. Both observed the car approaching in confusion, while Ghoul screamed in terror.

“At the orphanage with Sarah.”

Perfect.

“Ghoul?!” The Reptilian shouted upon recognizing his teammate, his reptilian eyes widening in terror.

In response, Ryan opened his window and pointed a finger at the US government’s secret lizardman master. “Witness me!”

Gemini’s light body instantly vanished in a flash of light, while the Reptilian narrowly managed to leap out of the way before the crazed driver could hit him. Ryan’s car smashed through the fence at full speed.

Ryan drove through the Junkyard’s labyrinth of trash walls like a conquered realm, ignoring the Psychos scavenging in the area. Mongrel glanced at the intruders from atop a rusted car, his teeth sinking into a living rat’s back.

Having grown to know the guy in previous loops, the sight filled Ryan with compassion. Mongrel truly didn’t deserve

being turned into an animal, and the courier would make sure to help him take his life back.

Instead of attacking, Ryan tossed grenades behind him to collapse some of the trash walls and disrupt ground-based reinforcements. His own would come from above anyway.

By the time someone sounded the alarm and the sound of bells echoed in the Junkyard, Ryan's group was almost in view of the bunker's entrance. The driver sensed the heavy gaze of the Land on him, and a quake sent debris falling on his car. Having lived through this situation multiple times, the time traveler easily zigzagged around the improvised projectiles.

When Ryan reached the Junkyard's landmark trash tower and the tunnel leading to the bunker, he noticed two shadows flying in the skies above. Two would-be heroes, floating on glass surfboards.

Unfortunately, toxic clouds already formed above the Junkyard, as Acid Rain and Mosquito moved to protect the tunnel's entrance. "Thieves!" the former snarled as she drew knives. Much like Mongrel before her, the sight of her maddened expression made Ryan pity her. "Thie—"

"Blondie, shoot!" The courier shouted, as he veered his car to the left. "Shoot the other blonde! Double blondie!"

"Alright!" Fortuna opened the car's door mid-motion and leaped out of it, Paulie's rocket launcher in hand. She pressed the trigger before she even landed on her feet, aiming for Acid Rain.

The surprised Psycho took a step back as a rocket with a smiley face painted on the tip flew straight at her. She immediately teleported above a trash wall as an acid drizzle

started raining down from the toxic clouds above. It helped little, for the Genius-tech missile followed and forced her to retreat; it would take minutes for the projectile to run out of fuel, keeping Acid Rain occupied.

Mosquito, meanwhile, extended his wings and rushed at the Plymouth Fury with a fist raised. He only noticed the shadow above him all too late, a black and white angel of death and destruction.

Timmy had leaped from his glass surfboard, and transformed mid-flight.

“FLYING PANDA PRESS!”

The Panda gracefully landed on Mosquito like a fly swatter, and buried him alive beneath pounds of fur and fat.

Felix’s landing was far more gracious, as his glass surfboard landed in the middle of the courtyard. Ryan parked his Plymouth Fury right next to it, stepping out of the car alongside Livia with grace and dignity.

“Felix!” Fortuna rejoiced at her brother’s presence, tossing the empty rocket launcher away. Livia handed her best friend a submachine gun as a replacement, while Ryan claimed the other for himself.

“You know, sis, I always wondered how a team-up would go,” Atom Cat replied, before noticing Mongrel leaping into view atop a trash wall. The maddened Psycho summoned a fireball into his hand.

“Remember, kitten, no lethal force,” Ryan said. “Stick to pebbles!”

"Yeah, yeah, I've got this," he replied before grabbing empty tin cans from the trash walls, turning them into bombs, and tossing them at Mongrel. His projectiles and the Psycho's hit each other in the air, sparking a devastating blast.

Unfortunately, the explosion caused a weakened trash wall to collapse on itself and cast a rain of debris on Fortuna, the Panda, and Mosquito. Felix's eyes immediately widened in panic, as he realized his screw-up. "Sis!" he shouted as loudly as he could. "Sis!"

While Timmy managed to drag his unconscious enemy out of danger, Lucky Girl was too close to dodge. She looked at the collapsing debris with shock, as her power somehow failed to deflect them.

Ryan almost froze time and rushed to her rescue, before noticing Livia smiling.

A second later, an invisible force grabbed the living lottery ticket, carrying her above the ground and to safety.

By now, Ryan should have known better.

"We'll take it from here, Quicksave," Shroud declared as he became visible, holding a blushing Fortuna in his arms bridal style. And her power didn't even need to force his hand this time around! "Clean-up the nest."

Felix didn't hide his relief. "Thanks," he said to Mathias, before focusing back on Mongrel.

His sister's reaction was far less refined. "Felix, you screw-up, you almost dirtied my clothes!" she complained, shouting so loudly that Shroud winced. "I will strangle you if the mutants don't kill you first!"

"I would suggest drowning him, he doesn't like being wet," Ryan replied, as he and Livia moved into the shaking tunnel. Before he abandoned the surface, the courier gave the situation a cursory glance.

These events were so familiar, yet different. A scenario honed through multiple repetitions, built upon information he had collected over many loops, executed by allies he had gathered on his journey. After so long, it was all coming together.

And yet he immediately noticed something utterly new. Something he never imagined would happen, except in his wildest dreams.

His Plymouth Fury...

His Plymouth Fury hadn't taken any damage!

"It's a holy sign," Ryan muttered to himself with religious awe.

"And if we do our part right, it will make it through the day intact," Livia said with a grin.

Perfect Run confirmed!

The couple rushed into the tunnel while its walls trembled, the Land attempting to collapse them. The duo quickly reached the bunker's black door entrance and faced a pack of four Dynamis drones.

"I take the left, you take the right—" Ryan asked his girlfriend, before sensing a chill down his spine—

When Ryan regained consciousness, the couple was walking through the blast doors while leaving four wrecked bots in their wake.

"You were saying?" Livia asked, teasing him by caressing the *Fisty Brothers*.

"You're greedy, Miss Augusti," Ryan complained, as the tunnel collapsed behind them.

"Greedy, me?" She replied with a smirk, as they entered the metal corridor leading to the bunker's main hall. "You are the one keeping the best stuff for yourself!"

"And here I was preparing you a big surprise..." Ryan glanced through the reinforced windows to the hangars beyond, and at Psyshock's thralls toiling on Mechron's mech and submarine. He noticed Len's armored head peeking over the waters linking the underground complex to the sea outside, and waved at her through the reinforced glass.

"A surprise, Mr. Romano?" Livia asked, suddenly interested. "I love surprises."

"For the Dynamis date, princess," Ryan said, as Len suddenly emerged from the waters and attacked the thralls with her bubble rifle. "The Dynamis date."

"I can't wait," she said, as they entered the bunker's recreational area. Much like in Ryan's suicide run, six Psychos occupied the room. Sarin, the liquid Ink Machine, and the faceless Incognito played pool alongside the sickly white, bald Pale Guy. Rakshasa played *Street Fighter* on the room's arcade, while a disembodied Asian woman's head floated behind the bar counter. Ryan remembered her name as the dreaded *Fuckface*.

Sarin hit a ball with a cue stick, before looking up at the newcomers. She didn't say a word, and for a brief instant, the courier worried that the transfer hadn't worked.

Thankfully, they had agreed on a secret code to test that out.

"The fart is in the toilet," Ryan said, before clocking his submachine gun. "I repeat, the fart is in the toilet—"

"I heard you for the first time, jackass." Bianca let out a sigh as she put her cue stick aside. "Took you long enough."

"You know these guys, Sarin?" Ink Machine asked, falsely reassured by her teammate's casualness. "They're new recruits?"

"The new management," Bianca replied, before suddenly pointing her vibrating gauntlets at both Ink Machine and Rakshasa. She blasted them both by surprise, turning the former into a puddle and blasting the latter headfirst into the arcade.

"Bianca, you heartless monster!" Ryan mourned the arcade game, before opening fire at the other Psychos. Though he was careful not to kill any of them, he didn't even manage to wound them. Incognito dived behind the pool table for protection, while Fuckface materialized crimson arms of energy to deflect the bullets. Pale Guy simply dodged, but Livia quickly moved to engage him in melee.

"Sarin, you traitor!" Fuckface snarled from behind the counter. "Incognito, call Frank!"

Incognito hastily rushed towards the elevator, but Ryan quickly shot him in the knees with his submachine gun. The

Meta-Gang member collapsed on the ground with bloodied legs, writhing in pain.

“Sorry, you’ll live,” Ryan apologized to the faceless Psycho, before turning his submachine gun at the bar counter. “We meet again, Fuckface! Won’t say I missed you though.”

“That’s not my name!” the floating head complained, before spitting a stream of acid at the time-traveler.

Ryan frowned behind his mask as he froze time and dodged. Her name was... it was...

Wait, she was right! The courier had nicknamed her Fuckface on his first suicide run and never bothered to look deeper afterward. Pale Guy too, now that he thought of it. They hadn’t survived their group’s civil war either during his Meta-Gang run, so he never got to know them in-depth either.

“No way, I never learned these two mooks’ names!” Ryan complained as time resumed. By then, he had closed the gap with Fuckface, tossed his submachine gun aside, and grabbed her by the hair. Before the Psycho could retaliate with her energy arms, the courier violently smashed her head against the bar counter with enough force to splinter it, knocking her unconscious. Her energy tentacles vanished into Red Flux particles. “Bianca, what are these redshirts called?”

“Does it matter, nerd?” Bianca asked, as she started targeting Pale Guy. The Psycho dodged her blast, but Livia exploited the opportunity to flank him from another direction. Repeated attacks from multiple fronts quickly pushed him back against a corner.

"Yes it does," Ryan said, as he stepped over a bloodied Incognito and an unconscious Rakshasa. "I'm a completionist."

"Catcher and Penanggalan," Livia replied as she finally managed to hit Pale Guy in the chest with Fisty. The blow sent the Psycho hitting the nearest wall, knocking him out of the fight.

Pfft, Fuckface sounded better. Ryan would make changing her name a top priority, when he took back his office of the Meta-Gang's president for life. Still, the courier could now carry on his Perfect Run with a clear conscience and moved towards the elevator.

"Alright, can you drag these guys to Shortie for safekeeping?" Ryan asked his teammates, with the same tone as someone running through a shopping list. "And help her with the thralls outside? There's a lot of them."

"Sure, but don't take too long downstairs," Livia said while dragging the dizzied Fuckface away. Bianca, meanwhile, kept Ink Machine trapped in puddle form with weak vibrations. "I want to invite everyone afterward to celebrate, and the restaurant closes early. Also, Dad will start worrying now that Geist is gone."

"Thai, or French?" Ryan asked before pushing the lift's button, knowing that she disliked Japanese food.

"Russian, to try something new!" His girlfriend replied right as the elevator's doors closed.

Oh well, at least Shortie would like it.

The lift reached its destination, and Ryan quickly made his way through the bunker's hub room and metal corridor. He

hastily reached the infirmary, and found Psyshock brainwashing two Rust Town addicts strapped to operation tables. He raised his head at Ryan, while the courier's hand reached out for the Bliss inhaler hidden beneath his trench coat.

"Little Cesare." Psyshock didn't show any fear at the sudden intrusion, overconfident in his immortality. "How strange to —"

Ryan froze time and applied the inhaler to his hated foe's face right before the clock resumed.

"Don't worry, Psypsy," Ryan taunted Psyshock, before activating the inhaler. "This... is not meth."

The surprised Psycho's tentacles thrashed around as Bliss spread through his nervous system, but Ryan held strong. Psyshock's energy quickly left him as the overdose paralyzed his brain, and the psychotic metal squid collapsed on the ground. The courier gave him a quick kick, before hiding the Bliss inhaler in a pocket.

"Agent Frank!" Ryan called out, knowing the metal giant was waiting a few rooms away. That was how Psyshock had sicced him on the courier halfway through the first suicide run. "Agent Frank, hurry! Russian agents poisoned the VP with Soviet caviar!"

The colossal giant of steel came rushing inside the infirmary, to find a maskless Ryan holding the drugged Psyshock in his arms, crocodile tears running down his cheeks.

"Agent Frank, US secret service!" The giant threatened Ryan with a raised fist. "Identify yourself!"

“Ryan Romano, CIA!” Ryan sobbed. “We survived Pearl Harbor together! Us and Sergeant Arch Dornan! Don’t you remember the boat, Agent Frank? The *boat*?”

A confused Frank the Mad waved an index finger at Ryan, as he remembered a day that never happened. “You were the Private! The Private on the boat!”

Thank God Livia predicted how to get inside his head. “You saved my life, Agent Frank, and today, I pay my debt.” Ryan wiped away his false tears. “I did all I could to save him, but the air... the communists poisoned even the air, Agent Frank!”

“I knew they put something in the airplanes!” Frank immediately looked at the drooling Psyshock with a worried gaze. “What can we do?”

“I did all I could to save him, but this is a communist coup, Agent Frank. They’re trying to destroy the government!”

Only now did Agent Frank understand the true threat their democracy faced. “The President is down there!” The giant panicked. “We must secure his safety!”

“No, Agent Frank, not *we*. It’s a suicide mission.” Ryan delicately gave the drooling Psyshock to Frank, who held him in his arms like a secret treasure. “I will do it. You stay here and protect the Vice-President from a Russian counterattack, until Agent Sarin comes back with medical help.”

“The US Secret Service does not—”

“Democracy can only survive if...” Ryan cleared his throat, his voice as heavy as a soldier marching to certain death. “If you live, Agent Frank. If the President dies, the Vice-

President... the Vice-Presidency must endure. Do you understand this, Agent Frank?"

Ryan let out a long, long sigh, as he put his mask and bowler hat on. "Let me die for my country," he pleaded, before adjusting his hat, "as a *hero*."

"I understand," Frank the Mad Lad replied, before offering Ryan a military salute with one hand while holding Psyshock in the other. "Semper Fi."

"Semper Fi." Ryan returned the salute, before walking out of the infirmary with a heavy heart.

There. According to Livia, if dealt in that way, Frank would follow orders and remain in the infirmary until the group could secure the rest of the bunker.

So far the Meta-Gang's rout was total, but the main course waited a few rooms ahead.

Leaving the neutralized Frank and Psyshock behind, Ryan continued deeper into the complex and reached a familiar underground chamber. Seven knockoff Elixir vats were lined up on a nearby wall, half of them occupied by mutated test subjects. One of the chamber's two blast doors was opened, and the courier heard footsteps echo from this direction.

"You know, since I've been in New Rome, I've fought aliens, Psychos, and power-mad Genomes, and few left a big impression." Ryan grabbed his Beretta, as his foe stepped out of the darkness. "But you, fatass? Your shadow cast a *heavy* presence."

Augustus was stronger and Fallout more determined, but the Meta-Gang's leader was shrewder, crueler, and in the end, more dangerous.

That was why he had to die first.

“What can I say, mate? I’ve hurt lots of people, and today will be an all-you-can-eat-buffet.” Adam the Ogre emerged from the shadow with a hand behind his back, his carbon skin as black as his soul, the grin on his face vicious and cruel. “But gotta say... I’ve never tasted a fellow Violet before.”

“Make that last loop count, Bibendum,” Ryan said, as he raised his gun. “You won’t get another.”

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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121: Presidential Debate

Two presidents had walked into a room, and only one would escape it alive.

"How about we start this debate with gun politics?" Ryan said, as he cocked his Beretta. "Then we can move on to the War on Terror. Spoiler warning: you're going to lose it hard."

"I was about to suggest dietary policies, Laddie," the living Michelin ad replied with pitch-black humor, as he kept his left hand hidden behind his back. Having lived through this situation before, Ryan had a pretty good idea of what, or rather *who*, he kept in reserve. "You'll be the second person most concerned."

He revealed his left hand, and Ryan didn't flinch.

Big Fat Adam had brought a hostage, as he did during the courier's suicide run. An Arab boy no older than fourteen, with tears of terror raining down his cheeks. A Rust Town denizen kidnapped to serve as cannon-fodder against the bunker's defenses.

"And though I prefer to eat French," Adam said with a vicious smirk, moving his right hand to hold his prisoner like a sandwich, "I can settle for a keb—"

Ryan swiftly shot him thrice, once in the face, and twice in the left hand.

Big Fat Adam closed his eyelids on reflex, but the first bullet impacted on the giant's left eye and bypassed the carbon skin. The ocular organ exploded into a rain of shrapnel and blood, while the other bullets blew off the Psycho's thumb.

The surprised Adam let out a roar of pain and agony, and his victim slipped through his bloodied fingers.

"Sorry, fatass, you made that joke before," Ryan said as he rushed toward the falling victim and activated his power. "And it wasn't funny the first time either!"

Adam's right hand lunged to grab his hostage, but stopped inches away from his neck as the world turned purple. Ryan caught his 'damsel-in-distress' in his arms, and immediately moonwalked in the opposite direction.

No sooner did time resume than Adam's carbon fist hit the metal ground, bending the steel.

"Run!" Ryan said, as he helped the hostage stand on his feet.

"But—" he started to speak in a Turkish dialect, too shocked to react.

"Escape through the corridor to the nearest voting booth, and stuff these ballots!" Ryan shouted in the same tongue, while Adam rushed at them with murderous fury. "Vote for me!"

The hostage was too shaken to do his patriotic duty, so Ryan decided to narrow his voting options. He began to freeze time, right as Adam the Ogre protected his face with his right hand.

Huh? Odd timing.

But still, Ryan loved immobile targets, and shot the hardened Psycho in the left leg thrice. One bullet bounced off his knee, but the others blasted holes in the calf.

"Let me introduce you to my friend, *Depleted*." Ryan said as time resumed. Adam stumbled on the cold hard ground, and the courier was still out of his hand's reach. "Family name *Uranium*."

President Romano did not believe in gun control.

Where Ryan's presidential charisma failed, the fear of the opposition worked like a charm. The hostage ran as fast as he could through the entrance corridor, leaving the two POTUS candidates to fight for the White House.

"I remember that voice..." Adam rasped as he rose back to his feet. In spite of the calf wounds, his enhanced Genome metabolism allowed him to carry on. "You're Bloodstream's kid. Cesare something. You're here to settle Daddy's score with us?"

"Actually, I'm here to take your presidential office for myself," Ryan said, as he circled the giant from the left and waited for his time-stop's cooldown to end. "Even people in your campaign staff voted for me!"

"The dead don't get to vote," Adam replied, although without any false joviality. His jaw extended as he put his unharmed hand through, and he brought out a grenade with Mechron's symbol on it. "And you're forgetting *abstention*."

He activated the bomb and tossed it at Ryan.

The courier froze time and dashed to the left side to dodge, while Adam lowered himself as if to sprint.

Ryan couldn't afford to waste his precious special ammo, as he had only a limited amount. Worse, although the bullets were top-notch quality, the caliber couldn't pierce the colossus' carbon shield in all places. The bones below the knee were probably as hard as the skin protecting them, and unlike Lightning Butt, bullets didn't have enough strength to break them.

The courier would write down 'adamantine bullets' on his Christmas list, but in the meantime, he needed to target Adam's throat and stomach. Ryan wondered how the Psycho's second power would react to intestinal wounds though.

Well, time to find out.

The courier shot the Psycho in his belly, which was so big that he barely bothered to aim. The bullet tore a hole through the carbon skin as time resumed, but no blood flowed out of the wound. If anything, Ryan noticed air getting sucked into the opening.

The live grenade exploded in a fiery blast of red particles without harming anyone, while Big Fat Adam sprinted at his rival. Ryan had to roll to the side to avoid a punch, then lower himself to avoid a second. The ogre moved with greater speed and agility than his size would suggest, giving his foe no breathing room.

Worse, Ryan quickly realized that the Psycho's attacks weren't random at all. Though the courier survived the volley of blows by retreating, he did so by getting closer to the colored vats in the chamber.

Some contained knockoff Elixirs, or substances just as dangerous.

“Say no to drugs, kids,” Ryan replied while raising his gun to counterattack, freezing time to get a better line of fire. But Big Fat Adam quickly covered his head, once again shielding his lone remaining eye.

A doubt crossed Ryan’s mind.

The courier fired another bullet in the frozen Adam’s gullet, before diving down between the giant’s legs. The shot opened a hole in the Psycho’s throat, but once again no blood flowed out. Big Fat Adam held a pocket dimension in his innards, but it seemed to spread all the way through the gullet.

When time resumed, Ryan had run as far away from the Knockoff vats as possible, while Adam the Ogre quickly pivoted.

“Eight seconds, mate,” the Meta-Gang’s leader said, as he glanced at the distance between Ryan’s current spot and his previous one. His voice had turned raspy from the throat wound, but he could still speak. “Ten if you push it. That’s your limit.”

“How did you know I was a Violet?” Ryan asked, holding the Beretta with one hand and grabbing throwing knives from below his trench coat with the other. “You hadn’t recognized me then.”

“Call it a gut feeling, boyo,” Adam replied, before grabbing the blue liquid vat with both hands, and ripping it off the ground. Cables dangled from the device, spraying the carbon-skinned man with azure, shining liquid. “Takes one to know one.”

Acid Rain.

Adam was like Acid Rain. He could sense Ryan's power, at least instinctively.

The courier had never dueled the Meta-Gang's leader for an extended period in the past. Each of them usually fought with back-up, so Ryan never paid his movements full attention. But the way the Psycho covered his vitals whenever the courier attempted to freeze time, or the quickness of his reactions whenever time resumed...

Ryan remembered his first encounter with the big fat president, which ended with the courier backhanded all the way across this very room. He thought the fatass had simply been fast enough to hit him right after his time-stop ended, but now, the courier wondered if Adam actually sensed him.

That bastard! Even after so many loops, he still kept tricks up his sleeve!

Thankfully, unlike Acid Rain, the Fatass didn't have the reflexes nor teleportation ability to fully exploit that knowledge. Ryan still had the edge, and most importantly, experience.

The Psycho threw the vat at the courier, right as Ryan tossed a knife at his right eye. Adam closed his eyelid and the blade bounced off it, but this gave the courier time to adjust his aim.

His bullet crossed the gap between the two fighters faster than the glass vat did, blowing off Adam's other eye. Ryan froze time before the vat could hit him and quickly dashed to safety, counting back his ammo.

He still had half left, but he was burning through his reserve faster than the national defense budget.

The vat exploded on the ground on impact, spraying blue liquid and glass shards in all directions. Ryan had escaped to safety by then, but a puddle of liquid spread on the steel ground.

If the drops made it past his clothes and reached the skin beneath...

"You know me, mate," Adam rasped angrily, before grabbing another liquid vat, red this time. His face had turned red from the blood flowing from his eyes. If anything, the outside now matched the inside in its horror. "You know how I fight. You move like a dancer rehearsing his show. This isn't our first rodeo."

"But it's gonna be the last," Ryan replied, before realizing his mistake as the blind Psycho tossed the vat in his direction. He might have been blinded, but he could still hear his foe.

The courier dodged another projectile, but another red puddle joined the blue one, both covering half the chamber's ground. Adam dragged a heavy flail from his gullet, and swiftly swung it with his right hand.

Realizing he couldn't keep fighting in this arena without risking getting exposed to the Knockoffs, Ryan dashed towards the chamber's exit. His boots made a sound while he walked on a drop of liquid, alerting Adam to his position.

The Ogre's flail lunged for Ryan's head so fast that the courier had to stop time to avoid becoming a Picasso picture, rushing into the corridor without looking back. The time-traveler heard the flail's spiked head hit a wall with a devastating impact, but he had safely made it out of the chamber.

Or so he thought.

A sharp pain raced across his waist, making him stumble inside the corridor.

The panicked Ryan glanced at his belly, seeing the tip of an arrow sticking out from his trenchcoat. *Crossbow*, the courier realized, as he heard footsteps behind him. A *crossbow bolt*.

“Not so easy without space to run around, huh?” Adam said as he dropped the flail and entered the steel corridor, his head reaching the ceiling. “You’ve been here before.”

His smirk widened, a crossbow bolt sticking out from between his teeth.

“*Lived through this before.*”

Shit.

Struggling against the pain, Ryan opened fire with the Beretta. He blew holes in the blind Adam’s throat and chest, while the Psycho responded by spitting out a volley of crossbow bolts. First one, then two, then ten.

Ryan exploited his time-stop to dodge the first volley and back away, but the bolt embedded in his body slowed him down. When time resumed, one of his foe’s projectiles hit him in the right leg below the knee. The courier collapsed on the cold hard ground, the ogre’s footsteps growing ever closer.

“I can smell your fear,” Adam said as he gained ground on the courier. The wounds didn’t slow him down at all. “I knew something was up when I watched you on the cams. Your timing was too perfect, your team too well-prepared. And

then I wondered... if you can control time enough to stop it, maybe you could turn it back too?"

Ryan attempted to shoot his foe again, before realizing he had exhausted all his ammo. With one last card up his sleeve, the courier put a hand in his trench coat and grabbed his secret weapon.

Time to see how far your pocket dimension extends, Bibendum, Ryan thought.

"But well, if you could do it all the time, you would have turned the clock by now. And if you fear the substitute so much, then the real deal will hurt even worse." Adam opened his mouth, the tip of a Blue Elixir's syringe sticking out from the gullet. "Time to take your medici—"

"Filibuster!" Ryan replied before throwing the triggered A-bomb down Adam's throat midspeech.

The surprised Adam gulped on instinct, swallowing both the explosive device and his own Blue Elixir. The Psycho covered his mouth with his hands, perhaps trying to vomit out the bomb, but he was too late to make a difference.

Ryan immediately crawled as far away as he could, while the bullet wounds on his foe's chest and throat started to light up. "*Bon appétit,*" he said, taking the time to taunt his foe one last time.

"Urgh..." Adam hiccupped, and then breathed atomic fire.

As it turned out, his pocket dimension was large, but not infinite.

The courier barely had the time to dive down as streams of flames erupted from the Psycho's mouth, nose, and his

bullet wounds. They hit the corridor's ceiling and walls in straight lines, melting the bunker's steel. Ryan himself used quick bursts of time-stop to position himself out of the fires' paths.

Like a balloon deflating as air escaped him, the flames' power tossed Adam the Ogre backward, his body rebounding off the walls. His empty eye sockets unleashed a stream of light, the blood drying up. The air in the corridor heated up by twenty degrees, enough to make Ryan sweat beneath his coat.

And then, the flames died out as quickly as they had spread. Bibendum ended his flight at the corridor's threshold, right before the vat chamber. When Ryan finally dared to look up at him, the Psycho's face had turned into a volcanic landscape, his metal skin melting off the charred hole that used to be his skull.

Adam's pocket dimension had contained most of the explosion, but flames from the blast had traveled up through his gullet, nostrils, and the openings the depleted uranium bullets had created in his belly... cooking his organs from within.

"Spicy dessert, whalie," Ryan said to Adam's corpse, as he heard his allies' footsteps. His vision blurred from the blood loss and the pain, but he couldn't help but chuckle to himself. "Served with Karmic Sauce."

Adam the Ogre didn't answer.

The Meta-Gang's presidential debate had ended in a K.O.

Like any good administration, Ryan's first act in office was to clean up the house.

Though he had to give orders from the infirmary, after expelling the former vice-president. Thankfully, Livia knew exactly what to say to Agent Frank to lead him around, even managing to get the overdosed Psyshock out of his care. She had pretended that she would send him to a special doctor's care.

A doctor called Cancel.

"Thank God you have a doctorate in medicine," Ryan said to the Panda as he lay on the operation table, his sidekick surgically extracting the crossbow bolt and quickly patched up the courier's wounds. Livia sat at her boyfriend's side all the way through the procedure, holding his hand. "Alongside physics, philosophy, and pretty much everything else."

"I don't learn quickly anymore, Sifu, but I remember everything!" the Panda replied while applying bandages.
"Does it hurt?"

"I'm a Vietnam vet," Ryan replied, "I can endure anything."

"Be careful, phony veterans don't last long in office," Livia mused.

"I've lived through more wars than chest colds!" Ryan protested, before apologizing to his sidekick for the loss of his Elixir. "I'm sorry that you won't get two powers this time around. Do you want a cushy job as an apology? Maybe Air Force One?"

He owed the Panda for his victory. The manbear's fight with Adam in the previous loop had taught Ryan that the Psychos' leader was vulnerable to internal damage, and thus gave him the idea of using his A-bomb as a deadly main course.

"He might still get a second wish," Livia said with a wistful smile. "Elixirs are extra-dimensional entities and can resist a great deal of damage. I've seen possibilities where we extract it from Adam's pocket dimension."

Ryan hoped so. He couldn't consider this loop a Perfect Run with casualties, and Elixirs were sentient beings too. "How is the situation in the field?" the president asked. "Are the troops behaving?"

"The others are helping Len transport the captive Psychos to underwater habitats," his First Lady explained. "We're also giving first aid to the hostages."

"Any casualties?"

"None," she said before lightly kissing him on the cheek.
"Thanks to you."

The news came as a relief. Ryan had worked over more than ten loops to save Rust Town from the Meta-Gang, and he had finally succeeded.

Having been warned, both Alchemo and the Carnival would make their way to New Rome. They would conquer the bunker, exploit its resources, and lay the groundwork for its final destruction. At long last, Mechron's ghost would be put back six feet under and never threaten the world again.

Ryan couldn't rest on his laurels though. After recovering, he would bring the hammer down on Dynamis, and bury his own past. As for the Augusti...

"What about Geist—" Ryan asked, but an amused Livia pushed her index finger against his lips. "Mmm!"

“Shush, we’ll see to that later,” she said with a tone that broke no disobedience. “Let’s celebrate today’s victory before moving on to tomorrow’s challenge, Ryan. We’ve earned it.”

He couldn’t argue with that.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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122: Second Chances

Ryan never thought he would bring a communist to Dynamis' doorstep.

Enrique Manada's waiting room was nearly silent, with only the sound of a secretary typing on her computer to break the monotony. Felix looked through the window, impatient to be done with the meeting, while Len's fingers fidgeted uncontrollably. She had been in a sour mood since they arrived.

Ryan didn't fare much better. His wounds still ached, and even his dazzling clothes couldn't hide all the bandages beneath them. Even with a Genome's metabolism, it would take him a few days to be back in top shape.

The courier's eyes wandered to his adoptive sister. She had made an effort to dress well for the occasion, trading her jumpsuit for a white blouse tucked by the waist into a blue skirt. A discreet red ribbon completed the set. Though Ryan's feelings for her had moved from romantic to brotherly over the last few loops, he still found her lovely.

"Mr. Manada will receive you now," the secretary said, causing Len's scowl to deepen.

"You're sure you want to come?" Ryan asked her. "I can take down the bourgeoisie on your behalf."

"Yes," Shortie said with a firm nod. "I need it, Riri."

At least she had taken Alchemo's meds before the meeting. As expected, the brain Genius had arrived yesterday with his own team, quickly confirmed Ryan's time-travel story after analyzing his mind-map, and immediately moved on to secure the bunker. The courier trusted his allies to manage that part without him, especially with Livia at their back.

Ryan had convinced his girlfriend to delay the celebrations until they could cure Bianca though. Celebrating the Meta-Gang's demise without her felt wrong.

The trio walked into Blackthorn's lair, the secretary closing the doors behind them. Len paid more attention to the Japanese pond than the flowers decorating the office, while Felix glanced at the people behind the mahogany desk. Though Enrique Manada welcomed them sitting in a chair costlier than most houses, Wyvern stood right behind him in her human form, arms crossed.

"Felix," she greeted her teammate politely.

"Wyvern," Atom Kitten said while returning the nod, before doing the same with his other superior. "Blackthorn."

"Atom Cat." The superpowered gardener moved on to greet the others. "I am Enrique Manada, the Chief Brand Officer at Dynamis and Head Manager of the Il Migliore program."

The man shook Ryan's hand, but when he offered Shortie his own, she only responded with an icy glare.

"She respects your private property," Ryan informed Blackthorn. "To each their own hand."

"I see." Enrique understood the message and moved on, the trio sitting in comfy leather chairs facing the desk. "I admit I

am curious. Atom Cat told me you wanted to discuss a possible partnership with our organization.”

“I don’t see why you asked me to come as well,” Wyvern said, arms crossed. She alone refused to sit down, perhaps because she worried that the meeting might end in a fistfight.

“We wanted to have a meeting to discuss the collectivization of our economy,” Ryan declared. “The more, the merrier.”

“Uh-huh,” Enrique replied without emotion. “And the real reason?”

Len looked at the superhero manager. “Why?”

“Why what, Miss Sabino?”

“Why did you do this to my father?” Len asked harshly, venom dripping with every word. “For money? For power? Was it worth it?”

Enrique didn’t respond, his fingers interlocked into a diabolical mastermind pose. His expression remained hidden behind his mask, though the flowers around the office seemed to bristle.

Ryan searched for something under his trench coat, causing Wyvern to tense. Instead of a gun, the courier grabbed a folder and tossed it on the desk. Blackthorn made no move to read the documents inside it.

“Enrique?” Dragon Mom asked her superior, confused.

“I know what it holds,” Enrique replied calmly, though Ryan noticed an undercurrent of shame behind the stoic facade.

Wyvern frowned before glancing at Felix, who stared at Enrique with cold anger. She grabbed the folder and began to read the documents within, her skin turning as pale as chalk with the first lines. “That’s impossible,” she said as she turned the pages. “It’s fake.”

“It’s not,” Len insisted.

“You think I can believe half of what’s inside? That Dynamis turned a Psycho into a drink, or cloned me?” The superheroine shook her head. “Lots of false information spreads about Lab Sixty-Six and the Knockoff production process. I’ve heard all the conspiracy theories. Aliens, children’s bodily fluids...”

“Well, they’re half right,” Ryan replied.

“You can take my blood if you want,” Shortie added, while Enrique remained as silent as a tombstone. “See for yourself.”

“Underdiver, I know you attacked Dynamis installations in the past, but spreading these lies are a new low and will not help anyone.” Wyvern put the file on the desk, a picture of a Knockoff transforming into Bloodstream slime slipping out of it. “Felix, don’t tell me you believe them?”

“I do,” Felix replied grimly. “I took this picture.”

Dragon Mom remained in denial. “You were deceived. And that part about Dynamis funding the Meta-Gang is the most ridiculous thing I’ve heard yet.”

This time, Enrique wordlessly glanced at the documents and examined them. He quickly reached the part about the Knockoff Elixirs deliveries to Adam, transcripts of Psyshock’s

meetings with Hector Manada, and most importantly, the schematics of Dynamis brain-mapping machine.

"Where did you get these documents?" the corpo asked, doubt gnawing at him.

Len brought out a phone, activating it. The video showcased Agent Frank dutifully keeping watch over a pile of dangerous Marxist literature, trapped in an underwater prison. Wyvern immediately recognized this proud defender of democratic values. "Is that Frank the Mad?"

"This is a live feed," Len explained, while Enrique watched on with sharp attention.

"We neutralized the Meta-Gang's leadership, and currently hold most of their members in underwater cells," Felix said. The video switched to Dynamis thralls being treated in an infirmary and to the Knockoff crates. "We have dozens of witnesses currently receiving medical attention. You can visit them yourself."

Wyvern scoffed. "Felix, are you saying that you defeated the Meta-Gang by yourselves?"

"You can come to Rust Town, and check," Len replied frostily. Her anger at Dynamis gave her confidence. "If you are willing to get down to earth and sully your clothes."

The superheroine flinched, but quickly regained her composure. "I raided the Meta-Gang half a dozen times since they arrived in New Rome."

"It changed nothing," Len rasped. "Hundreds would have died if... if we hadn't been here. Old people, children... they hoped you would come rescue them, but you never came."

Tellingly, Dragon Mom didn't attempt to say she did all she could. She had advocated Il Migliore attack the Meta-Gang in the past, and still wished her superiors took her suggestion to heart.

Speaking of her superiors, Enrique grabbed his own phone and started making calls. "I have been informed that some of our drones have gone missing lately, probably repurposed by the Meta-Gang," he said, the picture of the shattered machines on the desk. "Do you confirm? Uh-huh, uh-huh... why wasn't I informed?"

Wyvern glanced at her manager with worry. "Enrique?"

"Pack your things, you're fired." Enrique ended the call, and made another. "Yes, it's me. I have been informed that Elixirs from the April production were lost, do you confirm? Uh-huh... what about the technicians from the robotic division, Team 7? Are they missing?"

"Enrique?" Wyvern asked again, more and more concerned.

Instead of answering, Dynamis' CBO made a dozen phone calls in fifteen minutes, fact-checking every piece of information, following every lead. Ryan noticed that the flowers in the room grew more and more agitated as time went on, their petals dancing, their roots emerging from the earth. Wyvern noticed it too, and her doubt turned to horror.

In the end, Enrique put his phone on the desk, turned his chair around, and looked through the window. He couldn't deny the truth before the overwhelming amount of evidence.

"Enrique, say something," Wyvern demanded. "Please."

Instead of answering her, the manager glanced at an empty spot to his left, near the window. “You can come out, Martel. I know you are here.”

Shroud became visible without warning, causing Wyvern’s eyes to shine with a green glow. Enrique stopped his ally with a nod before she could transform.

“You know me?” Shroud asked, surprised.

Blackthorn shrugged. “We have a file on you, and everyone in the Carnival.”

“Did you steal his private data?” Ryan asked mirthfully.
“Dynamis should update its privacy policy charter.”

“I knew this day would come, Quicksave,” Enrique replied, while Shroud formed a seat of glass from his own armor. Blackthorn turned his seat to face the whole group. “I suppose that’s how you took down the Meta-Gang, with the Carnival’s help? Did Hargraves send you to arrest me? Or kill me?”

“No,” Len replied, though her tone didn’t soften at all. “I want answers.”

Wyvern slammed the mahogany desk so hard that its surface cracked.

Her violent reaction made everyone flinch, except Ryan and Enrique. The former, because he saw it coming; the latter, because he had expected it.

“Enrique, what’s happening?” The superheroine’s fist clenched, some of the documents falling off the desk. “Is any of this true?”

"All of it, as far as I can tell." His voice was heavy with guilt and remorse. "All their evidence points to my father conspiring with Adam the Ogre to weaken the Augusti. As for our Elixir production process... I saw it for myself."

By now, Il Migliore's shining dragon was positively trembling. "Tell me this is a sick joke of some kind."

"I wish it were." Her manager let out a sad sigh. "The Knockoffs react violently to Miss Sabino's blood samples. Her father put an unknown agent in her hemoglobin which removes the safeguards on our Elixirs. My brother Alphonse wanted her turned into a guinea pig so that we might remove that flaw, and perfect the production process. I put my veto on that, but—"

This time, Wyvern punched the desk and snapped it in half. Ryan quickly stopped time to save the folder and gather all the documents.

"You let Tyrano clone me? Turn me into a poison?" Wyvern asked, struggling to hold back tears. "Enrique, after all... after everything that happened between us... how could you do *this*?"

"Laura—"

"Your company infected this city's population with a Psycho, Enrique!"

"When I learned the truth about how our artificial Elixirs were made, it was too late to pull the plug," the CBO replied with remorse. "The Knockoffs had been distributed to the population. I was put before the *Fait Accompli*."

"Better late than never," Len replied angrily. "Why didn't you just *stop*?"

Instead of answering immediately, Enrique slowly removed his mask and put it on his desk's left corner.

He looked rather handsome, with perfectly groomed hair and a sexy Spanish mustache. He took a lot from his sire Hector, though with a leaner face and more skeletal features. While the father reminded Ryan of Pablo Escobar, the son looked more like a lanky Antonio Banderas.

Enrique glanced at Ryan and Len, before locking eyes with the latter. "For as little as it is worth, I want to apologize to you both," he declared. "What my family did to yours is unforgivable, and you are within your right to hate us. I have a responsibility in hiding the truth from the population, but I never wanted any of this. This was done behind my back."

"But you covered it up," Felix accused him, while Wyvern wiped away tears of rage and betrayal.

"If I had revealed the scandal, Atom Cat, then Dynamis would have certainly collapsed alongside any hope of rebuilding Europe into something halfway decent," Enrique defended himself. "Do you want Augustus to become the face of our future? We are not perfect, but at least we try to recreate society based on the rule of law. I cannot say the same for our opposition. Dynamis is the only remaining check on Augustus' authority; the last barrier between Europe's population and a deranged Genome suprematist."

Enrique glanced at the window, and at Mount Augustus sticking out of the horizon. "That is why my brother lied to me and created the Knockoffs, Sabino. To try and knock these so-called gods off their thrones."

"Yet your solution presents as great a danger to the world as Augustus," Felix said accusingly. "Maybe even greater."

“The Carnival didn’t give you the full reasons why we wanted Bloodstream gone to avoid a panic, and maybe we should have said the truth from the start. Our previous seer...” Shroud cleared his throat. “My mother predicted that Bloodstream would cause a worldwide disaster, if left alive. Our data proves that the risk remains even now.”

“My father...” Len’s hands fidgeted on her lap. “My father could go mad and... everyone who drank the Knockoffs...”

Ryan put a hand on her arm, and he could tell she was thankful for the emotional support. Enrique absorbed the news with gloom, while Wyvern looked fit to gag.

“Dr. Tyrano insisted that his vaccine worked,” Blackthorn said, though doubt had crept in his voice already. “That it would neutralize Bloodstream in case of a containment breach.”

“Don’t trust a reptilian to do a mammal’s job,” Ryan replied as he broke hand contact with his adoptive sister and extracted a beautiful sheet full of graphs from the folder. Blackthorn quickly grabbed it.

“Here is our plague doctor’s analysis report,” Shroud explained. “If put in contact with the blood agent in his daughter’s hemoglobin, the core of Bloodstream will regain its full power and automatically transform anyone who consumed a Knockoff into a clone of itself. And according to our simulations, it might gain the ability to do so on its own as it mutates further.”

Blackthorn sank deeper in his chair as he read.
“Thousands...”

“Millions would die in the best-case scenario,” Shroud replied.

"You've got to stop this," Felix insisted.

Blackthorn returned the document to Ryan. "You came to destroy Lab Sixty-Six."

"They wanted to come in guns blazing," the courier admitted, "but I convinced them to try finding a compromise."

"Why?" Enrique asked dryly. "Out of all the people in this room, you should hate us the most."

"Because although you look like a Saturday Morning Cartoon villain, I know you are anything but." If anything, Ryan had come to see Blackthorn as the other side's Livia, an internal reformer doomed to fail without outside help. "You're the only hope Dynamis has of reforming into something actually good for the world."

"We have found a treatment not only for the Bloodstream infection, but for the Psycho condition," Shroud explained.

Though skeptical, Enrique looked willing to entertain the possibility of a cure. "Do you have proof of what you say?"

"Of course." Ryan put a hand on his chest. "Thanks to our Psychocare policy, my administration is currently curing the Meta-Gang's members. You can come see it for yourself."

"But we will need resources to cure Psychos across Europe," Shroud said. "Resources that your company can provide."

"I... I want to try the treatment on my father. To try and heal him... and if it doesn't work..." Len cleared her throat. "If it doesn't work... I want to end his suffering. This is all I ask. I... I don't even want revenge. I just want him to find peace."

Enrique tensed up. “My father and brother will never agree —”

“They won’t,” Ryan agreed. “Which is why we’re asking *you* to do the right thing, Jiminy.”

Though he remained as stoic as ever, the courier’s words affected Blackthorn. Ryan could see it in his body language, how the plants in his office shifted. A part of him truly believed in the superhero propaganda he pitched to his customers.

Deep down, Enrique Manada desperately wanted to make the world a better place.

“I’m resigning,” Wyvern declared with a hardened voice. “I can’t stand by this. And neither should you, Enrique.”

“No, I should not,” the manager conceded. “But if we reveal the truth and arrest my father, then my brother Alphonse is in charge. He won’t let his life’s work vanish without a fight. He has gambled too much on this project to stop now.”

“Even knowing the risks?” Felix asked, aghast.

“Even so. My brother dreams of a world where everyone is a Genome, and thus equal. He would rather die than abandon it.”

“Then we’ll stop him too,” Atom Cat locked eyes with his manager. “You remember the day I first came to this office, Blackthorn? What did you say to me back then?”

Blackthorn let out a heavy sigh. “That even if your family was in the wrong, you were right to take a stand for what you believe in.”

“Start practicing what you preach. Or was that just a slogan?”

Wyvern put a hand on Enrique’s shoulder, making him freeze. The superhero and the corpo exchanged a glance, full of conflicted emotions. Past intimacy, pain over past lies, regrets... a tiny bit of hope. They had been so close that they could probably understand the other’s thoughts without saying a word.

“Even if it’s all for naught, Laura?” Enrique asked Wyvern.

“Even if it is all for naught... Someone has to try, Enrique. Or nothing will change.” She gathered her breath. “Please.”

Enrique’s hand rose to touch Wyvern’s, but she backed away from his shoulder before he could make contact. For the first time since Ryan had met him, the courier could see the pain and loneliness behind the Manada’s stoic facade.

“Suppose I’ll help you.” Il Migliore’s manager faced his guests. “Even if by some miracle Dynamis survives the destruction of our main lab, our loss of credibility, and my brother’s inevitable retaliation, the company will be a shadow of its former self. Easy prey for Augustus. Unless you intend to take him down after cleaning up our house?”

“You have a secret weapon against Augustus,” Shroud pointed out. “The Gravity Gun.”

“An *untested* weapon,” Enrique pointed out. “You of all people should understand why we’re unwilling to take a gamble, Martel. Your organization’s last encounter with Augustus ended with half of your members dead, Martel; ours, with Malta sinking beneath the waves. When humans dare the lightning to fall, they *die*.”

Ryan felt a sharp pain in his chest, right where Lightning Butt struck him in the past loop. “We have another option,” he said. “Mechron tech. Its efficiency has been proven.”

Technically true, though he left out the gory details.

“Nothing is ever certain with Augustus, but I suppose this is true for all things in life.” Enrique seized Ryan’s folder. “I will analyze these documents in detail. If you are correct about the potential for an Elixir epidemic... if you are correct, then I will contact you again.”

“And the Gravity Gun?” Shroud asked.

“I will send you the data.” Enrique looked away, avoiding Wyvern’s gaze. “Go now.”

Not yet. While Shroud vanished and his other allies moved to the door, Ryan turned to Wyvern and spoke one word.

“Jasmine.”

Wyvern flinched. “What, Jasmine?”

“It’s not too late for you and her,” Ryan said. “All she wants is an apology and recognition.”

“Apology for what?” Dragon Mom asked with a confused frown. “I never did her harm.”

“She wants you to apologize for never paying much attention to her, and letting her live in your shadow,” Ryan said. “That’s all she wants in the end. Recognition for her achievements, and being treated as an equal. It’s really that simple.”

Wyvern's eyes widened, and the courier could see the gears turning in her head. "Is that another prophecy?" she asked, Enrique squinting at the courier with suspicion. "Are you a precognitive Genome too?"

"Sort of." Ryan shrugged. "It's not too late to help her turn her life around. But it won't be possible without you."

"I... I see."

Hoping that she would take his words to heart, Ryan walked out of the office and left the two corpos alone. They were locking eyes as the courier closed the office's door behind him.

Though Ryan could tell that not all hope of patching things up was lost, flower and dragon had many couple counseling sessions ahead of them.

"What was that for?" Len asked on their way out of the building.

"I made a promise to a girl once," Ryan said, remembering his Jasmine lost to time. "I owed her that much."

Ryan drove the Plymouth Fury on the way back home, but the group didn't move to the Junkyard immediately. "Here," Atom Kitten said at a key crossroad. "To the southeast."

The courier immediately recognized the way. "Family, or friends?"

"Friends," Felix said.

After half an hour of travel and avoiding two traffic accidents, Ryan parked his car in front of Jamie's house.

The occupants were already waiting outside, even before the courier and Felix stepped out of the car. Ryan noticed Ki-jung's rats in the grass around the house, and tossed a swiss cheese piece at them. "Why do you carry cheese on yourself?" Felix asked in confusion.

"Why wouldn't I carry cheese?" Ryan answered, while Len remained in the car. Though she was improving, she didn't do well with new people. Baby steps. "I have milk too, if you're thirsty."

"Only if we drink from the same cup," his sidekick replied, before facing his old friends. Jamie looked as tense as a bear caught in an ambush, while Ki-jung appeared torn between joy at seeing Felix again, and worry.

As for Lanka...

"Look at that, a suicide bomber," Lanka said while opening a beer can. She glanced at Ryan and Len, her eyes hidden behind her sunglasses. "Are they your new team? Come to blow yourselves up together?"

"Sort of," Felix replied.

Ryan put a hand on his sidekick's shoulder. "We found your cat erring on the road, and adopted him."

"Ain't our cat anymore," Lanka replied before sipping her beer. "He ran away, so you can keep it."

"Felix, why are you here?" Though he asked the question with calmness, Jamie couldn't suppress the worry in his voice. "Are you returning back into the fold?"

"I'm not coming back," Felix replied, before choosing his next words carefully. "But... I realized I might have treated

you a bit too harshly. I hoped we could stay friends.”

“Funny, I remember you saying we were *done*,” Lanka replied, unimpressed. “Among other colorful things.”

“I still believe them,” Felix replied bluntly, causing Ryan to sigh. Atom Kitten was about as diplomatic as a prison door. Still, the courier hung back, as it was a private matter between former friends. “Staying with the Augusti is wrong, especially after you saw the damage they caused first hand.”

“Felix, you will always remain our friend,” Ki-jung said softly. “I remember all you did for me, and Jamie too. You will always be welcome among us.”

“But by coming here, you’re putting everyone in danger,” Jamie declared. “If Pluto learns you came...”

“You’ll die.” Felix sighed. “Guys, you’re going to die if you stick with them. Even if you don’t do anything wrong, Augustus will be the death of you. You will retire in coffins.”

They know, Ryan thought, as he observed their reactions. Lanka and Jamie seemed to have accepted it as inevitable, while Ki-jung stared down at her own feet.

Felix waited for them to answer, before clenching his fists at their silence. “Guys...”

“We can’t leave,” Jamie said, while his girlfriend looked away.

“After dragging Ki-jung into this mess, you’ll keep her in it?” Atom Cat accused him.

Jamie's expression turned into one of disgust, his voice brimming with cold rage. "Drag her into this?"

"Jamie was against me joining the Augusti," his girlfriend said while observing her rats in the grass. A dozen of them stopped fighting over the cheese to go back to their mistress, surrounding her like an elite rodent guard. "But we had little choice. I *stole* from the organization, Felix. They wouldn't have let me leave New Rome alive."

"Pluto wanted her dead, to make an example for those who would dare to steal Bliss shipments," Jamie explained grimly. "There was no other way to mollify the leadership. What else could we do?"

"Run away together," Felix said, unimpressed. "Flee to another country, or join Dynamis. They could have protected you."

Something in his voice made Jamie's expression turn into one of suppressed anger.

"Felix, if we had abandoned the family as you did, Ki-jung would be dead." The mobster crossed his arms, his face grim and sullen. "*I* would be dead, *Lanka* would be dead, and *everyone we ever cared about* would be dead. The only reason *you're* still alive is that your parents and ex-girlfriend have Augustus' ear. Without them?"

Jamie locked eyes with his old friend.

"You would be buried in an unmarked grave in Rust Town."

Felix flinched, as the words hit close to home. Ryan didn't blame him. He had seen firsthand how far Lightning Butt would go in the past loop, and how so few could hope to escape his grip alive.

"Alright, I see I was a special case," the young superhero confessed, less sure of himself. "But let's assume that the Augusti leadership collapses."

"They won't," Jamie replied with cynicism. "They can't. Nobody can defeat the Olympians, let alone Augustus."

Ryan shrugged. "We can, and we will."

"I don't believe you," Jamie said with defeatism.

"But if we succeed?" Felix asked. "Just *imagine* that we succeed, that Augustus and his cronies are gone. Would you leave? I'm not asking you to join us, Jamie. Only whether you will simply step aside."

"Leave the family?" Jamie was aghast. "I... that would be betrayal. I owe them everything. If it were not for Mercury, I would be a nob—"

"Yes."

Everyone glanced at Ki-jung.

"Yes," the vermin controller repeated, first hesitantly and then more firmly. "Yes, I would leave. I would leave and I wouldn't turn back."

"You're sure?" Jamie asked with a worried frown.

"I... you saved me, Jamie. But each time I look at Bliss..." Ki-jung's arms trembled, her gaze haunted by the memories of darker times. "Each time, I feel the urge to fall back into it. As long as this drug exists, I will never be free of it. You saved me, but... how many others suffer, with no one to help them? If we can escape that poison... if we have a chance, we should take it."

Her boyfriend considered her words, doubt gnawing at his heart. He might owe the Augusti everything and felt he belonged nowhere else.... but Ryan knew that he intended to marry Ki-jung and start a family with her.

A *real* family forged in blood and hardship, rather than a false one built on drug money.

"Jamie?" Felix asked, a hint of hope in his voice. "What would you choose? I have to know."

The mobster put a hand around his girlfriend's waist, pulling her closer. "I would choose her," he said, Ki-jung resting her head against his shoulder. "Wherever that leads."

Felix let out a breath of relief, before glancing at Lanka. "And you?"

"Sorry, Bomberman, you won't get a diabetes feast from me." She shrugged her shoulders, tossing her empty beer can away. "I won't say a word about this meeting, but I just can't imagine a world where Augustus ain't killing you one day."

Ryan put his hands behind his head. "Lightning won't strike him this time."

"And how would you do that?" Lanka snickered. "There aren't any lightning rods big enough for the marble guy upstairs."

"We'll put Lightning Butt in a bottle and toss him where he belongs," Ryan promised. "With the clowns."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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123: The Last Break

Enrique Manada had been true to his word.

Sitting around a garish pink table at the *Dostoïevski* restaurant, Ryan, Len, and the Panda examined the plans of Dynamis' Gravity Gun; though the Gravity Rifle would have been a better name for it. The device was long and impractical, though the courier was certain they could miniaturize it.

As Livia had promised, the *Dostoïevski* was a Russian all-you-can-eat buffet located at New Rome's periphery and catering almost exclusively to families. The restaurant could have easily accommodated hundreds of patrons, though Ryan's girlfriend had rented the entire restaurant for a private gathering. The floor was carpeted with industrial, blue flooring, with the food steam trays decorated with fish imagery; staff members were dressed in sailor's attire, and the tables smelled of ice cream. Somehow, the comforting atmosphere put even the usually shy Len at ease.

Everyone had come dressed casually for the occasion, even Ryan. The other guests hadn't arrived yet, though the courier didn't doubt they would. Nobody in their right mind would miss the garish neon lights advertising the restaurant on the roof.

"A few seconds after being fired, the projectile creates a gravitational anomaly," Timmy explained, after reviewing the schematics. It was so odd to see him without his

costume on in human form. He looked so scrawny and ordinary, with a shy, gentle smile. “Everything in its vicinity is pulled towards the sphere, while it counteracts the Earth’s pull.”

“So, if I understand correctly, and I almost always do,” Ryan said, “the sphere will pull Lightning Butt towards itself, and then fly up?”

His pandawan nodded. “According to Dynamis’ calculations, the Gravity Gun will expel him from the upper atmosphere. After that, the sphere will wander through the solar system without ever returning home.”

Ryan immediately saw where Dynamis found the inspiration for that plan. “They wanted to *Kars Augustus*.”

“Kars?” Len asked with a frown. Ryan silently vowed to remedy her complete absence of pop culture knowledge.

“I understood that reference!” The Panda said happily.

“Every time you open your mouth, my young pandawan, my faith in humanity is renewed,” his mentor congratulated him.

“But will it work?” Len asked with skepticism. “Augustus can fly.”

“By manipulating electric charges to ionize air,” Ryan pointed out. “He shouldn’t be able to fly outside the atmosphere. However, if he breaks the sphere before reaching space...”

Len frowned. “Do you think it could work, Riri?”

“Livia doesn’t believe so.” At least not without support. “Well, it’s not like I’m going to rely on only one secret weapon.” His main plan was to lure Lightning Butt to Monaco and trap him there permanently, while beating him up into submission with his Black Flux power remained a secondary option.

“We could make copies and distribute them to our group,” Len suggested. “I could replace my water rifle with it.”

“No, too dangerous,” Ryan said. “For it to work, I will need to fire it in close combat. Better to use our limited time on miniaturizing this Gravity Gun and install it in my armor.”

“Only your armor?” Shortie’s eyes widened. “Riri, you can’t mean...”

“Dynamis’ gardener in chief had a point. When people dare the lightning to strike them, they die.” Ryan had seen Augustus tear apart Big Adam’s jaw with a backhand, shatter Sunshine’s core, and survive the following supernova. New Rome’s tyrant was, by far, the most powerful foe the courier had ever faced. There was no room for error with him. “I’ll take Mob Zeus on alone.”

“Sifu, no!” The Panda protested in panic. “That’s suicide!”

“He’s right, Riri,” Len added while folding the schematics. “I’m coming with you.”

“I’m the only one who can even harm him,” Ryan replied. “And his immunity to my time-stop means I’ll have a hard time saving anyone caught in the crossfire. If he kills me, I can come back from it.”

Hopefully.

Len looked ready to protest, when the restaurant's door slammed open and a green-haired spitfire walked into the place. "Holà!" the young woman said in mangled Spanish, before switching back to Italian. She dressed so trashily that Ryan almost missed the hazmat suit. "What's up, boys and girls?"

"Hey, Bianca!" Ryan welcomed her with a raised hand. "What will you start with? Caviar? Blinis? *Borscht*?"

"I'll try everything, El Presidente," the former Sarin snickered, as a blonde, shy woman and a scrawny man followed her. A giant more than two meters tall closed the march, though he struggled to fit through the restaurant's doors. "I've got years of sensory deprivation to make up for."

"Hello..." The former Acid Rain smiled shyly at Ryan's group. The contrast with her deranged former self couldn't be starker.

"Oh, hi Helen!" The Panda waved a hand at them. "Hi, Mongrel!"

"Not Mongrel," the latter replied. With his Knockoff Elixirs out of his system, the former Psycho looked healthy and most importantly, sane again. "It's Jerome now. I don't wanna have a supervillain nickname ever again."

"You should still pick one," Ryan said. "We'll need you to improve our cure, and maybe even help us with weapons in hand."

The former Mongrel shrugged. "Look, I owe you guys a life debt, and I'll pay it back. But once it's done, I never want to have anything to do with Elixirs or fighting for the rest of my

life. Years as a savage animal make you appreciate a normal nine-to-five existence like nothing else.”

“You... you freed me from a long nightmare. Cured me, and gave me my life back.” Helen bowed to Ryan deeply. “If I can do anything to help... I will do it. Even if it means picking up arms again.”

“Yeah, none of us are finks here,” Bianca said. “Even Frank feels he owes you one... that, and he’s eager to burn down the establishment.”

Ryan glanced at the last member of the group as he walked inside the restaurant. Though he was no longer the colossus he had once been, the man was still over two meters tall, and slightly balding. His middle-aged face reminded Ryan of Marshal Zhukov, tough and blunt, but also someone you could have a good time fishing with. His grey parka and heavy boots made him look like a soldier ready to go to war.

“My name is not Frank,” the giant replied with a heavy Russian accent. “My name is *Vladimir*. Or Vlad, like the impaler.”

“Whatever you say,” Bianca replied, before moving on to the buffet. Helen hurriedly followed after her, while Jerome asked the waiters about the nearest toilets. “I never knew I would say that, but I liked you more as an American.”

Ryan agreed. Frank had been a true patriot, enthusiastic, loyal, amusing... while his real self...

“It was capitalist brainwashing,” Vlad the Mad replied. “They know they cannot stop the revolution, so they infect the workers’ minds with microchips and polluted ideas.”

His real self was a total killjoy.

Worse, Len immediately recognized a kindred spirit. “Are you a Marxist-Leninist?” she asked hopefully.

Vlad the Mad’s eyes lit up in enthusiasm, and he immediately sat right next to Shortie. Thankfully, the tables were meant for six and could accommodate the giant just fine. “I am a Trotskyist,” he said with pride. “Only through permanent revolution can the workers of the world achieve equality for all!”

“I thought the communists were almost extinct?” Timmy asked naively.

“No, you would fit right in,” Ryan said. “But only in Panda form.”

“You think equality is something to joke about?” Vlad squinted at Ryan. “You think neoliberal oppression is funny?”

Ryan sighed. That one took everything seriously, and didn’t have a humorous bone in his body. “No, no, I’m all for protecting endangered species, even Marxists.”

“Comrade Lenin may be dead, but his ideas live on,” Vlad the Mad replied with passion.

Ryan would rather like it the other way around, but Len was so overjoyed to meet another commie that she started grilling him about political theory. “Do you think universal equality can still be achieved in a neo-capitalist world like this one?”

“Of course!” Vlad replied, while Helen teleported his empty plate and replaced it with one full of beef. With the Psycho treatment having separated her two powers, the former Acid Rain could switch the position of items of near-equivalent

mass, including herself. “The workers of the world have never been more oppressed! The only thing they lack to take back the means of production, is awareness of their own strength!”

As he watched Len grin, Ryan had the feeling that these two would become BFFs in no time. He wondered if he had created a monster. “I prefer social democracy,” the Panda tried to meekly participate in the debate.

Vlad the Mad’s answer was the acme of subtlety. “And that is why this country is *BLEEPed!*”

The next batch of newcomers arrived. “This is a waste of my valuable time!” Alchemo complained crankily as he stepped into the restaurant, his daughter and a toaster on wheels following. “I do not need solid food!”

“Dad, it’s not the food that matters, but the company,” the Doll insisted, before greeting everyone. “Hi!”

Meanwhile, Toasty wasted no time bothering Helen and Bianca. The toaster on wheels rolled all the way to the buffet, to Acid Rain’s confusion. “Hey, beauties, do you want your blinis toasted...” it asked. “Or raw?”

“Is... is that toaster talking?” Helen asked Bianca, who shrugged before buttering a blini with low-quality caviar.

The last group arrived afterward, keeping the best for last. Mathias walked into the restaurant with his dazzlingly golden girlfriend holding his arm, while Livia and Felix exchanged words behind them. Ryan observed his girlfriend from head to toe, recognizing her clothes as the black coat she loved so much. Discreet, yet elegant.

“Lovely,” he said when Livia returned his gaze.

"You're not so unfortunate yourself," she replied with a wink, before glancing at Fortuna. "Do you mind if I take my knight aside for a moment?"

"It's fine, Livy," her best friend replied, before putting one arm around her boyfriend's, and another around her brother's. "These gentlemen will keep me company."

"The things I do for family," Felix grumbled, though his heart wasn't in it.

"You're anticipating a bit too much on that front," Mathias said.

"No, he isn't," Fortuna insisted with a blissful gaze, before dragging them aside to their own table.

Ryan abandoned his own group to settle with Livia near a window. Their table was meant for two and isolated from the rest, and provided a cozy kind of intimacy. Livia nodded at a waiter, and a familiar tune started playing in the restaurant.

"Why are they playing the *Rains of Castamere*?" Ryan asked, upon recognizing the music.

"Because Mathias still half suspects me of treachery, and will recognize the reference," Livia said, glancing at the vigilante. Though Mathias sat with his girlfriend and Felix, he often glanced at Ryan's table. Jerome's return from the toilets quickly distracted him though, as an unusually kind Fortuna invited him to join their group. "I like to make him squirm."

"You are a cruel, wicked woman," the courier accused his girlfriend.

"Would you rather that I disguise myself as a hockey killer and ambush him?" She asked, as a waiter gave them a glass of vodka each. "I'm surprised you didn't assault Luigi yet."

"I made him pay for his slight against me tenfold already," Ryan replied while sipping his glass. "I'm not that vengeful, especially on a potential Perfect Run."

"Good." Livia glanced through the window, and at the parked cars outside. Ryan's was the most dashing of the lot, though his girlfriend's Ferrari gave the Plymouth Fury a run for its money. "Is everyone else here?"

"Only Dr. Stitch, and he chose to work on the Bloodstream vaccine plague rather than join us," Ryan said. "Sunshine and co are destroying Mechron's remaining bases as we speak. They'll sit this one out, at least for now."

"Good. If my father catches wind of their presence in the city, it will mean war."

Ryan frowned. "How are things going on that front?"

"Geist's demise woke my father up from his inaction." Livia played with her glass, her expression darkening. "He suspects the Meta-Gang. From his point of view, he hasn't heard of their activities in a few days, right as Geist mysteriously vanishes. Obviously, he suspects a connection. He has heavily reinforced security around Ischia Island, and authorized Vulcan's plans to take back Rust Town... at least so far."

"So far?"

"Wyvern made a surprise visit to Vulcan early tonight, and she left the foundry both alive and unharmed. My father

hasn't been informed yet, but once he is, he will grow suspicious of Vulcan's allegiances." Livia glanced at her boyfriend with a quizzical eyebrow. "What did you say to Wyvern?"

"How to patch up with an old friend," Ryan replied with a sigh. "I owed that to Jasmine."

Livia smiled, and for once the courier didn't detect any hint of jealousy in his girlfriend's expression. "I understand."

"Do you think it will work?" the courier asked. He was glad that Dragon Mom listened to his advice, but it took New Rome's destruction by an orbital satellite for Jasmine and her to reconcile.

"I give Vulcan a fifty-fifty percent chance to take Wyvern on her olive branch, and I will make sure to warn her if my father issues a kill order. She will make it out alive, whatever the case."

"Thanks," Ryan said. His fingers brushed softly against Livia's, to her joy. "Is it alright to come here though? Your daddy is in a paranoid phase."

"He is, but I mollified him somewhat when I brought Psyshock to Cancel. Officially, I'm meeting with Genome mercenaries to help us take down the Meta-Gang." She winked at him. "Dad is too happy that I am taking my future role of leader seriously to look too much into my activities."

"Damn it, I should have asked to be paid in advance," Ryan said. "That was a missed opportunity."

"Whatever happens to Vulcan, my family will occupy Rust Town again soon, and this time they will examine the area thoroughly." Livia sighed. "There's a strong possibility they

might discover the bunker, even if we condemn the entrances."

"So we'll have to destroy it." Ryan had expected as much.
"Take what we can, and blow up the rest."

"It's better that way," his girlfriend replied. "Things like the Bahamut orbital laser and robot armies will only lead to disaster."

"Truth be told, I'm not sure what to do about Mechron's Knockoff production process," Ryan confessed. "I considered offering Dynamis the necessary technology, but not until after Greenhand is fully in charge. Unless..."

"Unless?"

"Unless you're putting your veto?"

"I might." She joined her hands and looked at the night sky beyond the window. "If all goes well for us, my father will be ousted from power, as will Hector and Alphonse Manada. At which point, both my family's empire and Dynamis will be weakened. After reforming both, I intend to propose a merger to Enrique Manada."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "You want to form a new government?"

"The New European Republic," Livia said with a foxy grin.
"How does that sound?"

"The fearsome *NER*?" The time-traveler chuckled. "I think it's already taken."

"In the old world, not the new," Livia defended her choice.
"And you're going to be part of it."

“Moi?”

“What?” She laughed at his confusion. “You always joked about becoming a president. Don’t you want to become the Albert to my Victoria?”

Ryan chuckled while finishing his Vodka. “When did you upgrade from princess to queen?”

“When you called me Queen Crimson,” she said before giving him a dirty gaze. “You’ll look good with a tie on.”

“Only if you wear a matching suit.”

“Red and black,” she replied, before finishing her own vodka. “Mechron’s Knockoff technology could help this newborn nation, or it might create more tensions in Europe. I’ll need to examine the future in-depth after we prevail, to see how it will go.”

Ryan’s expression deflated. “If we prevail.”

“Even if we don’t, now that you have saved, we will remember everything. We can try again.” She expected him to say something, but grew suspicious when he remained silent. “Ryan, what are you hiding from me?”

The courier sighed. “I’m having performance issues.”

“With your power?” Livia’s eyes widened. “You couldn’t save.”

“No. My Elixir, or maybe the Violet Ultimate One itself, won’t let me. I don’t know why.”

“Is it about your other power? The one you used to kill Geist across multiple timelines?” Livia took his hands into her

own, her steely gaze demanding answers. “Ryan, don’t you think it’s about time you tell me?”

Ryan sighed, and told her everything. He gave her the details of his expedition in the Black World, about his power’s inner workings, and how it interfered with the space-time continuum. The more he spoke, the more she scowled... Although to his surprise, Livia didn’t appear worried.

“The Elixirs and Ultimate Ones grant us our wishes,” she said with a sad frown. “What did you ask for to get a power like this?”

Ryan answered bluntly, “I wanted to die.”

His girlfriend bristled, but her sorrow quickly turned into hope. “You *wanted* to die, past tense,” she said. “Now you want to live.”

Sharp.

“I had lost too much, with little to fight for anymore.” Ryan glanced at the people around him. By now, Len was *smiling* while the Panda and Vlad the Mad exchanged pleasantries, all red on vodka. The Doll managed to make Alchemo relax a bit, while Helen grew more at ease as Toasty’s terrible flirting attempts alleviated her mood. Bianca soon joined their table with a plate full of food, while Jerome toasted glasses with Mathias, Fortuna, and Felix. “That’s not the case anymore.”

Livia beamed with happiness. “You gathered all these people, Ryan,” she said, her gaze lingering on the former Psychos among them. “In some cases, you saved their lives, in more ways than one. They’re here for you... with you.”

"You most of all," Ryan said.

She blushed and beamed with joy like a sunflower, warming the time traveler's heart. "This is why I'm not so worried about the Ultimate One's plans for you," Livia declared. "If it weren't for its influence, we wouldn't have met each other. If it encourages you to see this loop through to the end, even without saving, then it means it has something in store for you."

Unfortunately, a doubt quickly gnawed at her heart. "But if everything you destroy with that power stays destroyed..." she trailed off. "If you kill Father..."

"I won't," Ryan said. "I swear. I might imprison him, but I won't slay him."

Livia examined him carefully, before nodding to herself.
"Alright."

"That's all?"

"I trust you, my prince. It's as simple as that. You always fulfilled your promises, and I know you will follow through with that one." Her expression twisted into a frown. "Could your power cut out the tumor?"

"Maybe," Ryan said, though he had no intention of saving Lightning Butt from himself. "Or I might accidentally give him a wound he will never recover from. I'm sorry."

Livia nodded to herself, but didn't insist. She had already made peace with the fact her father's days were numbered, largely by his own fault.

"I'm already asking a lot from everyone to spare my father, especially after all he has done," she admitted. "Ordering

his victims to help cure him would be greedy. Bruno Costa could have saved him, and he blew that chance anyway. Now, he won't even let his daughter Narcinia out of that cursed island."

"What additional defenders can we expect?"

"Mars and Vulcan, for a start," Livia answered. "Aunt Pluto and the Killer Seven have orders to reinforce the factory at the first sound of an alarm."

Ryan crossed his arms. Almost all of these people needed to go for the Augusti to reform, Bacchus included. "This could actually work in our favor."

"I thought the same," his girlfriend replied. "I could pull strings to have Mercury added to the security detail while sending Uncle Neptune away. With so many Olympians gathered in one area, we could cut the rot from the family. Venus, we can capture easily."

"The *old* Mercury?" Ryan asked in confusion. "Isn't he retiring?"

"He will only do so if he feels the organization's power is secure," Livia explained. "That man was in the Camorra even before my father took it over and transformed it into the Augusti. He dedicated his life to this organization, and he won't let it fall without a fight."

In that case, the purge would leave only people like Neptune, who wanted to go legit, and Augustus himself. Still, Ryan could tell that his girlfriend worried that the raid might go wrong. Ending the battle with little to no casualties would be a trial.

“I have a surprise for you,” the courier said. “Something that will cheer you up.”

“Truly?” She squinted at him. “I haven’t been able to guess what.”

“Because I built it in a thin place, so you wouldn’t notice.”

“Built it?”

Ryan magically pulled blueprints from under his shirt, and showed them to his girlfriend.

The plan detailed a power armor, based on the Saturn model. That suit was leaner though, and adapted to a female wielder. Its plates were red as blood, its visor black as night, and a white spider symbol was painted on the chest. Most important of all, this model had traded the ear-like antennae for eight telescopic tentacles of reinforced steel.

“Queen Crimson, I present to you the Opis armor.” Ryan smiled as Livia gasped in shock. “Tailor-made for you.”

“Ryan, I can’t wear this,” she said, while covering her mouth with her hands. “If the others identify my powers on the Bliss Raid—”

“I wasn’t thinking about Bliss Island,” Ryan said softly. “How about we fight nuclear-proliferation together?”

Livia’s eyes widened, as her fingers moved to seize the schematics and examine them closely. She gawked at the smooth helmet, at the elegant metal tentacles that would make any Japanese schoolgirl squeal, at the dashing spider symbol on the chest...

"I love it," Livia said, blushing. "Why a spider theme though?"

"It uses an extra-arm and drone system too difficult for most pilots to master... unless they can see the future. Besides, you're scheming and sensible like a spider."

His lovely princess pouted. "You make me sound like an evil mastermind."

"Evil..." He approached his head closer to her own to whisper in her ear. "Or misunderstood?"

She giggled. "You're an angel, Ryan," his girlfriend said before kissing him on the cheek. "Which is why I brought a surprise for you too."

"You did?" Ryan asked, suddenly excited. "It's not even my eighth-hundred and eighty-sixth birthday yet."

"It's on the roof. You'll love it."

He did.

His girlfriend dragged him to the restaurant's roof, where she had had a fascinating device installed behind the neon lights: a three-meters tall rocket, orange like an apple and rugged like a tank. A skeletal Psycho could be seen screaming behind the porthole, his voice muffled by the steel, his powers suppressed by a powerful heater.

Ghoul had been a sociopathic killer *before* becoming a Psycho according to Ryan's research, and Livia predicted that he would keep murdering people even if cured. Though several other captive members of the Meta-Gang were monsters even with a cure and would need to be imprisoned for the good of everyone else, the bag of bones was by far

the worst of them. The others might be cured, tried, and maybe even rehabilitated after a lengthy period of imprisonment; but Ghoul would never change.

The courier had jokingly suggested exiling his undead chew toy to space as an alternative to destroying him with his Black Power, but he would never have imagined that Livia would take him seriously.

“According to Vulcan, this rocket can go all the way to Pluto,” Livia explained.

“The planet, or the Genome?” Ryan asked innocently, marveling at this gift like a child before a new Playstation.

“Whichever you want. Also, Pluto is a dwarf planet now.”

“You don’t diss Pluto in my presence, princess.” Ryan’s fingers brushed against the rocket, basking in the rough feeling of steel and the smell of oil. Vulcan even added a string fuse to the reactor, like a petard! “How did she build something so beautiful in a few days?”

“She didn’t,” Livia gave him a sheepish smile. “I cheated a bit. She actually built it a year ago as a prison for Wyvern, but gave up on the idea when she realized that Wyvern would break out of it. I just asked her to add a few modifications, and gave her the data needed to improve the prototype.”

Ryan squinted in disbelief. “She wanted to send Wyvern to Pluto?”

Livia closed her eyes and nodded.

Strange minds thought alike.

"Still good," Ryan said, deeply moved. "You shouldn't have. You really shouldn't have."

"But I did." Livia offered him a lighter. "Wanna do it together?"

"Sure," he replied before taking her hands into his own. "I'll let you pick the destination. Pluto? Venus? The *Sun*?"

Livia gave it some thought. "In orbit around the Earth, in case we ever need him to bring him back."

"What, really?

"Ryan, he's also immortal," Livia giggled. "Sending him to Pluto would be really cruel. Maybe gazing at the Earth for a few decades will reform him."

Ryan had his doubts, but indulged his girlfriend all the same.

And so, they romantically lit the fuse together. Ghoul screamed and panicked as the flames progressed closer to the reactor. "Is it safe from this distance?" Ryan asked, suddenly realizing standing on the same roof might prove dangerous. "And the others are right below—"

"Shush," his girlfriend said gently. "It's okay."

Oh, alright, if she said so...

"What did you call it?" Ryan asked, as the fuse reached the reactor.

"SpaceZ," Livia replied.

The reactor activated, but to Ryan's surprise, no flame came out. Instead, the rocket suddenly jerked upward without a sound, not even shaking the roof below it. The device flew

into the air silently, a faint Red Flux glow shining below the reactor.

An anti-gravity effect?

The courier would have preferred a big fiery explosion, but he waved his favorite undead astronaut goodbye all the same.

And so, Ryan and Livia hugged while Ghoul vanished in the skies to restart space exploration.

Both knew it might be their last moment of peace before a series of harsh trials to come. They would have to destroy Lab Sixty-Six, follow up with the Bliss Factory in quick succession before the Augusti could mobilize, and finally topping off the spree with Mob Zeus himself.

From now on, they would have to run the gauntlet.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Yeah, the last breather chapter before the boss rush!

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lennon sedael Darien Benner Ligma
Spartanstoryteller Colo T BedlamBlade MasterofNova
Walter Philip Jones Goggy123 Escalatus Erostan
Clemens Hochstädter Brandon Stiles mars kiyu Jacob
Barger Sam Paley Aymeric Penven Harold Sandahl IV
Kody Ihnat John Puri Iresan NeWorlDark Samuel
Alexander Vall Andersen Rein Warner morganmoll
Warper6 Harrison Brown Andrew Holland Jdosnoen
James Bbyh Xerias Maalsc Devourerofwords TTG**

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Nikhil Majumdar Leon Schultz Jeremy Minton Leaored
Cipkenop rmb123 Ervin Ughy Shaoraka sri kalyan
mulukutla Winson Chan Slipperyfish Overlord_Grimm
agoniste Olivier Edery Brycen Legler Jonathan
Spaulding Erriballon Sævar Valdimarsson Hayden H.
Scott Sanjay Skovboa Taylor Tilbury Bob le Poisson
Rouge David Cullen Ashley Cameron Ivan Elyshev
samuel baldauf Tate Browder NotAWeeb Joel Sasmad
Bury nice Basiun Ryan Trueman Dominic Moreau Chris
Roden Thomas Tessier M Clason Dark Chaos Alex
Lindsay Sadinar The Knight Commissar Francis
Chartier Daniel Everest Ausner Gentil bisque
LinenZero Tomas Puskas Kyle Reese Zach Ariel reyz
Peter Christensen-Calvin Murphy Jeff Gault James
Teeple Dom Ceremonia Max Collins Виктор Фон
Стыценкофф David Hansson Thaco4 Mikkel Kolding
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Enaz the great Saul Kurzman Marc Claude Louis
Durand Rhodri Thornber Dax Sam

124: Lab Closure

New Rome looked gorgeous from above.

The city breathed life. Millions of people returned from work as the sun started vanishing beyond the horizon, like the blood cells of a giant organism. The lights of casinos' neon signs and street lights formed a sea of light, some red, others green, and all the other colors of the rainbow in between. The whole place smelled of sin, but most importantly, it smelled of life. New Rome rivaled the greatest Old World metropolises in size, making it the New World's lighthouse. It was a beacon of hope for mankind, the promise of a bright future where humans would rise from their own ashes and rebuild.

Ryan couldn't let this city die. Yet already a virus was at work, insidiously infecting thousands of Genomes, laying the ground for a worldwide pandemic. And though he had the cure safely contained in his Saturn armor's backpack, dealing with this disaster would only summon another.

"We're in position," Ryan declared through his armor's intercom. Livia was playing with her own new Opis armor in the clouds to his left. "Waiting for the signal, buddy."

Two video feeds appeared inside his helmet, one projected on each lens. The left one came from Shortie's own power armor, as she, Enrique, and a group of Private Security bodyguards climbed the lift to Lab Sixty-Six; the right one showed Felix, Wyvern, and half of Il Migliore waiting in front

of Hector Manada's mansion. The latter feed was of a poorer quality, as a Dynamis camera drone provided it.

"We're ready to move in too," Felix said, before turning at his teammate. Wyvern nodded as she took flight, followed by Devilry, while Reload and Wardrobe remained on the ground. Even a poor feed couldn't ruin her in Ryan's eyes; her law enforcement costume was the acme of *chic*.

"Oh, oh, can I wear the Chuck Norris costume?" Wardrobe asked with enthusiasm. *"I feel this is now or never!"*

"Another time," Wyvern replied with a chuckle, before touching her earcom. *"Enrique?"*

"Go ahead with the arrest," the CBO answered as his group reached the entrance of Lab Sixty-Six. Enrique bypassed the biometric defenses, allowing his team to move inside the dreaded Knockoff production facility. *"Romano, you can start anytime."*

"Are you sure your men are loyal?" Ryan asked. "I mean, they're called the *Private Security*. They don't work for the public good."

"I hand-picked this strike force myself, and I would trust them with my life," the corporate hero replied. *"It's not for my life you should worry. Your job is the most dangerous one."*

Well, Ryan had a lot of experience with A-bombs. "You're sure Fat Man will learn of this raid?"

"Certain. He has moles inside this building, and an alarm system to inform him of any breach of Lab Sixty-Six he didn't authorize himself. When he returns to New Rome, his rage will know no bounds."

Well, that explained how Fallout managed to respond so quickly to Ryan's raid during his Meta-Run. However, the living nuclear disaster had already moved to the city at that time, while he should be in Sicily right now.

Enrique marked a short pause, as if reconsidering the plan.
"Are you certain you and Miss Augusti can handle my brother on your own? He fought your girlfriend's father, and walked away alive."

Ryan chuckled. Was there a hint of concern he detected in his voice? "I never said my girlfriend was an Augusti..."

"You're not the only one with an information-gathering apparatus, Quicksave. Though yours trumps mine by a wide margin, I will grant you that." The manager cleared his throat. *"You understand that I'm taking a huge risk by trusting you on this, and I expect a show of goodwill."*

"I'm not going to kill your brother, don't worry." Though they might have to redraw the map by the time they were done.
"I'm all for nuclear energy... but only for peaceful purposes!"

"Good," Enrique replied, his tone suddenly much less friendly. *"Because otherwise, all I can say is that you will never see me coming."*

"Well, if your shiny big brother kills me, could you do the floral arrangement for my funeral?" Ryan asked. "Surprise me."

"I will bring lilies and carnations."

"By now, you should know I'm a flytrap guy," Ryan replied.

However, before moving on with the plan, the courier contacted his sister through a private line. Stitch had removed the infectious Bloodstream agent in Len's blood, so she shouldn't transform even in close proximity to her father, but still... "You're sure you want to go alone, Shortie?"

"*Yes, Riri,*" she answered before gathering her breath. "*I... I appreciate what you're trying to do. Support me. But in this case... in this case, I need to do it on my own.*"

"I understand," he replied, watching them enter Dr. Tyrano's lair. The good reptilian doctor was typing on a computer in the room where Ryan's team fought Alphonse Manada in a previous loop. The clones of Il Migliore's members floated in advanced mechanical vats, their body fluids extracted to create Knockoff Elixirs.

"*Sir?*" Tyrano rose up from his seat and hastily covered his computer's screen. Shortie's feed caught a file's title before he managed to do so, 'Monster Girl Project: Test Log.' "*I didn't expect you today.*"

"*No, you didn't,*" Enrique replied, hands behind his back like a corporate supervillain.

Len's gaze, and the video feed, lingered on the clones in the pods. Quite a few members of Enrique's escort lowered their laser rifle weapons at the sight. "*Holy...*" One of Enrique's guards said, before noticing Wyvern's scaled double. "*Is that Wyvern? Did we grow her in a lab?*"

"*Wait, are we clones too?*" another soldier in power asked.
"Is that why we're paid so little? Because we were programmed to shut up from birth?"

"No, you aren't paid much because my father is trying to cut corners," Enrique replied dryly. *"You would have been paid half as much if he had had his way. I covered the difference from my own pocket."*

"Still, you're sure you want us to film this, sir?" A Private Security member asked, anxious. *"If the world learns we're doing this kind of stuff behind closed doors..."*

"I know, but it has to be done," Enrique said with a sigh, before glancing at Tyrano. *"Pack your things, Doctor. We're terminating the Knockoff program."*

"What?" Dr. Tyrano choked at this. *"But sir, you can't! I received no order from management!"*

"I can, and I will. As for management, we're currently facing some turnover."

"Your brother will kill us all if he knows!" Dr. Tyrano kept protesting, before clarifying his fear. *"He's going to kill me for letting you in."*

Enrique didn't flinch. *"I will take responsibility for Alphonse and assume responsibilities for my actions today. You have nothing to fear, doctor."*

"It doesn't help! I can't let you do—"

Four laser rifles' red pointers aimed at his head, and a fifth between his legs. The scientist quickly raised his hands in surrender.

"Boris, how many times will I have to tell you," Enrique told one of his bodyguards with exasperation. *"Not the nuts."*

"He's keeping a secret weapon there, sir," the guard defended his choice of target, which Ryan found the wisest of them all. *"I can feel it in my bones."*

"In any case, Doctor, we have ample proof that this project will lead to a disaster. If I were you, I would worry more about the weapons pointed at you than my brother's wrath." Enrique turned to his men. *"Put up the explosives. I want nothing on this floor to remain usable. Sabino and I will deal with... with the source of it all."*

Ryan could almost see Len flinch behind the camera, but she followed without a word as Blackthorn and Tyrano entered Bloodstream's room.

And then, she saw what remained of her father.

Ryan couldn't help but shudder upon seeing him through the video feed. The alien creature Bloodstream had become floated helplessly inside a large, reinforced glass container; its body bloody red, and its all-too-human eyes glancing at Len. Could it still recognize her, even without the infectious agent in her body?

"Father..." Len put a hand on the glass, her voice breaking. She faced the creature's countless eyes, none of them showing intelligence. *"Do you... do you recognize me?"*

Silence answered, and Len lowered her head in despair.

Ryan gave his sister some privacy and switched to the other feed. By now, Wyvern's group was already confronting Hector Manada in his garden. The old chairman of Dynamis had been busy working on his roses when the superheroes surrounded him. His bodyguards had hands on their laser rifles.

“What is the meaning of this?” Hector asked, immediately realizing something was wrong.

Wyvern wasted no time in laying down the law. *“Hector Manada, you are under arrest for human experimentation, drug fraud, bioterrorism, funding organized crime, weapon trafficking, and virtually every medical crime private courts have a provision for.”*

“Add crimes against fashion!” Wardrobe added, looking judgmentally at the chairman’s dirty shirt and pants. *“That outfit is hideous!”*

“Arresting me?” Hector asked, more shocked than afraid. *“I sign your paychecks.”*

“We’re doing this pro-bono,” Felix said with a shrug.

Wyvern handed her former CEO a paper document. *“Here is our mandate.”*

Hector’s expression deflated as he read. *“This is Enrique’s signature,”* he said, his voice breaking. *“My own son...”*

“And the board’s,” Wyvern added, pointing at other signatures. *“We have overwhelming evidence that you funded and armed the Meta-Gang, making you an accomplice to their crimes, and poisoned the Knockoff Elixirs with a Psycho’s biological agent. Either would be grounds for summary execution, but we believe in the rule of law. If you surrender without a fight, you will be entitled to a fair trial.”*

“A fair trial? I run this city!” The chairman ground his teeth, before glancing at the other members of Il Migliore. *“Devilry, Reload—”*

"Sorry, ex-boss," Reload interrupted him with a hint of disgust. *"I can't close my eyes on something this big, even for a billion euro. It's Lex Luthor-level shit."*

"I don't care much either way," Devilry said bluntly. *"But you ain't solvent anymore."*

Hector clenched his jaw, observed the determined heroes facing him. His bodyguards looked ready to open fire. *"Are you really going to try fighting us?"* Felix asked, before pointing at Wyvern. *"We've got a **dragon**."*

The bodyguards exchanged glances, realized they weren't paid enough to die for a corrupt billionaire, and lowered their weapons.

Hector looked ready to protest, but by now realized that he was only one man facing the powerful superheroes he had spent millions recruiting. *"I'm calling my lawyers,"* he said, giving up without a fight.

"Of course," Wyvern replied, unimpressed. *"Wardrobe, if you would."*

Wardrobe manifested handcuffs out of thin air. *"You have the right to remain silent, criminal scum!"*

"You've condemned this city," Hector said with vindictiveness, as Wardrobe put handcuffs on him. *"My elder son will take over now, and there will be blood in the streets. You will see. After me, the flood."*

"Don't push it, Louis XVI," Felix replied, as he and Reload dragged the chairman outside his property. *"You deserve the guillotine."*

“Louis XVI!” Ryan complained through his private line with Livia, furious at his kitten’s error. “This is a reference to Louis XV, not Louis XVI! Livia, how could you date this uncultured bore?!”

“*Let him eat cake,*” Livia replied, before emerging from a cloud in her full, red glory. The Opis armor fit her even better than Ryan thought. Its sleek crimson steel espoused her form like a second skin, while her retractable tentacles waited for activation. She had a hard time managing her jetpack though.

“Marry me, ma bourgeoisie,” Ryan asked playfully.

“Mmm, maybe later,” she replied with the same tone, this time close enough that the courier could hear without the intercom. “So? Do we start now?”

“One second,” Ryan said, as he switched to Len’s feed. He wanted to witness this, and to offer words of comfort to his sister.

Len had stopped mourning her father, and instead moved to the control panel overseeing the creature’s prison. Enrique and Dr. Tyrano stood nearby, observing her; the former with guilt and compassion, the latter with curiosity. “*What are you doing?*” the reptilian Genius asked his underwater counterpart.

“*Trying... one last thing,*” Len said, before introducing a bottled, chemical agent through a hole in the control panel. The machinery transferred the rainbow-colored substance into Bloodstream’s prison.

This cure, developed through their group’s research into the Psycho condition and Mongrel’s power, should in theory restructure Bloodstream’s genetic code and make him

human again. This was the last hope of a despairing daughter to save the father she had loved.

But...

Some things couldn't be changed, no matter how one tried. Ryan knew that all too well.

"It's not working..." Len lamented, as the red blob absorbed the substance without changing back. The creature had mutated too much, halfway transforming into a denizen of the higher colored dimensions. The monster of Ryan's childhood had become something beyond human, beyond reason. *"It's not working."*

She didn't sound angry, or even surprised.

Just sad.

The father she had loved was long dead, and would never come back.

"I'm sorry," Ryan apologized. Though he felt nothing but disdain for Bloodstream, he understood his adoptive sister's palpable sorrow.

"I knew it." He could sense the sob she struggled to suppress. *"I knew it before I tried, Riri. But... but I still hoped."*

"What will you do now?" Enrique asked. Somehow, Ryan had the feeling he wouldn't interfere, no matter what Len chose. He probably believed, much like the courier, that a daughter was entitled to deciding her father's fate.

Len's voice turned deeper, firmer. She had moved from denial and bargaining to acceptance. *"What needs to be*

done.”

Ryan watched, as she slowly started activating Tyrano's failsafe.

The good doctor quickly tried to protest. “*Sir, there will never be another Genome with this exact power combination,*” the Genius pleaded with his superior. “*Its destruction will ruin years of research.*”

“*We have other means to make your dream a reality, doctor,*” the CBO replied, looking at Bloodstream. “*Methods that won't compromise our conscience.*”

Ryan half-expected Dr. Tyrano to fight back, but the reptile was no combatant, and the promise of being allowed to continue working on his dream of dinosaurhood mollified him.

When all that stood between Bloodstream and destruction was Len's finger, his daughter sighed, and looked at her sire one last time. Perhaps she remembered all the good times she shared with him, as well as the bad, before taking her final decision.

“*Goodbye, Father,*” Len said with sorrow.

Shortie pushed the button, and sprinklers flooded Bloodstream's container with chemicals.

Without the added strength of Len's blood agent to make Bloodstream immune to it, Dr. Tyrano's security system worked as advertised. His cure destroyed the monster's cells, grinding them down into formless organic goo. The red alien shoggoth Freddie Sabino had turned into slowly started turning white, its eyes losing their colors. The creature didn't even seem to suffer.

This was euthanasia, plain and simple.

Ryan knew he should have felt happy and relieved. He had longed for his adoptive father's demise, hated him with all his heart. He had nursed that grudge like a worm in an apple.

But now, as he watched Len silently put a hand against the glass as life left the creature, the courier could only share some of her sorrow. Though Ryan knew him, there was a good man inside that thing once. A father lost to madness and the Alchemist's cruel disregard for life.

And now, that man would only live in his daughter's memories.

"Whatever happens, I will always be there for you," Ryan promised his sister. He wanted to be in the same room as her, to hold Len in his arms and comfort her one last time. "You're not alone."

"I... Me too, Riri. I'll always be there." Len cut the video feed, though her voice kept echoing through the communicator. *"But... not today. Leave me alone a moment with him. Please."*

Ryan cut the communication, focusing on the moment. Livia had great difficulty remaining stationary, instead making ridiculous figures in the air. "Are you done struggling to fly straight?" the courier asked, before frowning behind his helmet. "Unless you're trying to cheer me up?"

"A bit of both," she replied while stabilizing her flight somewhat. "Seeing alternate selves learning how to pilot does not equal gaining their skill. How did you end up learning how to pilot a flying suit?"

"I don't remember, to be honest," Ryan admitted. "I mastered jetpacks like, three hundred years ago."

"Is there a skill you *haven't* mastered?"

"Ice-skating." This made her laugh. "Miss Augusti, do you know how to skate on ice *and* snow?"

"I do," his girlfriend replied playfully. "And I could teach you... if you promise to cheer up."

Ryan looked in the direction of Dynamis' HQ. "I am cheering up."

"Ryan..."

"I don't know," the courier replied. "I've hated him with all my heart. Wished him dead. I should feel joy and closure, not... not this."

A huge burden had been lifted off from his shoulders, yet it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"I guess I feel sad for Len and it bleeds through."

His words didn't fool Livia "I don't think so, Ryan. I think you feel pity for her father, because you understand that unlike the likes of Adam, he didn't choose to become what he was. A part of you truly wanted to see him cured."

Ryan remembered one of Bloodstream's rants, when he had caught his daughter taking her Elixir. The Psycho had said that he took two potions to better protect her in a hostile world, and these words had stayed with his adoptive son years afterward.

Maybe she had a point. A part of him still pitied Freddie Sabino for making an uninformed choice for selfless reasons, and paying the price since. He had moved beyond his burning hatred for his adoptive father, and found some embers of compassion left.

“But if my words can’t cheer you up,” Livia said, shyly moving her hands behind her back. “How about... we dance?”

“A dance?” Ryan asked, surprised by the offer.

“I like dancing,” his girlfriend admitted. “But I’ve never tried with a partner I can’t guess the steps of. Besides, we only have very little time left.”

Alphonse was on the way.

“Here’s my offer.” Ryan extended his hand at her, eager to take his mind off Bloodstream’s death. “I teach you how to dance *in the skies*, and you train me for the winter Olympics.”

“That depends.” She giggled. “Are you a good dancer, Mr. Romano?”

Oh, she dared challenge him? “The very best,” Ryan replied, taking her hand into his own. “Like no one ever was.”

And so, they waltzed in the skies.

As the couple made circles in the skies above New Rome, their armors’ backpacks opened and released a green dust upon the city below. The wind carried it like pollen, spreading this strange cure to the population.

Unknown to all, a new, friendly virus had infected New Rome's population. One that would destroy all traces of Dynamis' Knockoffs in people's blood, purifying them. Many would-be Genomes would wake up tomorrow morning far more human than the day before. They would probably curse Ryan, unaware of the grim fate they had been spared from... unaware that they spread the cure each time they breathed. On the ground, Ryan's other allies distributed the cure from high positions, or even through the city's water system.

In weeks, all of Europe would have caught the Cure Flu, exorcising Bloodstream's ghost from the population.

The courier relished in his armor's smooth controls and speed, as he and Livia spread the cure to Rust Town, the Augusti's territories, and the city's center. Thanks to data gathered in the Alchemist's lab, Ryan had added quite a few surprises to his suit.

Among other upgrades, he had combined the Fisty brothers to the gauntlets, which now included a Red Flux shockwave projector based on Bianca's power. A Blue Flux-powered computer all but eliminated lag time inside the armor, making the armor move like a second skin. Orange Flux would reinforce the shielding in a pinch, and Green Flux would heal Ryan if he suffered internal injuries. Yellow Flux should provide a defense against conceptual attacks, and White Flux made them all work harmoniously.

Six Flux-based batteries, one for each color except Ryan's Violet, provided the energy inside his backpack. Without his many allies to generate the necessary Flux, this upgrade would have been impossible. From the Panda to Jerome, and even Shortie, everyone had contributed.

Last but not least, Shortie had included a miniaturized version of Dynamis' Gravity Gun in his chest. Ryan intended to keep that trump card a secret until the time came to send Lightning Butt to a retirement home.

He hoped it would make a difference in the fight to come.

"He's here, Ryan," Livia warned, as she ended the dance.

Already? How? Even if he had been warned as soon as Enrique set foot in Lab Sixty-Six, no plane or helicopter could fly all the way from Sicily in such a short amount of time.

Ryan realized his mistake, as he noticed a bright red star appearing right above the twilight sun. His armor's camera quickly provided a larger image, showing a titan of black metal propelled by a wave of Red Flux.

Alphonse 'Fallout' Manada had ridden the atom all the way to New Rome.

"Anxious?" Livia asked, as the red star became brighter and brighter.

"A bit," Ryan admitted. "Last time we fought, he killed my entire team."

"But you didn't have me. Without false modesty, the two of us together?"

Livia put a hand on her waist, and adopted a fabulous pose worthy of a *gangstar*.

"We're invincible."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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Massgamer afgasd adgasd Harrison Russell Finn
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125: Fusion & Fission

Ryan had seen what Fallout could do in the past, and so he didn't fool around.

"We have to keep him away from populated areas," he informed Livia, as the two flew high above New Rome to meet with the incoming red comet. "When he's angry enough, he doesn't care about collateral damage anymore. And since we have trashed his life's work, he will get a bit..."

"Unstable?" Livia finished his sentence with a chuckle. "That one was terrible, Ryan."

"I'm keeping the best ones for later," the courier said.

The armored duo made contact with Fallout hundreds of meters above the Gulf of Naples. Dynamis' Red Genome appeared in all his shining glory, propelling himself through the skies by projecting two crimson streams of energy from his hands. The cyborg towered above both Ryan and Livia in size, even with their armor on. They might as well have been two GIs facing a flying tank.

Fallout's fiery skull looked at the duo from behind its protective dome, his empty eyes burning with atomic rage.

"Out of my way!" he shouted before going straight for the kill.

The missile launchers on his shoulders activated and unleashed a volley of rockets at Ryan, who had reached him first.

The courier responded by activating his power, freezing two dozen projectiles in place. He raised his hands and activated the gauntlet weapons. To his relief, they worked perfectly in the frozen time, unleashing two red shockwaves in the cyborg's direction. They detonated all the rockets in their way, and hit Fallout head on.

The impact and explosions propelled the surprised Alphonse Manada off his flight course when time resumed, almost making him fall in the Mediterranean Sea below. Yet though his method lacked the elegance and maneuverability of Ryan's jetpack, he managed to stabilize his course.

"This... frozen time..." the corporate cyborg glared at Ryan.
"You are Quicksave."

"A question, tin can," Ryan replied, as he attempted to engage the cyborg in close combat. "Is your zodiac sign *Cancer*?"

Instead of bantering back, Alphonse Manada adjusted his flight to move out of Ryan's way. "I should have killed you long ago," the cyborg said, using one hand to keep himself afloat, and pointing the other at Ryan. "I will correct that mistake here!"

The courier barely had the time to blink as a dazzling red beam illuminated the sky, as a chill went down his sp—

Time skipped forward, and when it resumed, Ryan had moved to Fallout's left. The surprised cyborg didn't have the time to react, as Livia engaged him in melee.

Eight telescopic black tentacles surged from her armor's back, each moving as swiftly as a serpent. They struck Fallout in the shoulders, tearing off the missile launchers integrated into his cybernetic apparatus, and in the chest. Steel claws at the end of the artificial arms tore through the Dynamis cyborg's shielding.

"What a waste," Livia said with a giggle. "A nuclear waste!"

Ryan wasn't certain whether to groan or laugh.

Fallout responded by activating the energy minigun in his right arm, forcing Ryan and Livia to fly away. "You can't defeat me!" he snarled angrily, though the courier struggled to hear him over the sound of plasma shots surging through the air. "I survived Augustus! You can't—"

An explosion echoed in the distance, coming straight from Dynamis' HQ.

The cyborg briefly interrupted his barrage of attacks to glance in its direction, his skull's glowing dimming in horror. Smoke came out of the building's top, as Enrique's team destroyed the floor holding Lab Sixty-Six.

"No, no..." Fallout's shock turned into despair and panic.
"No!"

Instead of continuing his offensive, the cyborg flew straight towards the Dynamis HQ in a desperate attempt to salvage the situation.

"Oh no you don't," Ryan said, as he immediately gave chase. Fallout opened fire at point-blank range to make him back-off, and Livia activated her—

When time resumed, Ryan's fist punched Fallout in his glass dome helmet.

The courier was intangible inside his girlfriend's skipped time, making him invulnerable to Fallout's attacks. Their abilities were powerful on their own, but together?

As Livia said, *invincible*.

Fallout's glass dome cracked while he lost control of his flight. Instead of landing in the Dynamis-controlled district, the cyborg ended up falling into the Mediterranean Sea. The waters' surface turned to steam when Alphonse Manada fell into the ocean, the Red Genome vanishing beneath the waves.

Though Ryan hoped that Dynamis didn't make the cybersuit waterproof, he wasn't naive enough to think the battle was over. "You think he's fond of sea mushrooms?" he asked his girlfriend, hovering above the water while waiting for Fallout to resurface. An area hundreds of meters wide started to boil, though the courier couldn't pinpoint the source.

"That would be a concern," Livia replied, as she looked at the sea. She was probably trying to look through possibilities in order to locate the nuclear disaster. Cooked fish started rising to the surface.

Nice reference, though Ryan wondered if many people would have gotten it. "Hey, princess, did you know I visited their particle accelerator?"

"I'm sure they were thankful for the exposure," she replied, before pointing a telescopic arm at a spot to her left. "Here, Ryan."

The courier unleashed shockwaves at the target, sending splashes in all directions. The water vibrated around the point of impact, but Ryan couldn't tell if he had hit Fallout. "Why hasn't he emerged yet?" he asked his girlfriend. The man was as durable as Leo Hargraves, a dive shouldn't be anything more than an inconvenience.

"I..." Livia froze, before quickly grabbing her boyfriend by the arm. "Higher!"

The duo immediately flew away from the sea, just as a crimson light erupted from below the waves.

A catastrophic explosion unleashed tons of boiled water into the skies, like an underwater volcano erupting beneath the sea. Though Ryan and Livia fled to safety, a cloud of steam swallowed their vision and obscured their sensors.

When they managed to escape from it, the duo noticed a bright crimson glow beneath raging waves of boiled water... a light moving towards New Rome's shore.

"He's running on the ocean floor!" Livia warned. Ryan unleashed shockwaves from above at the light's source, sending splashes in all directions, but failing to even slow Fallout's advance down.

"Damn, he's using the water as a shield!" No wonder the corpo hadn't emerged yet. "Where will he emerge?"

"The ship graveyard," his beloved oracle predicted, the two immediately flying after the light. "He's shedding his suit!"

Shit, that wasn't optimal. The ship graveyard was empty, doubly so after Shroud moved his base to the bunker, but they were within walking distance of inhabited districts.

The same thought had clearly crossed his girlfriend's mind.
"Ryan, how fast can you activate the Gravity Gun?"

"Almost immediately, but I will send him to space if I do that," Ryan reminded her. "His brother won't be happy."

"I would rather suffer Blackthorn's wrath than see people die. It will happen if he's allowed to march past the harbor."

"You see it happen?" She answered his question with a grim nod. Damn. Ryan immediately sent a distress signal to his allies on the ground, asking them to evacuate the locals.

The duo reached the shore first, making circles above the ship graveyard between Rust Town and the old harbor. Only crabs inhabited the rusted wrecks of tankers laying on the sandy shore, and Shroud's warehouse had been left gathering dust. After making sure no one had accidentally wandered into this perimeter, the couple waited for Fallout to resurface.

And resurface he did.

By the time Fallout reached the shallow waters, the sea around the ship graveyard had started evaporating. A dense cloud of steam swallowed the shipwrecks, and a glowing ghost emerged from the shadow of a supertanker. Alphonse Manada had shed his cybernetic armor like a snake, revealing himself in all his radioactive glory. His body had become nothing more than a black, charred skeleton with radioactive fire for flesh, and Red Flux particles for smoke.

"I recognize your power, Augusti," he rasped while looking up at Livia, his voice sounding like smoldering fire. "Is this a declaration of war? Has your father grown so old and craven that he sends his daughter to fight his battles?"

"This has nothing to do with my father, and all to do with you," Livia replied, even as the temperature kept climbing. The very sand turned to glass beneath Manada's feet. "And you are misplaced to mock my father, considering you committed the same exact crime. You've poisoned thousands."

This time, Alphonse Manada furiously raised his right hand at the duo. "I saved thousands!" he snarled, his fingers shining like the sun. "I gave the common people the power to defend themselves!"

A mighty, house-sized stream of red particles erupted from his palm. Ryan and Livia split in two directions, both to dodge the attack and distract Dynamis VP.

"The lab is already gone, and Bloodstream destroyed!" Ryan argued, trying to distract the maddened nuclear disaster. "What is there left for you to fight for?"

"Everything," Fallout replied, though he focused his blasts on Livia. Thankfully, the seer leveraged her armor's superior mobility to dodge the attacks. "We've got more than enough data to restart our Knockoff production elsewhere."

"We disseminated a vaccine, Cherno Bill," Ryan replied before freezing time and letting it resume right before he punched Alphonse Manada in the face. "It's over!"

His Fisty gauntlet hit Fallout in the jaw.

The Red Genome didn't even flinch. Ryan might as well have hit a steel wall.

"Can you even fathom how powerful I am?" Fallout's hand surged for the courier's armored fist with blinding speed, grabbing him before he could back away. The Red Genome

pulled Ryan closer, gazing into the helmet's lens with his fiery eyes. "Did you think I wore that armor for my own protection?"

Ryan defended his vital space with shockwaves, but they proved no more effective than a breeze. Fallout grabbed both of the courier's wrists with his own hands, and started crushing the gauntlets with his sheer strength.

"I destroyed a city the day I took my Elixir," Alphonse Manada said, the light around him growing more and more intense. The Saturn armor's sensors quickly issued heat and radiation warnings, Orange Flux spreading through the shielding to increase its resistance. "Wiped it from the map. I couldn't control my power, and I killed thousands. Even now, it takes all my self-control not to burn this city to *ash*."

"No, you madman!" Livia attempted to rescue her boyfriend from above, sending her telescopic tentacles to restrain the maddened corpo. Their steel, weaker than the Saturn armor's, melted before they could even touch him. "There are thousands living nearby!"

"I swore all these deaths wouldn't be in vain," Fallout rasped, his face blinding. "That I wouldn't stop fighting for the good of all, no matter what I was up against. No matter what I had to do."

He's going to blow himself up, Ryan realized in horror, as the Red Flux around Fallout turned into a cloud.

Putting all available power in the jetpack, the courier pushed Alphonse Manada backward in an attempt to put as much distance between the living bomb and New Rome. The cloud became blinding, and Ryan felt a shiver go down his spine as Fallout exp—

The explosion was *still* ongoing after the timeskip.

To Ryan's perception, an ocean of fire swallowed him from all sides. Though the improved Saturn Armor's shielding had been designed to resist hits from Augustus, the courier still felt it buckle against the sheer power of the blast. Some of the heat bypassed the Orange Flux-powered steel around the chest and burnt the skin beneath. Ryan hit something hard head-first, his vision blurring.

When the fires died down and the courier could see again, he found himself at the heart of an enormous crater.

Alphonse Manada had devastated the entire graveyard, annihilating the nearest tanker, turning the whole beach to molten sand, and vaporizing all water in the vicinity. Shroud's warehouse had been blown away, a ship husk sent flying more than fifty meters closer to the shore. Ryan heard alarms and Private Security sirens coming from the old harbor, the blast's shockwave having shattered all glass windows over a vast radius. An enormous pillar of smoke rose a few meters away from the courier, darkening the skies.

And at the edge of the crater, Ryan noticed Livia's armored hand sticking out of the molten glass.

At this moment, the courier's brain stopped thinking, and his body moved on autopilot. "Livia!" Ryan hastily rose to his feet, his armor's servos grinding in the knees. He immediately attempted to fly to her, but the blast had damaged his jetpack.

He froze, upon noticing movements inside the smoke pillar.

"Still alive?" Though his fiery radiance had dimmed, Alphonse Manada emerged from the smoke unscathed. In

this moment, he looked so very much like a demon rising from the depths of Hell. “I will need to kill Vulcan too, and make sure she never creates something like this armor again.”

“What did you do?” Ryan hissed, struggling to hear his own words. His ears felt off, muffled.

Alphonse rolled his shoulders. “What good is seeing the future, if you can’t avoid it?”

Livia’s ability was limited in its duration. The madman had sustained his blast for at least half a minute, preventing her from escaping its radius.

No.

She could have escaped, but she couldn’t see Ryan. Couldn’t make sure he would survive.

She had stayed for him.

If it hadn’t benefited from the timeskip’s intangibility, the Saturn armor wouldn’t have survived the explosion. Even now, the blast had annihilated the paint job and most of the outer shielding, revealing the circuits beneath the metal plates.

Ryan’s fists clenched as a wave of Green Flux overwhelmed his vision. The pain from his burnt skin vanished and his ears worked normally again, as his armor’s secondary systems repaired his flesh. Though the courier wanted to rush to his girlfriend’s side immediately, Fallout clearly wouldn’t let him.

“You could have blown up the whole district,” Ryan accused the corpo with fury, as he adopted a fighting stance.

"I would rather burn half this city than give an inch to your kind," Alphonse replied callously, his left hand shining with Red Flux. "And once you are dead too, I will dissect your sister, make her cough up that precious blood of hers, and repair the damage you caused."

If Livia's condition hadn't made Ryan want to see the corpo dead, that comment sealed his fate.

Fallout let out a snarl as he lunged at the courier, his left hand aiming for the chest. He would tear through what remained of the Saturn armor, and incinerate the organs underneath.

"Do you know what your mom and a nuclear reactor have in common?" Ryan asked, right as he activated his own power.

Blackness shrouded the courier's hands as time froze to a crawl, devouring Red Flux particles like a black hole consumed light.

"I don't get in without protection."

Ryan's right hand met Fallout's left, the Black Flux disintegrating the corpo's fingers, palm, and entire forearm.

When time resumed, Alphonse Manada didn't immediately register what happened... until the pain made itself known. Fallout let out a roar, as he suddenly registered the damage. His fiery gaze dimmed, as he looked at his severed arm. "W-what?" he could only say.

"Give me an inch, I'll take the arm," Ryan said with a cold voice, before raising his hand in a karate chop and freezing time again. "You destroyed a city when you gained your power."

His blackened palm hit Alphonse's right shoulder like a scythe, severing the whole arm.

"*I destroyed time.*"

Fallout let out a scream of pain as time resumed, his severed right arm collapsing into a harmless shroud of red particles. Ryan suspected that much like Sunshine, the atomic disaster had a solid core somewhere.

The time-traveler would just have to peel him like an apple, until he found it.

"How? Even Augustus..." The now armless Fallout took a step back, his ghoulish jaw twisting into a new expression.

Fear.

"On your knees, before I cut off the legs too," Ryan warned. "I swore not to kill you, but you don't want to know what I can make you live through."

Fallout clenched his teeth and glanced at his severed arms. His stumps shone with a crimson glow, but his arms didn't regrow. "Fine," he said, the rest of his body brightening to explode once again.

"Enough," a familiar voice said from above the two combatants.

The light in Fallout's body died out, as a new duo made its presence known.

Wyvern was flying above the graveyard, holding an unmasked Enrique like a blushing bride. She slowly descended on the glass ground, before letting her on-and-off boyfriend walk on his feet.

"We will take it from here," Enrique told Ryan. As he spoke, enormous roots broke through the crater's edge, gently excavating Livia from below the debris. "She will need immediate medical attention."

"If she is dead, he will follow," Ryan warned, a finger pointed at Fallout.

"I know," Enrique said with a sigh. "But let me try."

Ryan glared at Fallout, before deciding Livia's life was more important. The courier left the Manada siblings and Wyvern to settle things, while the roots gently laid his girlfriend on the ground.

Thankfully, she had been at a healthy distance from the blast's epicenter and the armor was top-notch quality. The flames had seared the shielding, but Ryan could hear her breath underneath.

"Livia?" Ryan immediately removed Livia's helmet, letting her platinum hair flow out.

"I'm..." Livia's eyes fluttered, and she couldn't look at Ryan straight. She must have had a concussion. "I'm alright..."

No, she wasn't.

But she was alive, and Ryan immediately gave her first aid.

Meanwhile, Fallout's temperature had fallen down to a hot summer's heat and his Red Flux particles had become no more than a faint glow around his bones. "Enrique?" When he realized that his brother and bodyguard would make no move to stop Ryan, Alphonse Manada realized the truth.
"What have you *done*?"

“What I should have done years ago,” Enrique replied, unflappable. “Father has been arrested for trafficking with the Meta-Gang, and Freddie Sabino has been permanently destroyed. His daughter saw to it.”

Fallout’s jaw clenched so tightly that Ryan wondered if it would break. “You let her?!”

“I did.”

“You acted behind my back!” Fallout snarled at his brother, smoke rising from below his feet. Though Ryan let Livia’s head rest on his lap, he glanced in the Manada siblings’ direction, just in case it degenerated.

Though Enrique remained outwardly calm, the rose on his suit lost a few petals. “Like you did once. It is not a pleasant thing, you will agree.”

“Why?” Alphonse’s voice turned from anger to sorrow. “Why betray our dream?”

“I betrayed our dream when I didn’t blow the whistle on the Knockoffs,” the CBO replied. “I betrayed my conscience when I let this mess fester. But enough is enough. I’m setting my foot down.”

“It’s not too late,” Fallout said, in complete denial. “We have Knockoff caches left in Spain and Sicily. With Tyrano’s help, we can recreate—”

“We will recreate nothing,” Enrique said. “I already sent orders to have the caches destroyed, and Dr. Stitch’s vaccine will make those you managed to hide useless.”

“The Carnival?” Fallout looked up at the semi-unconscious Livia in shock. “Impossible... they would never work with

her."

"We all worked together on this case," Wyvern said with an angry frown. "Don't you see that this was madness from the start?"

"A better world cannot rise as long as their kind," Alphonse glared at the wounded Livia, "holds all the power. When some can summon lightning and others don't, the world becomes unjust! Only when everyone is a Genome will we have equality!"

"Says the guy selling his Knockoffs at fifty thousand euros a bottle," Ryan replied dryly, not even sparing the corpo a glance. Livia managed to form a smile on her lips, her boyfriend caressing her cheek.

"That time will come by itself," Enrique argued. "I have seen the data. Children of normal people and Genomes always get superpowers. In time, everyone will have them."

"In time, but Augustus is here *now*." Alphonse shook his head. "We have to fight him, using all the weapons at our disposal."

"The ends don't justify the means, AI," Enrique replied. "I see that now. The reprehensible means you would employ will discredit the good end we seek to achieve. I sent you reports about Bloodstream's instability—"

"We can patch it out," Fallout argued. "We have the Geniuses—"

"You are not cloning me again," Wyvern said with a dangerous tone. "If it were up to me, I would have dragged you in the same cell as your father. You both *disgust* me."

“Do you think I liked it?” Alphonse replied angrily. “While you were playing heroes for the cameras, I was fighting Augustus’ armies in Malta. Without the Knockoffs, we can’t hope to challenge his forces head on!”

Blackthorn sighed. “Brother, you sacrificed so much for this project that you won’t even consider better alternatives.”

“There is none.” Fallout’s skull flashed with bright red light. “Step aside, brother. If we capture Augustus’ daughter, maybe we can salvage this.”

“No,” Blackthorn replied calmly.

“Enrique...” The living meltdown’s voice turned threatening. “Step! Aside!”

In response, Enrique pointed a finger at his forehead.

“Then kill me,” he said softly.

This made Wyvern flinch, and Fallout pause. Ryan checked if his Gravity Gun still worked, and immediately armed it when the Saturn armor’s sensors confirmed it.

“Brother, you don’t know what you say,” Fallout said, surprised by the reaction. He must have expected his brother to go along with his plans, instead of setting his foot down.

“I know, and I won’t budge on this matter.” Enrique kept pointing an index finger at his forehead, his gaze strong as steel. “If you want to continue this madness, Al, then you will have to kill me. If you want total control of Dynamis and recreate that damned project, you will have to step over my corpse.”

“You’ve gone mad.” Fallout said. “For the love of the mother who bore us—”

“No,” Enrique replied, gently, but firmly. Behind, Wyvern looked at him with newfound respect. “Al, when we were children, before the Elixirs... you told me it was us against the world. I never forgot. Unlike our father, deep down, I know your heart is in the right place.”

“Then you know my cause is just,” Alphonse replied.

“Yes, but not the methods. But there is still hope for you.” Enrique offered his brother his hand. “I want us to work together towards a brighter future, Al. Towards a world ruled by law, not by strength or money. With our allies and Geniuses, we can find a better, healthier way to give people the power to defend themselves. We could even drag Augustus down from his throne. Together, we can do anything.”

The heavy silence that followed felt heavier than a mountain. Both brothers faced each other in silence, neither willing to make a move. Wyvern tensed up, and Ryan prepared to fire his weapon at any moment.

“Please,” Enrique pleaded.

As he lacked any facial expression, Ryan couldn’t guess what went through Fallout’s head. Most probably, he suddenly realized how much he would have to sacrifice for his dream, and if it was even worth it.

Continuing down this path would mean losing his brother, but Alphonse Manada had never flinched at atrocities to see his vision come true. As his jaw clenched and unclenched, Ryan remembered something very important about the elder Manada sibling.

"All for the dream," Fallout said, his body releasing a cloud of Red Flux.

He never knew when to stop.

Ryan tried to freeze time and attack, but someone beat him to it.

A 'click' sound echoed right behind Fallout. The living meltdown barely had the time to look over his shoulder, as a black sphere materialized in his back.

An invisible force pulled the former cyborg towards the device, alongside the glass shards in close proximity to him. Wyvern had to grab Enrique by the shoulder to prevent him from joining his brother, as Fallout's spine impacted on the black sphere.

The black object immediately surged towards the skies at a blinding speed and took Alphonse Manada with it. By the time the nuclear meltdown understood what was happening, it was already too late; in the blink of an eye, he vanished beyond the clouds. Ryan looked up to watch red flashes and explosions in the skies, each more distant than the last.

Shroud dropped his invisibility, a layer of glass covering a technologically advanced rifle. Dynamis' Gravity Gun.

Alphonse Manada had funded the weapon to defeat Augustus, and now ended up as its victim.

"I'm sorry, Enrique," Wyvern said, as she attempted to comfort her manager. "I'm deeply sorry."

"It had to be done," the corpo said with a sorrowful sigh, his eyes trailing after his brother's comet tail.

"Is she alright?" Shroud asked Ryan, glancing at Livia with genuine concern. "I already called Stitch for reinforcement."

"I'm..." Livia squinted. "I'm fine..."

"You will need rest," Ryan replied. As a Genome, her enhanced metabolism had spared her brain damage, but it would take her time to recover. His eyes wandered to Ischia Island in the distance.

They had cured New Rome of one poison, but another remained.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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Farmer Robert Buckley Finn Manuel Bern Garrett
Cartwright Mattias Åkesson Lucas Fontes Kyle Boyd
Kent Gunn Shyncx Oyebanjo Isaac Magnuz Plz
MCKunz Jochem van der Wal Finalgear brdyamt Bored
Caleb Smith Daraon Micheal Chow Caleb Orduno
Gumbybare Yotedom Brendan Mewburn Eric Lau
jonathan yuhas Matt Nick M. veillantif The Shard
Lalanne Mathieu jj Isaac Quek Max Korn Jaxon Davies
wellwish3r Ben MC Braden Miller Stacy W Patrick
Caswell sborrat Banzales Gregory Shaw Sam N
Mcnoodlies Brandon Thompson Tommy Linh Dang
Ethan Chen Kyle Pattison WaxierJarl Dylan Jitay Renia
Ted Berkowitz Jonathan Moran Michael T Rasmus
Andersen Dallas maxime cheniour Marco Belina Lee S
Rosen John Michael Acuna Sassan Xick Note That One

Guy Balaji D Josef Pollock Kyle Kampo Sebastian Goy
Xaim dmitriy Kilt Braed jesper thor jakobsen FOV
Lunexion Ritwik Ghosh lissomchunk Kooooomakimi
Wy vern Tim Christensen Jasper Irwin Matthew
Orenstein Bruno Hoelters Dudxet Same CZED P enyuk
TheDeftPiper Jaykay2307 Ricky Brent Soren Evan
Desmond Tyler Mezynski Axel Marcus Jean-Louis
Robert Pieter David Ditty Denzell Miller Avaritia Gorik
Disclancer Gnana Prakash Patrick Brown Luke Liban
D. KaiserKlyce Samuel McCollum Nicholas Guyett
Darkdej Terrodin Sad Turtle Quetzhal Lukas
Wittendorff Nielsen John Pratt Eddie Christopher
Bennett Krikor Chichadjian blartwitter Sometimes
Lucky MAS Shaunal Harris LordHailith MacDB Isaac
Halfon Conor O'Halloran Eleanor Keeley Mike Drew
Kerstens Rene Zaal Nick Burton Jonathan Rudel
reafan chris Anthony Thieflord171 lichman Adrian
Cheung Hieu Vo Christopher Harris
Tenpoundtarantula River Snoddon Albert Garcia Chris
Ferguson Dallas Gillespie Ray Collado Kyle Sorensen
Roderick Gibson Doodlyboy15 Quau Brohan Wei name
Henry Wartemberg The Dargon Alzein Paul Krause
Sam4005 Nicholas Pankratz b0urne78 Kinowin Philipp
Münzing Bobs Muhammed Hussain Frostbound
slammer evan peat Matei Atimariti Alaine Gian
Mabilin Craig Morris Lucy R Brantley AGENT KB Logan
hensley Stormblessed Mattes Büscher Andrew
Petrucci Garrett Hazard Justin Firestone Arthur Meyer
Nicolas Grundmann Paradoxez Novel Reader
BrokenStorm Torin Smith isaiah llwast Ben Hunter
Bob Dorian arty Hong Yee Kiat Nicholas Dynami
Exypnada Niloc Rem Kosluchar Skeln Ben Cole
Westeller Musicarna Kyle Pemberton John Brodrick Mi
Boltaruas Avista Askenazu Iwritestrangethings
Xdragon James Peebles Alexander Rodriguez
skewness7 Enzo Elacqua Chaos' Crowl Kanigami

**Stefan Adrien Matricon alex love Lohis giom Slim
Dakhch Brennon Shippee Bodoroo TargetDrone Reed
Montemurro The Human Siolfer Billy bob David Cohen
Michael Fee James Heney Miran 41 Matthew Lewis
Worthington Tom RandomAnkle RageBone Mathias
Nielsen Joshua Turnbull Adwait Gautam Prinz Valium
Tom Xiaoding Wen William Martinez Gimro Thrackie
Gregory Thundertruck Douglas Hoeflin Dennis West
Zack Crum confusion Tre Nathan Fahrenbach Armand
Sellier styww2 w Dominic Ferreira Ulthar Steven
McNeeley Orange Johnny2by4 Sportpix
PleaseDontStep KingGoomba Ken Ip Icqewby andrew
barnes Daniel Hepburn Jebril Alan Calingasan Barry
Pritchard Zebidizy Ho Jak Noah Jon Morehouse
Jonathan Gooch Ursae Ganskvis Destruct180
nathaniel everett Fat Frog Oxylus Blorcyn Connor
Beeson Alexander Goldfarb campbell tyson Patrick
Erdmann Jannik Domini andy Kierindoongo Ab9999
Eugene Chick Pea Somerito Mathew Moran Rageflare
Sterban Friz grinning panda DHNightshadow Conor
King kyle hirshson Sebastian Larsen Tim C Argivian
Gary Ethan Brendan Roberts Trucinox Alex Cotter
Daniel Bessette Sahil Box Slayer Jacob Andrew Jake
Warren Warior1411 Auron32 Håvard Betten
Impetusin Luke Boughan Anton Selling Kageryu LT
Joseph Catanzaro Pipsqueak233 Julian Andrade
dangerous mob Zipper Houston Peter Kim Daniel
Taller Carter Hadley Glen Anderson William Beyer
Sebastian Lachs Oiva Metsola Luis Wattrodt TheFool
Justin Kwang Liam Farrell Max Bardsley Pine yor JmB
Andrew Warfield Eitan Davidson Alon David Philip
Kessler Andres Montemayor Thomas Wolf Mr McGuffin
Tristan A Mr. Finch Casey Gillespie HeavenDragon
John Test Andrew Liess Samuel Kirkpatrick Blaffey
Greenboy676 Cal Fiala Ryan Brudnicki King Lokajad
Mortal Complex Username Jonathan Hemlin Bob Reid**

POWA Jarrod Young Sir Sloth 10Jay John McCarter Lee
Moffat GuGuy Anton Lulanov Raycn James Lavender
Josh Enterman Ronan Magical_Duck Sam Vinh Pride
TacoWasTaken Lu jimi robert-jones Andreas Finn
Timothy Felker v William Fullerton Max Müller
weasel219 Jam Jymbo S T JustAUser Denis Gelrud
Zmelk S.R. Williams Alex Kentwell Julius Dubasas
Travis Vasquez Fatih Altunbasak Alex Anderson
Deltoren Frank Timoney kNevik mikespelun abele a
makt PJ Thum Caucasian Malaysian Anthony L Joshua
Donahue Deepsealife Kristian Huse Sam Miller
Psylekin Julien Fellegara redslash5 B. Gazzola
NightWhisper Samm Jarrod Broome Callum
Brocklehurst Joe Stuart Dye Hades the god
Grosbilljunior Abhichon chandrasen Matt Labrum
TKLD Eric Vistnes Jose maniac_ian Loki Jay Eskew
David Alexander Dupree Josh Delgado42 Not N.
Octopus Hoobie Gomez Paul Rettig Mikołaj
Wiszniewski Phillip Ingram lione pouet Nicolas Marty
Young Youghurt Aqua Ben Allen Ivan Delgado Ploxxer
Christian Matthew Alex FiveHands Fluffywolf Michael
Frankford Athur3s Brent Orion BB King Marcus
HollowIce Blah64 Hamis Adrian Engel Bieu
Massgamer afgasd adgasd Harrison Russell Finn
Ryan Nicolas Jensen T T Deinos AlthePal Dylan
Rectum Amaury Matt Kirvin James Deziel Magnus
Steffen Nørregaard focus2x K-Thomas Marcus Pehan
Xegzy Bon Bon crownfall Richard Barboza Alexander
Charlie John Smith Doom maltmana JT shawn war
doggle martin WowIExist Edwin Jose Andrew Wilson
Pooya Daravi Funeral Steven Lindsay Tyler Chesney
Hazza Vanderbyl Kyle J Smith Rommelfanger Bob
Davy chappie Alex Nimmer Jordan McDonald JJ B
Andrew Odom Danielle Warvel Ivan Kal
AdAstridPerAspera Thundabear95 Saysca Nate Bunny
Waffles Matt Helsgarde Harry Williams Alex Canavan

Hobold the kobold Adam Johnston Daniel Aguirre
Zach Hoeken Lance Linked Chip Twothousandone
KatarnK N0T0B0K Heikki Aitakangas Jake
OccultOwlbear Eric jian TheBreaker Localthiccboi
Jonathan Caselli Richard Lee PJ LeBlanc Slade
Schlaudecker Erik Sjöström KingKuppa Kananat
MaliMi Aleksander Z Michael Forrester ZRhulad
joshua Miller Cole Mathews Ethan Bookmaggot Scott
Bosse Dietz Summercat James J Nonnuvya Bizniz John
Bush Nock Kasan GraySquirrelEatToast Kite7
Subliminary Jordan Antti Huovilainen itzzzzzon .
Minow Michael S. evilperson41 Deathburn edmuck
Gally just_a_potato Robert Dalton Cade Spence altus
Svend Mohammed Hajjaj Cosimo Yap Cliint Michael
Yamashita charlyfu Hntpo s476 William Johnson John
Evans halestlemon Joey Nguyen HarbingTarbl Djeez
Thordur hrafn KilledbyBooks David Cox NLRUmbra
hippityhoppity Wancek Weirdisaac Thelon TaoBio
Bryce Iudi Wilhelm bengtsson Gaëtan Hillion X4D8
Bernice0311 Brody Brown Andrew Rutherford Butler
Aeon Sharath brett thomas Thiago Ruiz Imran
Comedy knight Gerrant Anonmily William Brayer Cole
Calderon Aehs Conor lennon sedael Darien Benner
Ligma Spartanstoryteller Colo T BedlamBlade
MasterofNova Walter Philip Jones Goggy123
Escalatus Erostan Clemens Hochstädter Brandon
Stiles mars kiyu Jacob Barger Sam Paley Aymeric
Penven Harold Sandahl IV Kody Ihnat John Puri Iresan
NeWorlDark Samuel Alexander Vall Andersen Rein
Warner morganmoll Warper6 Harrison Brown Andrew
Holland Jdosnoen James Bbyh Xerias Maalsc
Devourerofwords TTG Oliverthms Kai Uehara
Majorana Siphor Malphas Nikhil Majumdar Leon
Schultz Jeremy Minton Leaored Cipkenop rmb123
Ervin Ughy Shaoraka sri kalyan mulukutla Winson
Chan Slipperyfish Overlord_Grimm agoniste Olivier

**Edery Brycen Legler Jonathan Spaulding Erriballon
Sævar Valdimarsson Mani Hayden H. Scott Sanjay
Skovboa Taylor Tilbury Bob le Poisson Rouge David
Cullen Ashley Cameron Ivan Elyshev samuel baldauf
Tate Browder NotAWeeb Joel Sasmad Bury nice
Basiun Ryan Trueman Dominic Moreau Chris Roden
Thomas Tessier M Clason Dark Chaos Alex Lindsay
Sadinar The Knight Commissar Francis Chartier
Daniel Everest Ausner Gentil bisque LinenZero Tomas
Puskas Kyle Reese Zach Ariel reyz Peter Christensen-
Calvin Murphy Jeff Gault James Teeple Dom
Ceremonia Max Collins Виктор Фон Стыценкофф
David Hansson Thaco4 Mikkel Kolding Christensen
Matthew Pixie Sands K BlackFire13th borrk Kevin
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Margetts Colby Arvid Hedbark Hulg Gohen Sebin
Paul Zadaine Audric CK Karthic 白酒鬼 Augustus
PbookR DemonKingBaka Bob Smith Glader John
Carroll Reviv3pls Bobo Bo Manu quentin Corgi
McStumperson RepossessedSoul Armo Daniel Mackie
Chris M James Walsh Zack Tae Jim of Trades Seadrake
Enaz the great Saul Kurzman Marc Claude Louis
Durand Rhodri Thornber Dax Sam**

126: The End is Nigh

“—Dynamis’ stock price has steadily crumbled since the disturbing revelations about their Knockoff Elixirs, and public outcry from former clients who recently lost their expensively-purchased powers,” the newscaster said on the hospital room’s TV.

Ryan squinted, as a video of Alphonse Manada’s explosion appeared behind the anchorwoman. The quality was terrible, probably due to radiation interferences, though one could see Wyvern and Enrique flying towards the blast’s source.

“—Dynamis’ spokesperson confirmed that Alphonse Manada, alias Fallout, was responsible for the explosion that shook the old harbor. The reasons for this action remain obscure for now, though Wyvern affirmed that the now former vice-president is now safely out of commission—”

The next images then showed the cyborg’s ejection into space. Only Ryan and Livia’s armors had been caught on tape, with the latter’s face and identity remaining mercifully hidden.

“The new acting Chairman, Enrique ‘Blackthorn’ Manada, promised a full indemnity to the victims of both incidents and a public trial to judge the responsible. His actions have so far been met with division among staff— ”

“I still can’t believe they came clean,” Mathias said, sitting on a chair near the window with his arms crossed. Ryan himself occupied the seat closest to Livia’s bed, Henriette snoring at his feet while Eugène-Henry unilaterally decided to occupy his lap. The courier had traded his damaged Saturn armor for his stylish suit, at least until he could repair it. “I thought they would at least sugarcoat the truth, not... spill everything to the press.”

“It was necessary,” Livia replied, wearing a white gown and bandages around her forehead. Braindead’s operation had prevented brain damage from her close brush with Fallout, but it would take her a few days to recover. “You cannot learn from your mistakes without owning up to them. Enrique understood that, and Wyvern all the more.”

After the battle with Fallout, Enrique had the group transported to Dynamis’ hospital, with Stitch and Alchemo tending to their wounds. Thankfully, Ryan’s evacuation warning had borne fruit, and though some locals had been wounded when Alphonse detonated himself, nobody had perished. The Perfect Run had been preserved.

At least, for the moment.

“Waves of resignations continue after Il Migliore’s disbandment,” the newscaster continued. *“Though Wyvern promised that a, I quote, ‘clean and nonprofit law enforcement organization’ would take its place, the fate of many heroes remain uncertain—”*

Ryan deactivated the TV. “How long before thunder strikes?” he asked his girlfriend.

“Not long,” she admitted, looking away through the windows and the veil of time both. “Things are moving quicker than I expected. Vulcan has already left the Augusti.

My father learned of Wyvern's visit and has ordered her death."

Ryan's heart skipped a beat. "Is she going to make it?"

To his relief, Livia answered with a nod. "Thankfully, Vulcan was no fool and spied on my father's communications."

"It doesn't bode well if he's already purging his own ranks though," Mathias said with a frown.

The seer nodded slowly. "Fallout's defeat and Hector's arrest have him on edge."

"If it's too good to be true, it probably is?" Ryan guessed.

"Yes. He will make a push to take over New Rome, but he is smelling a trap." Livia sighed. "His forces will move into Rust Town anytime soon... and if left to their own devices, they will find the bunker."

"I will repair the Saturn armor one last time, and destroy the base," Ryan replied, rising from his seat. Eugène-Henry immediately leapt from his lap to Livia's. "Looking Glass, you gather the others. Livia, you stay here."

"I won't," she replied, biting her lip. "Uncle Neptune will soon pick me up to take me to Sorrentos. My father won't let me stay in a Dynamis hospital while he's plotting their destruction."

Mathias frowned, but shrugged. "Well, we have prepared for the attack for days. We can do it without you."

"I wish I could supervise the assault," Livia said with regret. "To make sure it goes well."

"You could supervise it from afar," Mathias pointed out. "My mother did that with the Carnival, and it worked very well for them."

The fact that he was willing to relinquish command to Livia at all surprised Ryan. The courier guessed that watching her take wounds in an attempt to protect New Rome from Fallout helped build trust between them.

"My uncle won't let me out of his sight." Livia joined her hands, while Eugène-Henry nuzzled her fingers. "I... I will try to find an opening."

"No," Ryan insisted. "If Braindead says you should rest, then you will. If you don't, he's likely to put your brain in a jar, and you truly don't want that."

Livia pouted. "Ryan, I can't stand back while you and the others risk your lives cleaning up my family's messes."

"You helped us clean our own with Bloodstream, and the Meta-Gang too," Mathias replied. "To each their turn."

Livia frowned, and refused to stay idle. "I can at least make some calls. This will be a game of rock-paper-scissors, and I can bring more counters to the table."

Ryan squinted. "Did you set up everything so that we would have the perfect people assembled for the job?"

She answered with a sly, foxy grin. "I would be a poor seer if I didn't."

"I love it when you're in a mastermind mode, pulling strings from the shadows..."

"All is going according to plan." Her smile faltered. "I hope."

Ryan glanced at his translucent friend. “Matty, can you leave us for a second?”

“I will brief the others,” the vigilante replied, before taking the door.

Livia exchanged a heavy glance with her boyfriend. “Ryan, after destroying the island...” She cleared her throat. “You’re going immediately after him, aren’t you? Alone?”

“Yes.” If Lightning Butt didn’t come for his head first. Ryan expected the madman to get off his mountain after watching Ischia Island go down in smoke. “It will be alright. I won’t kill him.”

“It’s not his life I fear for. You can’t save.”

“Didn’t anyone tell you?” Ryan asked with a smirk that didn’t reach the ears. “I’m immortal.”

“Don’t joke about this!”

Her startling reaction took her boyfriend aback and woke up Henriette. Livia closed her eyes, but failed to suppress tears forming at the edge. She took a deep breath as the dog started licking her fingers to console her, and sobbed.

“Ryan, the man I love is about to go fight my father. And one of them might not come back.” When she opened her eyes again, Ryan could see the fear and dread in them. “Either he will kill you and you may not restart, or you risk permanently landing a killing blow. And I can’t do anything to prevent it.”

“Livia...” Ryan began.

She didn't let him finish. "I know you're trying to comfort me, tell me it's alright, but it's not. Ryan, your sister just euthanized her father, and Enrique Manada arrested his own before banishing his brother into space. Even if both hoped it would end otherwise... they accepted that it couldn't. While I... I still can't, Ryan."

Ryan listened in respectful silence, letting her say what weighed on her mind. Instead of answering with words, he sat on the bed and gently wiped away the tears.

"I'm scared, Ryan," she confessed, taking his hands into her own and squeezing his fingers. "I'm scared because I've seen how it *could* end, but not how it *will*. I... I thought I wanted to be surprised, but... not like this."

"Livia, do you remember what you told me at the restaurant the other night?" Ryan asked, trying to reassure her. "That the Ultimate One guided us together, and that I should carry on to see what it had in store. Even if I couldn't save."

"I said that," Livia admitted, sighing. "I thought I could shoulder the doubt back then, but now..."

She had wanted to reassure him. To tell him it would be okay, that it would turn out alright, the same way he tried to comfort her before.

"Ryan, if you can't save... if you feel your life is in danger, in real danger, flee."

"I can't, Livia." Not his style. "After the destruction of his island, your Thundering Daddy will shock everyone he can get his metal hands on. If I can't defeat him, thousands will pay the price."

"I know, but... there is still time to solve your save point's problem. Restore that safety net at least."

"I think I have a solution," Ryan replied, though he doubted it would work. Still, it cost nothing to try. "Trust me on this."

"I trust you with my life, Ryan... but I don't want this to be the last time we see each other, you understand that?" She locked eyes with him, and he lost himself in the blue abyss of her gaze. "Promise me that you will come back to me, alright? Just... promise me."

Ryan held her gaze for a while, before lightly kissing her. Her lips tasted like strawberry, soft and gentle to the touch. The contact lasted no more than a few furtive seconds, but the courier wished it had lasted a lifetime. "I will," he promised. "I swear. Quicksave delivers, no matter how many tries it takes."

It drew a tired grin from her. "Make sure to succeed in one go this time."

The courier smiled to hide his own unease, before petting Eugène-Henry and Henriette one last time and exiting the room. He felt Livia's worried gaze on his back as he closed the door behind him.

He found Len waiting outside the door, wearing her terrible jumpsuit and carrying her water rifle. "Shortie," Ryan said. "You heard everything?"

"I didn't mean to." She looked at him with resolve. Although her eyes remained slightly red from dried tears, her body language appeared different... more confident. "Promise me you will come back too, Riri."

"Can you stop raising death flags, please?" Ryan asked. He had the intuition every promise he made jinxed him further. "Fine, I promise I will come back if it makes you feel better."

"I... I am already better." Her smile had a sorrowful edge to it, but it was a smile all the same. "Thanks to you."

"The thanks are all from me, Shortie," Ryan replied. "You saved my life when you developed that mind-transfer tech. In more ways than you can count."

"I told you before, Riri. What we have is more powerful than friendship. Whatever we are up against... I know we will face it together." She bit her lower lips. "It's... it's what Dad would have wanted, I think. My... my real dad, I mean. Not what he became."

Ryan examined her face closely. That bittersweet expression of someone who had found an answer to a lifelong question, though it had cost her a great deal. "You've made peace with yourself?" he asked her.

"I think so," Len replied. Instead of looking away, as she usually did, she held his gaze. "I... I did all I could, Ryan. It's hard to explain but... I don't feel happy about my father's death, but I don't feel guilty anymore either."

"I understand, Shortie. Believe me, I do."

"For a long time, Riri, I thought it was my fault," she admitted. "That dad... that dad wouldn't have become a monster if I could defend myself. I wanted to return my father to normal because I loved him, and... because I blamed myself."

"You don't anymore?"

"No," she replied while shaking her head. "What happened, happened. As you said to me once... there are things you can't change. I tried the best I could. It's... it's time I move on. I can't change the past, but I can improve the future."

She had failed to save her father and would carry this pain all her life, but accepted that she couldn't have changed anything.

Len Sabino had found closure.

"I... I've given some thoughts about what I should do now," Len said. "I thought I would take the children away with me to the sea, but now..."

"But now you've changed your mind?"

"I... yes. I thought the world couldn't change. That the surface could only get worse. But..." Her eyes shone with a hint of hope. "It's getting better. We made it better."

Ryan chuckled. "We did, yes."

"If even Dynamis can change... I think the world can too." Her cheeks blushed, as a shy grin formed on her lips. "I've... given thought about the Architect. She wants to create cities, to repopulate the countries devastated by the Genome Wars. I think I can help. Not just help Rust Town's children, but all children across the globe. Make sure they grow up in better conditions than we did."

"Good luck exporting the socialist revolution," Ryan said with a chuckle, but deep down he couldn't feel prouder of her. "But it's good, Len. You'll help countless people, and not only because of your power."

Len frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You have a kind heart, Len, and that's what matters most I think. Mechron, the Alchemist, even Fallout... they all had the power to make the world a better and more bountiful place, but they misused their gifts. Mechron made weapons, the Alchemist empowered the likes of Augustus, and Fallout lost sight of what truly mattered to him. But you, Shortie?"

Ryan grinned ear to ear.

"You will do great."

She reddened so much that Ryan wondered if her inner commie had come out of hiding. He decided to tease her a bit. "Did I give you diabetes with mere words?"

Len answered his jab with a sisterly hug. He let her arms move around his back, and his around her. He listened to her slow breathing, as his mind wandered to his first family. It had been almost nine centuries since his parents perished at the hands of raiders, so long that he could barely remember how they looked, or even their names. Ryan had been twelve when Bloodstream and Len found him hiding in his home's wreckage, a lost child with nothing.

Though he had lost a family of blood that day, he had gained another forged in sweat and tempered with struggles. A sister he loved dearly.

"Thanks, Riri," Len said, before breaking the hug. "We can discuss our future after we win, alright?"

Yes, indeed.

After they won.

In the depths of Mechron's bunker, Ryan laid on an operation table clad in his Saturn Armor as robotic arms repaired Fallout's damage.

Since he wouldn't have the opportunity to improve upon the design further, the courier had taken the opportunity to install a few upgrades. The most important of all was a system based on the mechanism his team's Geniuses developed to discuss with Elixirs.

"Can you hear me?" he asked, his helmet's lens shifting with the Elixirs' rainbowy colors. A voice channel opened, as his armor's computer translated his words into Flux signals.

The synthetic voice that answered through the channel was unlike the one he heard while in the Black World... but Ryan knew, deep within his bones, to whom it belonged.

"Ryan."

His Elixir.

"You know, we've been together for a very long time," Ryan said, wincing as a robot added a new chest plate on the armor. "Yet I never learned your name."

The notion seemed to amuse the Elixir. "*We emissaries do not have names,*" it said. "*You may call me however you wish.*"

Ryan gave it some thought. Lightling? No, Darkling would get jealous. "How about Magenta?"

"Magenta?"

"Violet would have been too simple. Or maybe you would prefer the Color out of Space? Coos? Or the Color out of

Time?"

The Elixir didn't answer immediately, but when it did, it sounded quite pleased. "*I like Magenta better,*" it said. "*Better than fuschia or purple. How long did you ponder that one?*"

"Shouldn't you already know? I mean, you are inside me." Now that Ryan thought of it, it meant that his Elixir had experienced everything its host did...

"I am no peeper," the entity answered, vaguely amused. *"We have bonded for so long that I understand human thoughts better than the rest of my kind, but it remains a second language to me. Subtleties escape me... though I do know why you wanted to have this conversation."*

Ryan looked at the metal ceiling above his head. He could almost hear the Augusti troops marching above his head, hundreds of meters beyond the steel and dirt. "Why did you prevent me from saving?"

"I had nothing to do with it," his Elixir admitted. *"All Violet powers ultimately derive from the Ultimate One. As Darkling said, we are priests. We do not bring miracles; we can only ask for them."*

So Ryan had been right, it had been an Illuminati plot from the start. "Then let me rephrase myself: why did your boss prevent me from saving?"

"I do not know, but I can guess. Your connection to the Black has grown, Ryan. Before you could barely consume Fallout's Red Flux, but now... now you could harm him directly." His Elixir sounded quite concerned. *"Black is a sword without a hilt. Unlike other Colors, it is as dangerous for its wielder as*

for its foes, and it feeds on the timelines you delete. If it grows too strong..."

"It will grow uncontrollable and destroy me. Powerful as it is now, it might cause my save to go wrong." That would explain why the Ultimate One would prevent the courier from accessing his trump card, but the implications worried him greatly. "If I can neither create a new save point nor die, then what will it mean when I, say, die of old age?"

"I do not know, Ryan. But the Ultimate One sent you a message. To carry on until the end, and see what lies beyond victory. Maybe... maybe you won't die at all. Maybe you will ascend instead."

"I thought I closed that door when I refused to stay in the Black World?"

"Ascension is not an end, Ryan, but a process by which lesser lifeforms ascend into the cosmic beings inhabiting the higher realms. The door is always open." His Elixir struggled to find the human words to explain the phenomenon. "I can hardly describe it. Each ascension is unique, and you are closer to it than most. The Hargraves lifeform too. He is trying to delay the process as long as he can, so he can stay on this Earth, but eventually, he will become a bright star in the sky. If he chooses to."

Ryan marked a short pause. "Why me?" he asked. "Why am I closer?"

"Because power is not the only thing that conditions ascension, Ryan. Wisdom is another. This is why the creatures you fought in the Alchemist's ship were denied this reward. Their eyes were small, and could see no further than themselves."

"With cosmic powers come universal responsibilities?" the courier scoffed.

"Yes," his Elixir answered softly, its voice full of pride. "*We have been connected for centuries, Ryan, and you have grown with them. Time has no more secrets for you, and though the road was long and difficult, you have reached the end of your journey.*"

It sounded like a teacher happy to see their student graduating, even though the final exam was yet to come.

"Do you think we can beat him? Augustus?" Though Ryan always projected confidence to others to keep their hopes up, his Elixir knew his thoughts. Lightning Butt was the strongest Genome the courier had ever faced, and this time he wouldn't have a do-over if he failed. "Can the Black harm him now?"

Magenta was suddenly a lot less enthusiastic. "*Augustus is made of the strongest material in creation, an indestructible metal invulnerable to non-conceptual abilities. Even if it has grown stronger, your other power will make it **possible** to defeat him, not **easy**.*"

So it would be victory or death. Ryan's Elixir must have read his thoughts, before it immediately tried to reassure him. "*I have faith in you, Ryan. In us. I know we can make it.*"

"I hope so too," Ryan replied, right as the robots finished their work. The courier stepped on his feet, his steps echoing on the steel floor. "Any word of advice before we go in?"

"One." The Elixir's voice turned cold and deadly. "*Don't cheat on me.*"

Ryan blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Now, I know you are a perfect specimen of Homo Sapiens with excellent genes, so I am not surprised that some of my kindred propositioned you.” Now the Elixir sounded positively jealous. *“I am very proud that you resisted the lure of free bonding, but let this be clear: I will not tolerate Elixir bigamy. I didn’t carry you for over eight hundred years to share now.”*

“Wait, can the Ultimate One grant divorces?” the courier asked playfully.

“That would be against my religion, but I can make this bonding a living hell.”

“I’m joking,” Ryan replied. “You’ve been my best bud since I was sixteen. I’m never cheating on you. Even with Darkling.”

“I know, Ryan. That was a joke too.” The Elixir sounded so serious and deadpan, that Ryan hadn’t noticed. *“Was it funny?”*

“You’ve still got a few years of practice ahead of you, but I’ll help.” Ryan put on a cashmere poncho over the armor, as he didn’t feel complete without it. “Till death do us part, then.”

“No, Ryan. Death is but a door, and the ending yet awaits us.” The Elixir marked a short pause, before uttering one final word. *“Onward.”*

Ryan cut off the communication and prepared to activate the bunker’s self-destruct mechanism, when he noticed a small, white shape in a corner of the room.

The Plushie stood on its two feet, gazing up at Ryan with its big, beautiful blue eyes. The creature didn't make a sound, nor did ominous eldritch voices echo in the room. The monster that had haunted the courier's nightmares and slaughtered its way across multiple loops now gazed at its maker with solemn silence. It looked... thoughtful, for a lack of a better word.

Almost sad.

"Why are you here, buddy?" Ryan asked, a little bit scared by its unusual behavior.

"Let's go to Disneyland!" the creature replied with its paws raised, its sorrow swiftly replaced with malice and cruelty.

Ryan raised an eyebrow behind his helmet, before suddenly trying to remember Narcinia's age... and failing. "No multiplication," he warned while pointing a finger at the murderous lagomorph. "If you mess up my Perfect Run, I'm never letting you disembowel anyone again."

"I am your friend!"

"You are." God have mercy, they had become friends one rampage at a time. "Is it about sticking it to Lightning Butt?"

The rabbit slowly nodded, as Ryan had guessed. It wanted payback for its previous defeat, and now might be its last chance to deliver.

"Alright," the courier said. He still owed the Plushie for saving him from Adam, after all. "Jump inside the backpack and let's blow up Olympus. And maybe Dreamworks too, if we have enough time."

The Plushie cried out in joy, and climbed on Ryan's armor. The courier opened the backpack compartment, and the demonic toy vanished inside.

The courier glanced around the metallic chamber, almost with a sense of sadness. Though his team had already taken away all beneficial, non-lethal technology from the bunker, it still pained Ryan to condemn this place to destruction. The sheer potential of its accumulated knowledge, centuries ahead of its time...

But as Sunshine had said it, there were no right hands to use this power.

"I always wanted to say it," Ryan muttered to himself, as he glanced at the room's cameras. It had taken all his charm to convince Alchemeo to program this specific order into Mechron's mainframe. "Execute order Sixty-Six."

An alarm immediately echoed across the bunker. "*Self-destruct sequence initiated. Explosion expected in: six minutes.*"

Ryan was outside in three, though he used his power to cheat.

When the countdown reached its end, the courier hovered above the empty Junkyard, watching on as Augusti cars crossed the checkpoints into Rust Town. With Dynamis' collapse, the guards had been either recalled back to other areas, or simply deserted. Nobody opposed the criminal syndicate's invasion.

Yet, no sooner had they crossed the border that the whole district trembled.

The quake wasn't powerful enough to devastate Rust Town, but Ryan couldn't say the same for the Junkyard. The open garbage den collapsed on itself, its ground falling down as explosions devastated the bunker hidden beneath it. Piles of cars and trash fell into a deep gaping hole, blowing a cloud of dust into the skies.

When the dirt fell down back to earth, only an abyss of smoking debris remained from the Junkyard. Though the rest of Rust Town remained intact, its major landmark had vanished. Ryan wondered if it would harm the local tourist industry.

A crimson light briefly glowed in the blue skies above, like a red star shining in its final death throes. The Bahamut satellite had self-destructed alongside its orbital command center, the sword of Damocles that had hung over New Rome shattering.

Mechron's legacy would never haunt the world again.

This last loose end closed, Ryan turned to glance at Ischia Island. He noticed the shadow of Mechron's submarine making its way there, ready to disembark troops. New Rome would have its own D-day, with a time-traveler leading the charge.

Len immediately established communication. "*We're waiting for you, Riri.*"

And so, Quicksave flew on to his last battle.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Hi guys, so after a long, *long* battle with Amazon's selection process, somebody finally heard my prayers and broke the deadlock! The second volume of my Perfect Run series is

finally available on Kindle, covering the Dynamis and Meta arcs! I would be thankful if you could spread the word or add a review!

Link: <https://www.royalroad.com/amazon/B09HN7BHZJ>

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127: Theomachia

By the time Ryan reached Ischia Island, the area had already turned into a warzone.

The Mechron submarine had made landfall before Ryan arrived, unleashing a motley crew of cured Meta-Gang members, Geniuses outfitted with advanced power armors, and berserk Pandas on Ischia Island's shores. They were welcomed by inactive turrets, Augusti gunners on the walls, and a horde of zombies buried beneath the beach.

Ryan had never seen Mercury in the flesh, only through skulls he used as intermediaries. According to Livia, the old Olympian could infuse corpses with necromantic energy and pilot undead from afar. With Geist out of the picture, the Augusti had decided to raise all his victims: bloated corpses left to drown beneath the waves, skeletons cleaned of all traces of flesh, and the diseased remains of the island's test subjects. A yellow glow illuminated their eyes.

And who better to lead the legion of the dead than the god of war Mars himself?

Still, this army faced powerful opposition. Vladimir had transformed into a metallic version of himself, and landed first on the shore alongside the Panda. The steel man absorbed Mars' swords and spears into his body while stomping on any corpse foolish enough to get in his way, quickly growing from three meters tall to four. Suicidal undead tried to climb on his legs with explosive belts, but

the Panda quickly swept them off. The valiant bear tossed the kamikaze bombers into the sea where they exploded in fiery blasts.

Mars, after quickly realizing that most of his weapons wouldn't affect Vladimir, switched from spears and swords to Genius-made weapons. A rain of Vulcan-made bombs fell on the iron giant, each with enough power to damage even Wyvern.

All of them turned to sand in a violet flash, while explosions rocked the Bliss fortress' foundations.

Mars flinched in surprise, while a blonde woman stepped over the submarine and joined the fray. Acid Rain followed Vladimir and the Panda on foot, and immediately worked to counter Mars' power. Since she could switch items with those of equivalent mass with a wider radius than the Olympian, she completely neutralized his arsenal.

To his credit Mars tried. Bombs fell by the dozens, only to explode amidst his undead troops; he launched a gas trunk at Vladimir's face, but it turned to sand midair; he even prepared to fight the giant in close combat with a thermal lance, but it transformed into a severed zombie's arm within his hands.

In the end, the dreaded warrior that put Ryan and Felix on the run one loop ago could only retreat as a steel giant ran after him. "This is the Bay of Pigs all over again!" Vladimir snarled, as he fruitlessly attempted to catch the wily Olympian. The giant proved no better at the task than abolishing private property, his hands grabbing only sand.

Ryan couldn't help but smile beneath his helmet, as the scene reminded him of an old Looney Tunes cartoon; though he doubted Mars would have Bugs Bunny's luck. And

indeed, when the Olympian attempted to fly away by unleashing pressurized air, Acid Rain switched it with seawater. The helpless Mars stumbled on the ground and was immediately mauled by the Panda.

Livia had been correct. Genome powers were a rock-paper-scissors game.

It didn't matter how powerful you were, someone out there had the exact ability to counter yours. Through intelligence gathered over multiple loops, Ryan had arrayed the perfect match-ups against the so-called Olympians.

Not that the normies in their employ fared better. Shortie had bubbled a dozen gunners, while a trail of explosions on the beach followed Felix as he blew up undead left and right. The Doll provided suppression fire with a Red Flux minigun, her own Mechron-made power armor shrugging off bullets.

Worse, Vulcan's security system had failed to activate and intercept the invaders. At first Ryan thought his own Geniuses had done it... before noticing multiple Augusti trapped inside their own power armors, unable to move.

"Livia, you cheeky little spider, that's who you called!" Ryan couldn't help but laugh. Still, he wondered how Vulcan had the time to sabotage the defenses. Since the power armor she had created suffered from the same problems as the turrets, the courier assumed his ex-girlfriend had put a killswitch inside her creations since their inception. Insurance in case the Augusti leadership turned against her.

And she had cashed in.

Still, though the attackers were clearing out the beach, the defenders on the fortress' walls held their ground. Having

expected an assault by Dynamis, they had reinforced the ancient castle with anti-air defenses and heavy artillery. Once their allies on the ground were defeated and the risk of friendly fire reduced, they started dropping shells on the beach. Though their projectiles couldn't hold off Vladimir's advance—and in fact only fueled his growth—the others had to take cover or run behind the giant.

Some of the Killer Seven were among the defenders, with Vamp and Night Terror using rocket launchers, Sparrow unleashing deadly volleys of lasers from her hands, and Mortimer disdaining the heavy artillery for a subtle but deadly sniper rifle.

Ryan circled the fortress from above, trying to locate the more dangerous Cancel and Pluto. Some Augusti gunners noticed him and tried to shoot him down with anti-air cannons, but the courier froze time and retaliated with shockwaves. Cannons exploded one after another, sending defenders tumbling down the walls.

While he cleared out the anti-air defense perimeter, Ryan noticed a familiar red blur moving around the beach, pushing his allies out of harm's way whenever projectiles threatened to hit them.

"Mr. Wave?" Ryan shouted from above, his voice echoing over the battlefield. "You were supposed to destroy the Mechron bases!"

"God asked things of Mr. Wave too once," the Genome replied, as he quickly pushed Felix to the side before one of Mortimer's bullets could blow his head off. "And Mr. Wave replied '*say please!*'"

The man said it with so much style that Ryan couldn't hold his blasphemy against him.

Once word of the Carnival's presence reached Lightning Butt, however...

The appearance of two new figures on the main wall, right above Narcinia's flower garden, caught Ryan's attention. They emerged from a reinforced door, the first with the same cheery smile always plastered on her face, the second with a furious scowl.

"Matty, Cruella and her Dalmatian at twelve o'clock high," Ryan said through the communicator, as the two killers joined Mortimer, Vamp, and Night Terror. No one answered, so the courier guessed the silent assassin was already in position.

"Sweet, I don't know where to start," Cancel shouted over the song of bullets, raising a bazooka towards the beach alongside her comrades while wearing riot gear.

Unlike her subordinate, Pluto didn't bother with body armor. She didn't need it, or so she thought. "Traitors first," the Augusti underboss hissed while glaring at Felix. Already, Ryan noticed the sand below the kitten's feet shifting in strange and dangerous ways. "I should have killed him long —"

She didn't finish her sentence, as a tranquilizer dart hit her in the neck, and another hit Cancel right below the helmet. The latter instantly turned her bazooka at the attack's source while Mortimer did the same with his sniper's rifle, but saw nothing.

Pluto hastily tried to remove the dart, but her hands fumbled before they even reached her neck. The Augusti Underboss who had nearly killed Ryan in the past, and successfully murdered countless others, stumbled and collapsed. Night Terror dropped his cannon to catch his

superior in his arms, but Pluto had already fallen into a catatonic state.

Though Ryan knew tranquilizers usually took minutes to affect their target, the Alchemo-made anesthetic spread through the Genomes' bloodstream and nerves in seconds. The courier had seen Pluto's power in action enough times not to take any risk with her. She had to be dealt with swiftly with no chance to activate her death curse. Cancel, who was just as dangerous, fell unconscious on the wall's bricks.

An invisible assassin had taken out Pluto and Cancel before they could even enter the game, and brought a partner.

When Shroud became visible on the walls right behind the Killer Seven with a glass-coated tranquilizer gun in his hands, so did his lucky charm. Ryan had to admit that her glass armor fit her like a glove, especially when she removed her helmet and let her golden hair flow.

"Fortuna?" Vamp choked while drawing a handgun and pointing it at the couple. Mortimer and Night Terror exchanged a glance. "You're working with them?"

"I am," Lady Luck replied with a determined frown. After receiving Alchemo's memory treatment, she had remembered how the Killer Seven had tried to murder her brother in the previous loop... and she didn't forgive.
"Morty, Richie, don't make this hard."

Mortimer immediately dropped his sniper rifle, to Vamp's dismay. "Mortimer, you coward!"

"They've got a living luck charm and K.O.'ed our power-canceller," he said with utter defeatism, before falling to his knees with his hands behind his head. "Poor ol' Mortimer ain't rolling the dice."

Vamp snarled and tried to open fire at the duo, only to slip on a brick. She barely had the time to scream before she stumbled over the wall and fell on the sand below, headfirst.

"See?" Mortimer asked with a shrug. "It's quicker this way."

Night Terror glanced at the unconscious Pluto, then at Shroud's tranquilizer gun. "I surrender," he said meekly. The sun was still up, and so he couldn't use his power.

"Good," Shroud replied before knocking him out with a dart too, just in case. Only Sparrow remained, and she was too busy trying to keep the giant Vladimir away from the walls with suppression lasers to interfere. "This leaves only Mercury and Bacchus inside."

"I'll deal with them," Ryan said while landing on the walls and blasting the nearest reinforced doors with shockwaves. A faint mist slipped inside the fortress, almost invisible. "It's been a while since I've attended Mass."

"No way, my sister is inside and they confiscated her phone!" Fortuna complained. "I'm coming!"

"Sorry, he has range and your lucky charms won't work on Bacchus. He did take an oath of celibacy." That, and Fortuna's power wouldn't protect her from a telepathic assault.

"You're sure?" Shroud asked while keeping Mortimer at gunpoint. "Your power won't protect you."

"And that's where you're wrong, my friend," Ryan replied, before stepping through the blasted doors and into the fortress. "I have a guardian angel too."

Though Bacchus would probably consider it a demon.

The courier walked into a steel hallway, the shadows of Shroud and Fortuna vanishing behind him. All guards had moved outside to defend the perimeter, so nobody dared to stop the courier's advance.

None but the voices.

"Coming inside alone was a mistake." Though Bacchus' voice echoed in the corridor, Ryan didn't see him anywhere. Nor did the armor's sensors pick up a sound. The words existed only in the courier's head. "Despoiling this holy ground was a sin."

"Can I confess my sins while hauling you out of here?" Ryan remembered the fortress' plans from his previous visit, and suspected that the priest awaited him in the Bliss production center. "This place is lost, Father."

"All you sinners did was invoke the Wrath of God. I already sent word to Augustus."

Which meant Ryan had no time to waste. "I should have called myself Joan of Arc," the courier said before smashing through a blast door blocking his path with shockwaves. The steel doors fell on the ground with a loud noise, though only darkness awaited beyond the threshold.

The courier suddenly realized something was wrong with the architecture, though he couldn't put his finger on what. The corridor's angles looked perfect, too perfect, the ceiling too smooth...

"All spirits are linked, by the grace of God, yet you have turned away from It." Bacchus' voice sounded almost warm

and soothing. “This place is a temple to Its glory, which your mere presence desecrates.”

“Good, just let me grab Narcinia and bring down the roof, and you won’t have to suffer my wits anymore.” Ryan briefly froze time, the world turning purple. The darkness in front of him vanished, a wall of dented steel standing up where the blast door should have been. The real blast door had been to his left, and intact.

“I won’t let you,” Bacchus said as Ryan let time resume and unleashed a shockwave to his left, dispelling the illusion.

“She is a bridge between us mortals and my God, too precious to be sacrificed to the likes of you.”

“She is what, thirteen? Fourteen?” Ryan snickered before continuing his progress. Lamps in the ceiling flickered, and shadows shifted all around him. “That’s like five years too old for you.”

“I see that even my salvation cannot reach you now.” Bacchus’ voice let out a sigh, and the blast door magically reformed behind Ryan. “But all sins are forgiven in death. Once I have peeled away your mind to nothingness, your corpse will bolster the cohorts of the risen.”

And Bacchus attacked.

The ground collapsed beneath Ryan’s feet, making him stumble into a black abyss with fangs and teeth. The courier activated his jetpack, but a serpentine tongue caught his ankle and dragged him into the darkness.

This is all in my head, Ryan thought, but his own brain wouldn’t believe him.

When the fangs closed around his stomach and tore him in half, the pain felt very real.

Ryan immediately activated his time-stop, and when the world turned purple, the courier stood inside a security checkpoint room with only computers for company.

He hadn't even activated his jetpack.

When he had fought Night Terror in the past, Ryan had noticed that his time-stop briefly dispelled illusions. The courier suspected that telepaths worked by 'broadcasting' thoughts through Blue Flux, and they couldn't do so in a frozen world.

Unfortunately, the illusions reasserted themselves the moment time resumed. The next telepathic attack took the shape of a tide of blood swallowing Ryan and seeping into his armor. The courier instinctively held his breath, but the red liquid bypassed his lips and started filling his lungs. His vision blurred as he drowned into the red ocean, the laughter of Bloodstream resonating with the waves.

Ryan knew this was all an illusion, and unlike Night Terror, it didn't look like Bacchus could inflict real damage through hallucinations. However, the priest didn't have to harm the time-traveler, only to delay him. If Augustus fell on him while blinded by illusions, the courier might as well be a sitting duck.

Another time-stop dispelled the red flood, and Ryan used shockwaves on the floor below his feet. The ground collapsed when time resumed, but when the time-traveler fell the hole went on and on forever. A hideous alien cacophony erupted around him, as strident as the scream of children. The twisted illusion made the courier's ears bleed and his vision blur.

No, Ryan realized as the cacophony became deafening, not illusions.

Insanity.

Bacchus could degrade an individual's sense of reality like advanced schizophrenia or other mental illnesses, destroying the victim's very identity. He peeled someone's mind away like an onion, until nothing remained.

"You did this to Giulia Costa," Ryan realized in horror, his voice somehow cutting through the alien cacophony. The courier had grown used to pain through centuries of time-looping, but a normal mind would have shattered under these psychic assaults. "You tortured her, until she forgot who she was."

Human mouths opened on his armor, to taunt him with ten thousand voices in one. "Some in the Holy Church believed that only through pain and flagellation could one become closer to God."

Ryan choked, as tendrils-whips sprung from the darkness and hit him in the chest and back. Though his armor should have stopped them, they flayed the skin beneath the steel. Their kiss felt like sharp blades cutting him up.

"Is that the best you can do?" the courier said with a grunt. "My girlfriend scratches me harder!"

"Giulia Costa died on the altar, only to rise again, a holy maiden and a tool of the one true God," Bacchus replied softly. "It took days for her to accept this divine grace, but in the end, she opened her heart to me."

"Yeah, I'm going to martyr you too as soon I reach your hiding room!" Ryan activated his power again, finding

himself facing a steel floor with four animated, putrid corpses striking his back with pickaxes.

Mercury.

Bacchus cloaked his undead thralls with illusions, allowing them to strike him by surprise. *They're trying to find a joint or weak point in the armor*, Ryan thought, as he blasted the undead to pieces in the frozen time. They wouldn't find one, but might damage the circuitry or the helmet's lenses.

He managed to rise back to his feet before the time-stop's duration ended, but the courier already felt mentally exhausted as if he had overslept. The repeated mental assaults couldn't harm him physically, but they taxed his brain.

If this lasts too long, I might pass out from the sheer headache, Ryan realized, as he tried to remember his current location inside the maze-like facility. Thankfully, his enhanced timing let his body continue walking towards its destination.

Time ran out, and the psychic assault renewed.

Nails impaled Ryan through the hands and the feet, impaling him on a Christian cross overseeing Ischia Island. The Plushie was crucified to his left, a half-rotten Len to the right. Bacchus stood in front of the naked courier with a sharp spear, while New Rome burnt beyond a bloody horizon.

"I now realize that the Gnosticism heresy had the truth of it," the priest said, as he stabbed Ryan in the chest. The courier clenched his jaw not to scream as the spear's tip twisted between his ribs. The illusion was so vivid that it fooled his nerves. "This world, this crooked reality, is a

prison for souls. A cosmic trap of monstrous proportions, keeping us from divine unity with the Ultimate Ones.”

“I know what Eva Fabre did to you, *Andreas*,” Ryan said in between grunts of pain. He hoped using Bacchus’ real name would unsettle him and dispel the hallucination, but it only made the priest stab him harder. “She wrecked your mind when you gained your powers. If there was ever a good man inside you, he’s probably weeping.”

“The Alchemist awakened me,” Bacchus replied, his face twisting into a skull with a blue, alien light peering out of the eyes. “She was a prophet, and I followed the wrong path.”

“She was mad, and now she’s dead.” Or she wished she was.

When Bacchus opened his ghoulish mouth, Eva Fabre’s voice came out. “Does it matter if the carpenter dies, so long as the house stands?” The spear in his hands turned into an Elixir needle, oozing a blue oil from its tip. “The Lord of the Scriptures to whom I dedicated half my life was a lie, an illusion. There are no other gods than the Ultimate Ones.”

“Geist saw heaven,” Ryan reminded him. “A bright Yellow realm of light and angels.”

“Yes, he did.” The universe turned a blinding Yellow, the courier’s eyes burning from the light. “What of it?”

“You don’t get it. If he saw a heaven with angels, maybe your old God exists in the Yellow World. You got the color wrong!”

Ryan froze time again and collapsed into a bed of flowers. Their petals were blue, their cores yellow. The courier

noticed a hole in a glass ceiling above his head, and two undead with welding sticks surrounding him.

The courier quickly rose up and rushed out of the glass garden, punching the corpses out of his way. He had somehow made his way into the Bliss labs in the facility's heart, and quickly guessed why.

His enhanced timing sense. His body had kept moving towards its destination like a sleepwalker, even if Bacchus assaulted his mind.

Unfortunately, sleepwalking wouldn't save Ryan from physical attacks.

An old hunchback stood near the drug assembly lines, surrounded by a group of ten undead bodyguards all equipped with submachine guns. The fossil dressed astonishingly well, wearing a cashmere black suit and a bowler hat, though he needed an ugly wooden cane to stand. His white beard couldn't cover all his face's warts and wrinkles, and his tiny eyes squinted at the glass garden with fear.

Mercury.

Unfortunately, time ran out before Ryan could unleash a shockwave at this geriatric disaster. The entire facility turned bright blue. A psychedelic lightshow blinded the time traveler to reality, the assembly lines turning into streams of shining data, the ceiling into the water, and the floor into an empty sky. Rain fell down on the courier, but the raindrops turned into blades when they hit his flesh.

Bullets, Ryan thought fearfully, before suddenly remembering he had his armor on. Or at least, he knew he still had it, even if his senses told him otherwise.

The longer Bacchus' hallucinations affected him, the harder it became to remember what was real or not.

"Your faith wasn't all that unshakable, wasn't it?" The time-traveler taunted his tormentor. "Or maybe it was just a disguise, easy to trade away when it didn't fit you anymore?"

"You don't know what you speak of." The pale blue world shifted into a spiral, a whirlpool sucking Ryan's very soul. "Don't you see that my work is for the good of all?"

"It's never going to work by torturing people," Ryan replied, an idea crossing his mind. Bacchus believed himself the tool of a higher power, chosen to fulfill a purpose. There was an opening. "You need wisdom and compassion to ascend. I know because *they told me.*"

Bacchus' resolve wavered. For a brief instant, no longer than a second, the blue spiral turned into the face of Andreas Torque, his eyes ablaze with madness and fury.

And so Ryan delivered the coup-de-grace. "I guess you were too much of a *protestant* to enlighten!"

Strong blue hands grabbed the courier's throat and started choking the life out of him. The hands grew a body, and then a head.

"I need to get out!" The illusory Bacchus screamed, and as he spoke his visage twisted into an abomination with four eyes and two mouths. "I need to escape! **I need to be free!**"

Ryan attempted to activate his time-stop, but his brain hurt when he tried to. His vision blurred, as fingers tore into his skull to rip open his brain matter. And Bacchus kept ranting,

his eyes dividing into a nightmarish kaleidoscope. “I can’t stand this reality!” he shrieked. “It’s all wrong! It’s all twisted and broken! Somewhere in that brain is the key, the door, the way out—”

The illusion flickered into nothingness, and Ryan didn’t even need to stop time.

The courier awoke to reality slammed against the Bliss assembly line by a group of undead, two of them trying to remove his helmet with welding tools. Mercury observed the process from a safe distance, still believing Ryan to be under his colleague’s influence.

The courier stopped time, forced the undead off him, and charged at their necromancer.

“Boo,” Ryan said as time resumed, Mercury’s eyes widening in terror.

He punched the old man in the face with enough strength to break his jaw. The ancient Genome dropped his cane and fell on his back, completely still. His undead collapsed at the same time as him, the yellow light in their eyes vanishing.

“One less pension to pay, I guess,” the courier japed, before almost stumbling from the mental pain. A Green Flux flash blinded him for a second, as the armor tried to heal him. It helped a lot with the exhaustion, but little with the headaches.

Ignoring the pain wracking his skull, the courier checked the unconscious Mercury’s pulse, confirmed his survival, and continued his journey deeper into the production center. He eventually made his way to the room where Bacchus kept the captives of his experiments.

Ryan found the priest wriggling on the floor, scratching his neck as a sentient mist filled out his lungs. The time traveler's eyes wandered at the cages around him, where drugged-out test subjects with hollow gazes waited in their own feces. One pair of eyes looked towards the courier with intelligence, and a great deal of fear.

Bacchus' eyes looked up and vanished behind his eyelids, but when the mist exited his throat, the courier could still hear him breathe. "Took you long enough," Ryan complained, as Bianca reformed next to her unconscious victim.

"Give me a break, it was hard to find him." His former vice-president squinted at him. "You're alright?"

"My head hurts like hell, but I've felt worse." The plan had been for Ryan to act as bait for Bacchus' attention while Bianca crept up on him. The courier had suspected, correctly, that the telepath would have a hard time noticing a creature without a brain.

But still, he hadn't expected the experience to be so *harrowing*.

"You're not alright," Bianca said with concern, before glaring at Bacchus. "Why did you want him alive? I could have burst out of his lungs easily enough, Alien-style."

"I promised I would bury him along with this place." A part of Ryan still wanted to pull his gauntlet's trigger. "But unlike some ivory madman I know, he didn't *choose* to become a monster. If Alchemo can cure his broken psyche like he did with Helen..."

That, and since Ryan might not have a do-over this time, he didn't want to regret anything down the line. A part of him

would have always wondered if he had condemned a sick man to death when other alternatives existed.

"That's awfully optimistic." Bianca shrugged. "But I would have said the same of me."

Ryan looked in front of the cages, stopping in front of one with a terrified teenager inside. "It's alright," the courier tried to comfort her, as he tore off the metal bars with his bare hands. "We're here to help."

Narcinia didn't make a move to escape her cage, keeping her arms around her knees in a fetal position. She looked at her rescuers with terror, a red mark on her cheek. Someone clearly slapped her not too long ago.

It almost made Ryan regret sparing that sorry excuse of a priest.

"Bacchus and Mercury are neutralized," Ryan told Shroud through his armor's intercom, the Green Flux finally removing his headaches. "We've got Narcinia and the test subjects, but she's... not well."

The answer came swiftly. "*Put on the loudspeakers.*"

When Ryan obeyed, it was Fortuna's voice that came out, brimming with concern. "*Narci, are you alright?*"

"Sis?" Narcinia's eyes lit up with hope. "Sis, is... is that you?"

"Of course it's me, silly!" Fortuna marked a short pause.
"What happened to you? You sound so..."

"It's... Father Torque, he..." Narcinia suppressed a sob.
"When Mr. Geist vanished, he wouldn't let me leave and

took my phone. He didn't even let me see Dad. When I tried to go back home, he... he..."

Her sister's voice turned reassuring and affectionate. "*It's alright, Narci. I'm here, we're all here. We're getting you out of this cursed place.*"

"But Dad—"

"*Dad is an asshole,*" Fortuna cut her off. "*Felix and I will show you.*"

"F-Felix came back?" The poor girl couldn't believe it.

"*For you, Narci,*" Atom Kitten's voice came out of the loudspeaker. "*I came for you.*"

"They're all waiting for you outside," Ryan said with kindness, extending a hand to the child. In that moment, he was brought to the day when Len found him under his house's wreckage, like a light in the darkness. "I'll show you."

Narcinia hesitated, but eventually took his hand.

It took Mr. Wave's help and a few minutes to evacuate the factory. Bacchus and Mercury were sedated, joining Sparrow, Pluto, and the rest of the Killer Seven. Vamp had broken her neck, and Mars had been bubbled. Narcinia gave her adoptive father a worried glance as Ryan surrendered her to Fortuna, who hugged her sister tightly. Felix watched on for a while until Narcinia started crying, and then awkwardly joined the group hug.

Ryan glanced at the Bliss Factory, at this industrial facility of death and destruction, and gave the fateful order.

“Tear this place apart!”

The giant Vladimir immediately punched the fortress’ stone walls with his bare hands, while Bianca assisted him with shockwaves. The building collapsed on itself, its evils buried for good.

“Riri,” Len said, her voice heavy with worry. “He’s coming.”

He was. The Saturn Armor’s sensors had noticed a spike in electromagnetic activity near the island. The air itself was choked with electricity, and red lightning coursed through the clouds above the island.

Shroud put a hand on the courier’s shoulder. “Ryan—”

“You killed me more than he ever did,” the courier quipped, before activating his jetpack. “I’ll be alright.”

The vigilante watched Ryan go without a word, but even though the courier couldn’t see through his friend’s glass helmet, he sensed the worry behind it. He wasn’t the only one. Shortie, Bianca, the Doll, Felix, Mr. Wave, Fortuna, Timmy, Helen, and all the friends he made across almost two dozen loops... they looked at him and prayed without a word.

They thought he wouldn’t come back.

And they might be right.

Ryan gathered his breath, swallowed his fear, and ascended higher and higher, until the Bliss factory’s rubble looked no bigger than his hand. Smoke rose up below him, while crimson lightning tainted the blue skies red. Thunder echoed all around the courier, booming and dreadful.

A thunderbolt coursed through the heavens right above his head.

"I love the dramatic tension," Ryan said, looking up. "You sure know how to make an entrance."

An ivory statue slowly descended from a cumulonimbus, shrouded in a crimson, electric aura. It would have hurt to even look at his face, but Ryan's lenses allowed him to see the furious, murderous scowl behind the crackling lightning. Streams of ionized, whitened winds swirled below the discount deity's feet, allowing him to fly.

Instead of stopping at the courier's level, Augustus floated a few meters higher to better look down on him. "Who are you?" There was no fear at all in his voice, but his clenched fists betrayed his anger. "The architect of all of this, I presume."

"My name is Ryan. Ryan Romano." The courier heard a scratching sound from within his backpack. "I've been called Quicksave, but for you?"

Ryan raised his fists and adopted a fighting pose.

"I guess King Saturn will do it."

"Is this my Titanomachy?" His eyes squinted at Ryan with contempt and arrogance. "This did not end well for your namesake the first time. Today will be no different."

"Well, the good thing about do-overs," Ryan replied. "They can turn failure into success."

"We will see how brave you are when nailed to a cross, bearing witness to the death of these fools who followed you

here." Augustus' voice deepened like thunder, his gaze brightening. "Let's go."

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

You all knew it was going to end like this.

Next time on the Perfect Run: the final battle.

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128: Time & Thunder

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

Official chapter theme.

Also, the [Perfect Run's audiobook](#) is now available for pre-order! Release date in November ;)

A part of Ryan always knew it would end this way, ever since he first set foot in New Rome.

He had tried to get away from this battle, to run circles around it, to delay it, to out-think it, but he couldn't run away from it. In the end, all he could do was stand his ground and fight.

And that he did.

A mighty crimson bolt struck him in the chest, the electricity redirected by his armor's circuitry. Though the lightning would have fried a man alive, it dispersed harmlessly to the false god's dismay. Ryan immediately activated the Gravity Gun in his chest while Augustus was briefly startled, firing a black sphere straight at his foe's stomach.

Augustus quickly caught the projectile with his left hand as if it were a tennis ball, and found himself trapped. The black sphere pushed him backward and above, higher towards the skies. Ryan gave pursuit, both foes flying above the clouds in a perilous ascent.

"Dynamis." Augustus clenched his jaws, his eyes ablaze with rage as he recognized the technology. "I knew it."

He attempted to crush the black sphere with both hands, but though its surface bent and cracked before the iron grip of his fingers, it resisted. Ryan calculated the angle as they ascended, the blue in the skies giving way to darkness. The stars became visible beyond the ozone layer, while New Rome's gulf looked no larger than a pond beneath them. The courier wondered if he would be able to see Ghoul's rocket from this altitude.

His hopes of watching Augustus follow the undead and Alphonse Manada into interstellar exile were quickly dashed.

"There it is!" Mob Zeus shouted, the electrical halo around him becoming so bright, so illuminating, that it would have burnt Ryan's eyes were it not for his helmet's lenses. "The supreme lightning of victory! The absolute power, that sunk islands, turned castles to dust, and split the atom!"

Ryan's armor sent alarms about abnormal electromagnetic activity, so the courier immediately backed away and fled west. Augustus became a burning star above his head, and then exploded in a cataclysmic light show.

A burning supernova of crimson plasma set the atmosphere ablaze, unleashing a blast that rivaled Ryan's own A-bomb. A wall of fire erupted in the skies, expanding in a spherical wave of energy annihilating all in its path. Crimson thunderbolts coursed in all directions, tainting the black void of space red. The sheer thermal wave heated up the air, starting a blast of burning air stronger than a hurricane and faster than sound.

Ryan froze time, and though Augustus' crimson lightning kept working in the frozen time, it did halt the enormous

blast of displaced, super-heated air. Putting all power in his jetpack, the courier broke the sound barrier and outpaced the fireball. Even though he managed to avoid the worst of the blast, the cashmere poncho over his armor went down in flames, and the heat made his armor's paint peel away.

Even though the fireball now spanned kilometers, the shockwave eventually weakened and died. Ryan glanced over his shoulder, to see a dying crimson sun fill up the heavens above him.

Was that why Augustus' Red Elixir had given him lightning manipulation? Because he associated it with godhood and power? Ryan supposed that the Orange one had made Mob Zeus' feeling of being untouchable uncomfortably real. Worse, the catastrophic detonation confirmed what the courier had long suspected.

Augustus' lightning generation had no upper limit.

Yes, Lightning Butt needed a little time to generate anything stronger than a thunderbolt, but he could produce enough power and heat to create *nuclear explosions*. Maybe he could even manipulate electrons to somehow break atoms.

No wonder Mob Zeus had managed to sink Malta. If given free reign, he could probably destroy human civilization on his own.

Ryan couldn't allow him to do so.

A shadow emerged from the blinding light, chasing after the courier and quickly gained ground on him. The sheer power and speed of Augustus' flight caused a small tornado to form beneath his feet, and no black sphere impeded the living statue anymore.

Ryan hastily turned around to face his nemesis, flying with both fists raised before him. Augustus answered the challenge by smiting the courier with a torrent of bloody lightning.

Instead of dodging, Ryan flew straight through the thunderstorm, pushing his power armor's resistance to the limit. The Saturn Armor stockpiled the lightning in an internal battery, but the sheer voltage strained it. Still, it allowed the courier to emerge from the lightning right in front of a surprised Augustus.

Ryan froze time, and punched Lightning Butt in the left cheek.

Black particles surged around the courier's fingers, swallowing his hand in darkness. In this punch, Ryan poured all his memories of watching Bliss victims wasting away, of finding Narcinia in a cage, of Augustus striking Hargraves while the world came to an end, of Mars trying to murder his own son, of Pluto *successfully* killing Fortuna, of all the hideous crimes he had seen take place under Mob Zeus's orders across his adventures in New Rome.

Ryan's hand hit Lightning Butt with so much strength, so much weight behind it, that the blow reverberated across the Saturn Armor. For a brief moment, the time-traveler worried that his power hadn't grown strong enough to inflict substantial damage, that all his efforts had been for naught in the end.

And then the split appeared.

The left side of Augustus' face cracked around the impact, a red light glowing from inside the tiny rifts spreading across his cheek, his lips, and his forehead. The blow sent the god

wannabe falling down, but he quickly regained control of his flight.

Yet instead of engaging Ryan again in melee, Augustus hovered in place as time resumed, looking up at the armored time-traveler flying above his head with surprise... and a hint of fear.

Their positions from the battle's start had reversed.

"You wounded me," Augustus said, half shocked, half angry.

"Really?" the courier replied, freezing time again and closing the gap between them. "Let's check!"

And Ryan punched Augustus again!

Lightning Butt *tried* to dodge, but his own reflexes worked against him. For years he had felt secure in his invulnerability, letting his foes break their hands against his metal skin as a show of strength. His survival instinct was fighting his arrogance, and Ryan's hand struck before this internal battle could resolve.

This time, the courier aimed for the right side of the head, and witnessed more cracks appear. The electrical halo around Augustus briefly shorted out, revealing the old man underneath the luster of power. Red lines spread across his ivory visage, like a damaged statue. His haughty, arrogant expression had turned into a wince of pain. Ryan couldn't help but feel a deep sense of satisfaction at the sight.

"Remember," the courier said, "you are mortal."

Time resumed, and Augustus struck back with a bestial snarl.

His first blow hit Ryan's chest with enough strength to bend the reinforced metal, and the second sent the courier falling down to Earth at the speed of a cannonball. Ryan regained control of his flight after crashing through a cumulonimbus, floating above the vast blue expanse of the Mediterranean Sea. Instead of engaging his foe again, he fled west as fast as he could.

Augustus immediately pursued the time-traveler with feverish zeal, his fear replaced with murderous desperation. He couldn't let anyone capable of harming him live to fight another day.

Ryan checked his location, and opened a long-distance channel. Both he and Augustus flew so close to the water, and so swiftly, that the sea seemed to split in half below them. "Simon, where are you?"

"We evacuated as you asked, p'tit rital," his friend's voice answered while the courier dived to the left to dodge a crimson thunderbolt. Unfortunately, the lightning changed course and homed on to the time-traveler, though the armor absorbed it all the same.

"How far?" Ryan asked, as the Monegasque coast came within view.

"Really far. Why?"

"Because you might need to redraw the maps—"

Ryan choked as Augustus caught up with him with a roar. Both Genomes soon started manhandling each other above the empty but illuminated streets of Monaco, the sun was all but gone from the sky. A golden glow surrounded the courier, as the Saturn Armor's Yellow defenses struggled against the cursed city's insidious grasp.

"So you were the source of these anomalies," Augustus said, before closing his hands around Ryan's armored neck and squeezing. The mob boss' eyes burnt with savage hatred, the glowing red splits across his face making him look like a demon from Hell. The outside finally matched the inside.
"Good. I had hoped to kill you for a very, *very* long time."

"Sorry, I'm not into that sort of foreplay." Ryan activated his power and struck Augustus at his arms' joints by surprise, making the electric maniac release his hold on him. Mob Zeus attempted to punch him in the time anomaly, but the courier swiftly drew upon decades of judo practice, grabbed his foe's arm, and tossed the ivory man towards the city.

Augustus crashed into the ruins of the Monte-Carlo casino with a devastating crash, collapsing its roof as time resumed.

Ryan immediately retreated outside of Monaco's airspace, and delighted upon seeing Augustus disappear in a bright flash of violet light. The golden glow around the Saturn Armor vanished as soon as he crossed the Monegasque border and the fortifications Simon had set around the city.

The courier considered delaying his save until after he slept and confirmed he wouldn't wake up in Monaco, before remembering he couldn't.

Still, Ryan let out a sigh and took a moment to observe Monaco as he gathered his breath. He had worried that Augustus would prove immune to *that* too, but thankfully, even an invulnerable man couldn't escape this cursed city's grasp. The time-traveler didn't wish an eternity fighting clowns on anyone, but Lightning Butt had more than earned it.

Ryan prepared to call Livia to announce the news, when his armor's sensors noticed an anomaly.

An electromagnetic spike?

A flash of violet light erupted at Monaco's border, and a furious Augustus materialized barely ten meters away from Ryan.

The startled courier froze in place for a split second and instinctively halted the march of time. But Lightning Butt didn't slow down and tackled his foe, both of them flying towards the hills overlooking Monaco.

What? How? Did Augustus' invulnerability grant him immunity to Monaco's grasp?

No, something far simpler had happened.

Monaco had *let Augustus go*, either out of terror... or most probably, out of sheer spite.

The evil pocket dimension would rather screw Ryan over one last time than have a new prisoner!

The two enemies' flight ended at the *Tête-de-chien* promontory where the courier's adventure in Monaco first began. Augustus smashed Ryan's head against the pavement with enough strength to crack the helmet's lenses, and the courier's vision briefly blurred. A drop of blood fell down his forehead, while his last reserves of Green Flux coursed through his veins and restored his vision.

Augustus' shadow towered over Ryan as he struggled to stand back on his feet. "Here is where you belong," Mob Zeus said while lifting his right foot like an executioner's axe. "Under my heel!"

Ryan hastily rolled aside before Lightning Butt could stomp his head like a watermelon, and jumped back on his feet. Augustus' heel shattered the pavement in a devastating strike, digging a small crater.

"And here's the hand you deserve!" Ryan replied before freezing time. He swiftly backhanded the mob boss before he could adjust his position, his Black Flux-infused fist hitting the Genome supremacist in the face.

The blow sent a tooth flying and the mob boss stumbling. Lightning Butt quickly regained his footing, and touched his chin as if expecting to bleed. When time resumed, neither enemy took flight.

Instead, they faced each other on the promontory, their feet firmly anchored to the ground. Augustus didn't attempt to zap Ryan again, perhaps expecting the courier's armor to absorb his lightning.

Or perhaps the lightning lord would rather beat the time-traveler within an inch of his life with his bare hands, to better feel his bones breaking beneath his fingers.

"You fight better than most, but your efforts are for naught," Augustus said before taking a step forward. From the height of his two meters, the ivory man towered above his rival like Mount Everest above all other mountains. "There can only be one master of the world."

"You think that's what I'm fighting you for?" Ryan sneered, before doing some boxing footwork. "The *world*?"

"What else?"

"Because I want to be happy." Ryan froze time, right as Augustus raised his right fist. "Because I want to make a

great many people happy, and you're a threat to their well-being."

Lightning Butt lunged at him with a jaguar's speed, but Ryan lowered his head to dodge his deadly punch and retaliated with an uppercut. The blow, shrouded in Black Flux, would have shattered a normal human's head. It only caused more cracks to appear on Lightning Butt's chin, and the shadows around the courier's hands dispelled when time resumed.

"Make people happy?" Augustus didn't even appear capable of *fathoming* the notion. "The likes of us stand above lesser men. They exist to serve us; we don't exist to serve them. It is our will that decides what is right from wrong. It is our destiny, our divine right, to remake the world as we wish."

The ivory man tried to strike Ryan while he waited for his countdown to end with a haymaker, but the courier swiftly dodged this blow too.

"Make people happy? You sound like Hargraves." Augustus sneered in disgust. "Such weaklings are not meant to live."

"Yet I made Livia happy," Ryan replied, as he counted from nine to ten. "While you only ever brought her pain and sorrow!"

The mention of his daughter hurt Augustus more than the punches ever did. "You dare mention her name?!"

"She didn't warn you about me because she knows it too!" Ryan froze time, Black Flux swirling around his fingers. "That you're an irredeemable piece of shit! Even if she still loves you, she understands that you've got to go!"

"It doesn't matter," Augustus replied, lying to himself. "Once you're out of the picture, I will make everything right."

Ryan punched Lightning Butt in the chest, making him snarl as a new crack spread over his torso.

The vicious brawl continued for minutes, perhaps hours; the universe turned violet, then returned to normal, then switched back to violet again in an endless cycle. The two duelists stepped down the hill's steep slope, one punch at a time, with only the stars for witnesses.

Augustus was faster than Adam, and stronger than Wyvern. Though he was no martial art expert, he had far more experience with hand-to-hand fighting than Fallout. Lightning Butt's style was rough and direct, almost robotic, but nonetheless effective. His body didn't feel fatigue, and each of his blows carried as much strength as the first.

But he lacked something priceless, an edge that allowed Ryan to dominate him.

Experience.

When Augustus raised his fist, Ryan didn't see the Genome suprematist he had grown to despise. He saw the boxers, judo masters, Psychos, ninjas, clowns, *ninja clowns*, gangsters, petty tyrants, and heroes that he had bested across the years. He saw all the people he had fought in close combat over more than eight centuries of main quests, side-quests, random encounters, optional boss battles, and adventures across Europe. Ryan's body reacted on its own, drawing upon decades spent perfecting boxing, Krav Maga, Judo, Jiu-Jitsu, street fighting, and all martial arts known to man.

Augustus might have been over seventy, but he was the child among the two fighters.

By now, the mob boss' entire body had begun to resemble the moon's landscape, craters and rifts spread over a white wasteland. He tried to dodge and to parry Ryan's blows sometimes, but his own reflexes worked against him. Having never needed to dodge an attack or protect himself in over twenty years, Augustus had developed an overaggressive fighting style, all relentless attacks with little focus on defense.

It would have been enough to overwhelm almost anyone, but Ryan's reflexes had been honed to perfection over centuries. The courier focused on dodging the enemy strikes, and counterattacking whenever an opening presented itself.

The damage he inflicted wasn't only cosmetic. Augustus' expression had long twisted into one of permanent pain, though rage was one hell of an anesthetic.

"Now you look like a real statue," Ryan taunted him, even as his armor sent alarms. The Black Flux was damaging the gauntlets as much as the repeated strikes against Augustus' indestructible body, slowly consuming the steel.

He had to bring an end to the battle quickly.

Augustus seethed with pain and rage, his movements growing wilder, unfocused, desperate. When his punches missed Ryan and hit Monaco's hills, the very ground trembled before his might. His lips uttered a single word. "Why?"

"Why are you losing?" Ryan froze time and punched Lightning Butt in the face again. This time a bit of his stone lips flew alongside a tooth. "Because for all your might, your fists only carry the strength of your arrogance behind them."

While mine carry the weight of centuries, and the hopes of thousands."

Even this armor was the work of dozens of people, who each gave their knowledge, their work, their very lifeforce to make this wonder possible. From Len to Jasmine, from Felix to Livia, all of them contributed. Their strength coursed through these circuits.

And now, Ryan raised his hand to deliver the *coup-de-grâce*.

Instead of taking it, Augustus blasted the ground with lightning, blowing dust in all directions. Ryan's fists hit only smoke as time resumed.

When the cloud dissipated, Lightning Butt had taken flight and loomed over the courier.

"Your power works through your hands, and only within that temporal anomaly of yours," Augustus said, a crimson electrical current coursing through his cracked skin. "Your other weapons are useless against me."

He zapped Ryan with a torrent of crimson lightning. The Saturn Armor absorbed it, but when Ryan activated his jetpack to catch Augustus, the warlord denied him the privilege of another brawl. Lightning Butt bravely ran circles around his foe, bombarding him with shock and thunder.

"Running away, are we now?" Ryan taunted the mob boss as he chased after him. "Puny god."

Augustus answered with another lightning bolt. Unwilling to overcharge the armor's limited stockpile capacity, the courier dodged to the side, but like before the thunderbolt acted like a homing missile and hit him at lightspeed.

'Warning, remaining capacity at half-percent!' the armor warned after absorbing the electricity into itself.

Ryan realized dodging had been a mistake, as a twisted smile flashed across Augustus' cracked face.

Now he knew the Saturn Armor's endurance wasn't limitless.

The two engaged in a deadly course and pursuit over the French *Côte d'Azur*. Once a coastal and sunny paradise, the Genome Wars had left only ruins, muddy sand, and wild forests growing over both. They danced and waltzed, but only ever exchanged thunderbolts.

If it had been a hand-to-hand fight, Ryan might have prevailed, but Mob Zeus refused to let the courier get any closer than ten meters. Since he flew even faster than the time-traveler and resisted his Violet power, there was little Ryan could do to close the gap. He attempted his usual tricks, blowing up dust from the ground or trying to make Augustus lose sight of him to spring an ambush.

It was all for naught. When Ryan feigned retreat, Augustus gave pursuit only to back down whenever the courier turned around. When Ryan tried to hide behind a hill or a tree, the lightning always struck him from an unexpected direction. Mob Zeus could detect electrons, so he didn't need to see Ryan to hit him.

The mob boss harassed Ryan with a loan shark's relentlessness, never giving him any moment to breathe.

"I BLEEPED your daughter!" Ryan shouted, trying to infuriate the madman and make him drop his guard. "And your sister too! Look, a wild Hargraves!"

But neither truth nor lie disturbed Augustus' focus. Unlike Bacchus, he didn't let emotions interfere with his goal. Lightning Butt was brutal, but not stupid.

The only thing on his mind was his foe's death, and nothing else mattered.

In desperation, Ryan froze time, and attempted to unleash a shockwave while his gauntlets were wreathed in Black Flux. He hoped, prayed, that some of the dark particles would travel with the blast and damage his foe.

Instead, his gauntlets shorted out, Black Flux seeping out of the damaged circuitry instead of a shockwave. Worse, Ryan's fingers hurt beneath the steel, the darkness threatening to consume them too.

'Warning: system overload!' The Saturn Armor alarmed Ryan, before the latest thunderbolt caused the sensors to short out.

With little alternative, Ryan tried to activate his intercom and call for help. "Leo? Sunshine?"

But only thunder and static answered.

The sheer electromagnetic activity screwed with his communicators!

And what was bound to happen, happened.

Augustus zapped Ryan again, and this time, the armor failed to absorb the lightning. The Flux batteries melted inside the steel armor, and the jetpack exploded in Ryan's back. The whole armor failed, and the courier crash landed on some forgotten French beach.

His battered, crippled armor hit a hard bed of sand, dust creeping inside the servos. The helmet's lenses shattered, some shards making their way into Ryan's left eye. The courier had to bite his own tongue to swallow a scream, as half his vision turned red.

Get up, he thought furiously, I have to get up.

But the strike had damaged the armor's servos, and while it had been as light as a feather, the Saturn suit now seemed to weigh tons. Ryan could barely roll to his left side, blood dripping from his broken helmet, his right eye glancing up at his own death.

"This ends here," Augustus said, flying above his foe with the arrogant fury of a wounded god. "The lightning does not care for kings or commoners, for good and evil. When lightning falls, it strikes indiscriminately... and all mortals bow to it."

"Don't you know?" Ryan replied spitefully, his fists clenching. "I'm immortal."

"Nothing lives forever. You least of all."

Augustus' shroud of lightning grew more intense, as he gathered more power into himself. Scraps of his skin peeled off and fell into the sea, revealing the adamantine flesh and pulsating lightning veins underneath. He would gather enough energy to power all of New Rome for a year, and vaporize Ryan with it.

Centuries of training, two dozen runs spent preparing, billions of euros worth of resources gathered...

And it still wasn't enough!

It can't end like this, Ryan thought, his hopes faltering. If he couldn't go back in time again, he wouldn't have a do-over. Augustus would kill him, and then follow through with everyone in New Rome. *This is... this isn't a happy ending.*

"I am a god," Augustus said, his light as blinding as the sun.
"You are just a human being."

Ryan's guardian angel woke up.

Its white, furred form crawled out of the broken backpack and the damaged armor. It hopped on the sand in front of Ryan's face, and looked at the courier with big, sad blue eyes.

The same sorrowful look it had while in the bunker.

"No," Ryan pleaded.

"I will always be your friend," the Plushie replied, its pre-recorded voice morphing into another, alien one.

Then it bravely jumped at Augustus, claws out and firing lasers from its eyes.

Even the Plushie's weaponry paled before Augustus' light, as the false god struck down the beach with his thunderbolt. The crimson lightning fell down with enough power to vaporize a city block, turning the night sky red.

It never reached Ryan.

Instead, the Plushie took the hit, its mechanical body disintegrating from the sheer heat and voltage. The toy had barely leapt off a meter above the courier, but the lightning focused into a single point, a violet tear in the very fabric of

space and time. A thumb-sized looking glass peering through other realities.

A portal.

Much like Ryan's time anomaly, Plushie had always existed between two universes. It was a gate.

And Ryan was the key.

Suddenly, all fell into place. Loops of subtle nudging, of not-so-random coincidences and careful preparations, forming a chain of cause and effects.

All to leave that door open at the right time.

Using the last of his strength, the courier forced himself to his knees, froze time, and grabbed the portal with his bare hands. Violet and black particles swirled around his fingers in a deadly dance of light and darkness, consuming Augustus' divine lightning. Space itself bent and broke, as the time-traveler forced the gate open. Otherworldly, alien energies seeped into Earth's reality like blood pouring out of a wound.

From the size of a thumb, the portal's size increased to two meters in diameter... and so did its appetite. Sand, seawater, and air all floated into the rift, unable to resist its pull.

Augustus' eyes widened in surprise, and he attempted to fly away. But the rift consumed the air beneath his feet and made the living statue fall down into this violet hole. As Mob Zeus entered his reach Ryan grabbed him by the ankle, the adamantine flesh feeling as soft as butter between his blackened fingers.

The time-traveler dragged his nemesis into the otherworldly abyss as the gate closed behind them. The stream of Violet Flux intensified and swallowed them whole.

The two Genomes had entered the Purple World.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

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129: The Gate & The Key

When Ryan gazed into the violet abyss, the abyss looked back.

As he fell down into a tunnel of violet light, the time-traveler witnessed distant echoes form around him. Images flashed in his mind like pictures, followed by sound. He relived memories, some of them his own, but not all.

Ryan remembered the fateful day he and Len found their Elixirs, and the moment when it all began.

For a moment, he was Len, drinking an Elixir in a desperate attempt to heal a sick father.

The next instant, he was a woman with a dream, murdered by a heartless man. He lived through Julie Costa's murder, both as the victim and the perpetrator.

He became a living sun, fighting a final battle for the world's sake against a mad Genius' endless armies.

He remembered the Plushie's creation, his rebirth in Monaco, and his first Perfect Run.

He watched Bloodstream's final defeat through half a dozen pairs of eyes, gaining a broader perspective.

He became a priest eager to defend the world in the name of God, and the sociopathic scientist who drove him mad.

Ryan became all of these people and more, as he lived through these fragments of the past. The endless tapestry of time appeared before the wanderer, offering him greater insight and knowledge.

Through it all, Ryan's purple doppelganger followed after him like a shadow, a reflection. It floated ever closer to the original, but never fused with him. Two old friends had reunited, but now was not yet the time to become one.

There was still one task left to do.

"I'm with you," the double whispered with Ryan's own voice. His Elixir Magenta inhabited this specter, always standing by its human partner's side. *"Let's kick his ass."*

Ryan lightly landed on his feet and found a confused Augustus waiting for him.

To the courier, the Purple World appeared as a grassless plain without limits, the purple ground as smooth as a polished mirror. The skies were a lighter shade of violet, a beautiful void without clouds, without wind. Countless spheres floated above Ryan's head, linked by beautiful, dazzling auroras of Violet Flux. The strange bubbles reflected pictures of alien worlds defying understanding, of lands ruled by dinosaurs, of human and alien cities.

Ryan couldn't count them all, and each of them showed something different. Another place, another time.

Doors, the courier realized. Gates to other worlds beyond count, portals to different pasts, alternate presents, and possible futures. Ryan couldn't help but take a moment to marvel at this place's alien beauty, at this universe of limitless possibilities. The sight deeply humbled him, as he

truly began to fathom how vast the multiverse was, and how small he looked in comparison.

"What is this place?" The red light had gone out of Augustus, leaving nothing but a cracked statue of ivory. His eyes glared at Ryan, blind to this place's majesty. "What have you done?"

"I brought you to my home turf," the courier replied, taking a step forward. His armor suddenly seemed no heavier than air, and his Violet Elixir walked after him like his shadow. "This ends here."

"It will." Augustus raised his hand, trying to smite Ryan with divine lightning. But no electricity erupted from his fingers, to his surprise.

Mob Zeus couldn't draw energy from the Red World here. Not without the right permission. Unlike Ryan, he was nothing more than an intruder, an unwelcome guest in a world that served as the time-traveler's second home.

"This is a crossroads, but you can't break the lock," Ryan said, darkness spreading across his skin. "While I..."

Black Flux erupted from his heart, his very soul, burning off the Saturn armor and shrouding his entire body in a cloak of darkness. Ryan became a shadow with a purple reflection, a human-shaped black hole. A living void.

The Saturn Armor had never been more than an amplifier, helping Ryan focus his own personal connection to the Black World. But here, in this place? In this crossroads between all of space and time?

"I am the gate, and the key!"

Ryan could draw upon as much Black Flux as he wished.

Half his vision turned dark, as the paradoxical energies consumed his wounded left eye. The courier crossed the distance with his adversary in an instant, space dissolving between them as if it no longer existed. The surprised Augustus instinctively raised his left arm to protect his head, and Ryan punched it with a fist of solid darkness.

His shadowy fingers cut through the adamantine like butter.

Augustus' eyes widened in shock, as his forearm fell on the purple ground and left a stump behind. His flesh and blood had calcified, turning as solid and indestructible as the skin outside. But Lightning Butt's nerves still worked correctly, if his roar of pain was of any indication. He clutched the stump with his remaining hand, his eyes widening in rage and horror.

Ryan would have rejoiced, if his current state didn't hurt him as much as Augustus. He felt his skin peel away, devoured by the Black Flux. His legs, his arms, started to flicker like shade in the sunlight. If he kept this up, he would either ascend as a living shadow... or cease to exist.

"Give up," the courier ordered Augustus.

He didn't listen.

"I was chosen." Madness and hubris overwhelmed Augustus, his fear of death giving way to a single-minded, murderous rage. Unable to strike Ryan down with lightning, he raised his right fist in a haymaker motion. Lightning Butt's eyes were devoid of all rational thoughts; his hatred had overwhelmed his survival instinct. His mind simply couldn't accept defeat. "I was chosen by Fate!"

Ryan raised a hand, his purple double following his movement, and shattered Augustus' right arm at the elbow with a swift strike. The severed arm joined its twin on the purple floor, and the pain brought Lightning Butt to his knees.

He had lost the same hands he once smashed Julie Costa's head with.

Call it karma.

While his purple double glanced at the portals above them, Ryan looked down at his foe. Without the electrical halo surrounding him, Augustus' wrinkles, whether natural ones or cracks from the battle, were exposed for all to see. The perfect Olympian statue had degraded, his smooth outer layers now resembling a broken windshield. Though he shed no blood, there was hardly a spot in the mob boss' body without a rift, a hand-shaped crater, or exposed metallic flesh.

Ryan glanced at this all-powerful Genome's face, and it looked so old, so scared beneath the bluster. The face Augustus had struggled so hard to hide from the world wasn't that of a god, but of a feeble, bitter old man. One so afraid of his own death, that he had murdered thousands to stave it off.

Beneath all the cruelty and the luster of divine power, Augustus was nothing but a small, petty miscreant, worthy only of contempt.

"Give up!" Ryan shouted, his voice deepening as his throat flickered in and out of existence.

But now that he had lost everything, pride was all Augustus had left.

"A god does not surrender!" he snarled.

A true god was listening, and made its presence known.

The portal bubbles dispersed, pushed away by an invisible cosmic force. The smooth ground beneath Ryan's feet undulated like a water pond's surface, and the Flux auroras brightened. A humongous shadow covered Ryan and Augustus, making them raise their eyes at the alien skies.

The Violet Ultimate One descended from the heavens above.

Ryan had only caught a glimpse of the entity in the past, but now it revealed itself in its full, cosmic glory. The courier had vaguely mistaken it for an inverted pyramid, but on a closer look, it appeared far more complex. The geometric shape before him would have given a headache to Euclid, as layers upon layers of space folded in a bizarre triangular violet spiral.

This shape, this geometrical form, didn't exist, *couldn't* exist on Earth. Ryan's own human mind couldn't fully process what he saw. It tried to fit the shape among other, more classical forms, to quantify the unquantifiable... and it failed.

Millions of eyes covered this eldritch triangle, black orbs full of swirling galactic spirals, all-devouring black holes, nebulas, and cosmic phenomenons undiscovered by human astronomers.

Each eye is a universe, Ryan realized. This thing was so colossal, that it hurt the courier's head just to look at it. Even the haughty Augustus seemed transfixed by the sight.

The entity's eyes gazed at the mortals.

A solar flare of Violet Flux swallowed them both, dissipating the shroud of darkness around Ryan. The multiversal light of the Ultimate One bathed the courier's naked body, stripping him of the pain, of his senses, and reason. The deity's will overwhelmed his own, and let him see through one of its eyes.

The time traveler was brought back to a time before man, before life. He witnessed a nebula's matter condense while a star flared to life, planets forming out of space dust around the radiant celestial light. An asteroid impacted a rock of magma, the ejected stones gathering into a smaller pebble forever orbiting around its larger sister.

The fires cooled, allowing for the emergence of continents, of an atmosphere of volatile gases, and of vast oceans. The planet cooled as bacteria colonized it. Algae populated the deep, and legged creatures dared to walk on land. Insects conquered the skies, then reptiles the ground, until another rock from the skies set them all ablaze.

Mammals emerged from the ashes, growing larger and smarter. A primate mastered fire, and crafted tools to conquer the world. Lineages of humans evolved and became one, before splitting into countless tribes. Some raised pyramids, others temples. Kingdoms rose and fell, and two families walked down the road of time. One found its ultimate fruit in a man with a dream of violent conquest, another in a child that loved video games, both locked into a collision course.

All leading up to this moment.

"THIS IS A SECOND TO ME."

The Ultimate One's voice was unlike any sound Ryan had ever heard. It was the subtle song of undulating space, the

symphony of time. It was beautiful beyond any description, and yet awe-inspiring.

The voice of a true deity.

When the divine union ended, Ryan's pain had vanished, and the Black Flux along with it. His skin felt fresh beneath the iron, and a fully repaired Saturn Armor protected him. The eye blinded by Augustus could see again, perhaps even more clearly than it ever had.

The Ultimate One had afforded no such courtesy to Augustus, who remained a broken, crippled thing. Lightning Butt had gone into shock, his eyes wide open, his arrogant defiance gone.

"YOU ARE NOT A GOD."

He had seen the vision too, and the truth shattered him.

"YOU ARE **NOTHING**."

Augustus' eyes looked down at the ground, his gaze empty and hollow. He had formed his entire personality, his sense of self, around the idea that he was a god among men, chosen by fate to rule and conquer. He had built his family, his world, around this primal delusion, violently lashing out at anything that could contradict it.

But the Ultimate One had dispelled his armor of lies with the truth of his own insignificance, breaking him utterly.

Something inside Augustus had shattered, and would never come back.

The Ultimate One paid the defeated genome no more attention than a fly. Instead, its eyes set on Ryan, crushing

the courier beneath the weight of its divine gaze.

The courier's purple double knelt before the entity, the Elixir submitting to the elder entity. Though he didn't go as far, Ryan bowed as deeply as he could. Even the irreverent courier knew that he was in the presence of a true deity, a transcendental existence as far above humans as they were from ants. An entity of unfathomable power, and utterly alien.

"You are the Ultimate—" Ryan began, but the entity cut him off.

"I AM ALL OF SPACE AND TIME. I AM ALL THAT WAS, ALL THAT IS, ALL THAT WILL EVER BE. I AM EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE. I AM THAT I AM."

"So you control—"

"YES."

"And you already know what—"

"I KNOW EVERYTHING YOU MIGHT EVER SAY."

"Well, can you please pretend not to?" The time-traveler pleaded sheepishly. "It's annoying to get cut off all the time."

Violet Flux instantly swirled before Ryan, and solidified into a solid shape. The entity it coalesced into shared the courier's height, and little else. The figure wore a purple robe seemingly woven from the fabric of space, a foaming mass of bubbles foaming from below. Ryan didn't see any face beneath the hood, only a vision of a night sky and swirling nebulae. The creature had no arms, nor any need for them.

"Are you more comfortable with this shape?" The Ultimate One's newest avatar asked, its voice an echo of Ryan's own.

For some reason, that incarnation spoke in the French language.

"It's better," the courier replied, and to his joy, the entity didn't interrupt him again. It probably knew what the human was about to say, but politely pretended not to. Ryan then glanced at Augustus, who kept looking at the ground in a vegetative state. "What about him?"

"He does not matter." The Ultimate One's avatar didn't even spare Augustus a glance, as space lengthened between Ryan and the broken mob boss. Lightning Butt moved backward, until he vanished from sight. "Come."

Space bent, and a terrifying creature emerged from an angle at the edge of Ryan's vision. A horse-sized horror with white skin and hundreds of red eyes all over its body, with stunted tentacles as forelegs, and larger ones for hindlegs. Two antennas sprouted from its twisted, bulbous head like long porcelain ears.

The Plushie.

Or rather, the entity that had hijacked it.

Somehow, Ryan couldn't help but find it cute, in a grotesque way. The courier moved an armored hand at the monster's head, and scratched it behind the 'ears.' Its tentacles wriggled in pleasure, its red eyes turning blue.

"Thanks, buddy," Ryan said, the eldritch horror answering with a sound that could pass for a strangled cat's cry. "From the bottom of my heart."

The eldritch calamity had given the time traveler many scares, but in the end, it had been a loyal friend since day one. Ryan could see it now.

"Was that always your true form?" the courier asked, as the Plushie wagged its tentacles. The creature's shadow had looked different a few loops ago.

"It is the form it chose," the Ultimate One said. The courier suddenly noticed that its voice, while echoing Ryan's own, lacked any emotional intonation. The creature mimicked human speech the way a parrot did, understanding the words, but not the music. "It must return to its duties now."

Ryan suddenly realized that the Plushie's time on Earth had been the equivalent of a holiday.

No wonder it had spent its time sowing mayhem and destruction!

"I have so many questions," Ryan confessed.

"I have answers," the Ultimate One replied.

"Thank you." Ryan doubted that many people could boast about receiving an audience from an Outer God, or the closest thing to one. "You've guided me for a while. First through Eugène-Henry, then through Chronoradio messages. First of all, I thank you for it."

The deity didn't bother answering. It felt distant, physically present, but not *there* either.

"Was this predetermined?" Ryan asked hesitantly. "Did you make this moment inevitable?"

This time, the Ultimate One answered. "I made this moment possible. You made it inevitable."

Bubbles floated from beneath the entity's clothes and grew larger to the size of tennis balls. When Ryan examined them more closely, he noticed images appearing on their surface.

"These are paths you could have taken." The Ultimate One glanced at a bubble showing Ryan walking out of New Rome, but different. The courier's cashmere suit had turned into tattered rags, while his eyes had become blue and purple.

This doppelganger's malevolent expression chilled the original Ryan to the bone, especially when he noticed birds and clouds frozen in time above New Rome's buildings.

"In this possibility, you make a gamble and take a second Elixir, only to become the bane of your kind," the Ultimate One explained, while Ryan's purple double looked away in shame. "As the Clockstopper, you turn the human hive of New Rome into a snowglobe, before moving on to ruin millions of lives."

"Is this happening right now?" Ryan asked, horrified, while the Plushie purred against his leg. "In another reality?"

"No," the Ultimate One answered to the courier's relief. "As an observer, you are a spacetime singularity. This is partly why your mate cannot predict you."

The courier frowned behind his helmet. "An observer?"

The Ultimate One ignored the question. Another bubble floated in front of Ryan, showing him and Livia engaged in a vicious gunfight over the burning ruins of Mount Augustus' villa. "In this extinguished possibility, you never trust your

current mate, and you start a war with her for control over your timeline. Each loop becomes worse than the last."

Ryan gazed at this one for a while, before being distracted by another, showing the courier punching Augustus' chest and his hand coming out on the other side.

"In this one, you strike down her maker," the Ultimate One explained, "and though she does not war with you, your bond is broken. You leave the New Rome human hive, and return to your wandering, alone."

The Plushie pointed at another bubble, which made Ryan raise an eyebrow. It showed the courier in bed, surrounded by naked women including Fortuna, Jasmine, Yuki, Nora, the Vamp, Cancel...

And Felix.

Somehow, Felix was here too.

"Wait, is that the harem ending?" Ryan asked with curiosity.

"In this timeline, you give up on forming meaningful bonds with your kindred," the Ultimate One explained. "You live a jaded existence of meaningless sensations, dulling your heart's pain with physical pleasure."

Ryan suddenly noticed Len and Livia's absence in this picture, illustrating the absence of anything deeper than mindless sex. "I should have known it looked too good to be true," he said.

The Ultimate One dispersed the bubbles with a thought. "All of these are choices you could have made, or would have been forced upon you if you had wavered in your efforts. You discarded or extinguished these possibilities in the

service of your perfect future. If this present moment takes place, human, it is because you struggled to make it happen."

"So I have free will?" the courier asked, afraid of the answer. "If multiple paths are possible, then events aren't predetermined?"

"Free will does not work as most humans understand it," the Ultimate One explained. "The timeline is in flux whenever a lifeform makes a choice. A cat is faced with a forked path. It can take left, or right. In that brief moment, both possibilities coexist."

Ryan wondered if that cat's name was Schrödinger, or maybe Eugène-Henry. "Until the cat chooses."

"Yes. After which, one possibility becomes the truth and is set in stone. History is written. Whenever you saved and turned back time, the ink was already dry. Humans had made their choice in a previous history, and they would make the same for all future ones unless interfered with by an outside force. This is the nature of causality. This is the nature of time."

Ryan tried to grasp the implications. People like Augustus chose to do all their crimes, and the likes of Sunshine chose to help others. Time didn't invalidate their choice, but once the choice had been made, it couldn't change.

"So we humans have the freedom to choose," the human summarized, "but not to change our mind?"

They could write their life's story, but not change the first draft.

"The humans you met chose to become who they are," the Ultimate One confirmed. "But they cannot choose to become someone else. Only those who exist outside causality have this privilege. Beings of the higher dimensions, like the messengers. Those touched by the rebellious Black. And you."

Ryan remembered his old meeting with Len, when he had likened himself to a Schrödinger's cat, existing in multiple states at once. Yet unlike this poor, suffering feline, the courier could decide which state he ended up with. "So... I'm an exception?"

"You wished to undo the chain of cause-and-effect to save another life, so I granted you the power of an observer. The ability to exist both in your lesser reality and my Purple World, which transcends causality. As you can interfere with a lifeform's original choice, you alone decide which possibility, which potential reality, will become the true history. You alone can grant others second chances. You are the true master of your universe, human."

"I'm sorry," Ryan apologized, before looking at his armored hands. They had stopped existing a few minutes ago, alongside his left eye. "It must have been hard work to clean up the timestream after me. I probably caused a lot of paradoxes over all these loops."

"It is my role to maintain the integrity of the timestream," the Ultimate One replied, before glancing at Ryan's left eye. "Some of your body parts have been erased forever, so I replaced them with an earlier possibility of them still untouched by the Black."

"A time-transplant?" Ryan asked. "Nice loophole."

"I have grown efficient at filling the holes made by the Black, though not perfect. This power is by definition uncontrollable. The unforeseen error in the great machinery of the universe."

"Though I do wonder what would have happened if I died of old age, and saved a few moments earlier," Ryan said. "How would that have worked from your own point of view?"

"Time would have repeated, until you achieved peace and enlightenment," the Ultimate One answered. "Then you would have ascended to the Purple World, and history would have carried on without you."

Still, Ryan wondered how many cycles it would have taken... and he suddenly realized that the creature in front of him didn't understand how painful it would have been. The Ultimate One saw billions of years as a second. The courier suffering centuries in a time loop until he reached enlightenment wouldn't have been a blip on its radar.

"I have another question," the courier said hesitantly, unsure how the creature would react. "But I don't want to sound ungrateful."

The Ultimate One didn't answer, but it had probably foreseen what he was about to ask.

"Why didn't you help us more?" Ryan glanced up at the enormous pyramid. "You brought down the reptilians, according to Darkling, and you can control reality itself. Why didn't you prevent the Alchemist from devastating our planet?"

The Ultimate One's cowled head glanced at Ryan's left foot. "There is a bacteria crawling on your limb. It has an oval shape, with an orange cytoplasm and blue tentacles. It has

been with you since you first set a foot on New Rome, eating dust on your skin. It has fought deadly wars against parasites for food, survived radiation and lightning. One day it will duplicate. Did you notice it?"

"No," Ryan confessed.

"Mankind is a bacteria colony to me," the entity explained. "I am big, and you are small. Unless I focus or you disturb the timeline, I do not even notice that your planet exists. Your reality is a sand grain among the endless desert which I oversee. A pigment in the tapestry of my dreams. If this avatar of mine above your head entered your universe, it would appear more than one hundred billion of your solar masses, larger than the greatest of your black holes."

"I can hardly imagine it," the courier admitted. His human brain simply couldn't properly represent the size difference.
"So we are insignificant to the Ultimate Ones?"

"Humans are no more important to me than the birds you eat for sustenance, or the ants you crush underfoot when you walk," it answered bluntly. "My role is to maintain the march of time, and the boundaries of space for trillions of universes."

Ryan's purple double chose this moment to speak up.
"Helping you mortals is our job."

"I do not care for mortal creatures, but I do not disregard them either," the Ultimate One added. "This is why we Ultimate Ones created the messengers. To guide lesser life forms to a higher level of existence."

Ryan frowned. "Then why did you help me, out of everyone else? Was it because you needed me to destroy the Alchemist's base?"

"No," the alien deity replied flatly.

"Then why? Why did you help me reach my happy ending?"

"Because I chose to."

An aurora of Violet Flux flashed in the skies above, a shining thread linking time and space.

"You're like one of those guys who adopt wounded dogs they find on the road," Ryan realized. "You won't go out of your way to help others proactively, but if someone in pain directly crosses your path and begs for help... sometimes you answer."

The Ultimate One responded with silence.

In the end, it was neither good nor evil as humans understood it. It was a cold, alien thing.

But one capable of selfless compassion too.

Ryan neither felt angry nor happy with these answers. He could only accept them. Though cold and distant, the Ultimate One was not malicious, and had helped one pitiful human achieve his good ending without expecting anything in return. For that, the courier would always be grateful.

Ryan had one question left to ask. "So how does this end?"

"However you wish." The Ultimate One glanced at the Plushie and Magenta's avatar. "You can stay here and become one of us. You will gain immense power, and obligations. You will oversee timestreams, travel across countless realities. Many options will open to you. You can also choose to enter the Black World, if you seek greater freedom."

Ryan considered the offer, but though an interesting one, it wasn't what he had fought for. "Or..." he trailed. "Or I could return to Earth."

"You could," the Ultimate One conceded.

Ryan's thoughts turned to Livia and Len. "There is something I never experienced, in all my years of wandering. Something I've striven to achieve for a very long time."

For the first time in the entire conversation, the Ultimate One gazed at the human with what could pass for curiosity. "What is it?"

It knew the answer, but didn't understand it.

"Living a happy life," Ryan answered, "with friends who can remember me."

The Plushie's antennae lowered in disappointment, so the courier immediately reassured it. "Don't get me wrong, I would gladly join this heaven and wander the cosmos with all of you... just not now. Not today."

The Ultimate One remained silent for a moment, before reaching a decision. "The door to ascension will remain open. If you ever decide to join us rather than turning back time, I will extirpate you from your timeline and welcome you in my realm. Otherwise, you will be free to walk into the Black World. You have earned ascension, human, for learning to wield your power with wisdom. Now and forever."

"So..." Ryan glanced at his purple double, and at the rabbit-abomination, he had strangely grown fond of. "This is goodbye?"

"No, Ryan," his copy said warmly, the Plushie chirping in response. *"We are always with you, even if you cannot see us. Don't you understand? You are never alone. You will never be alone."*

And somehow, that was all Ryan had ever wanted.

"I will return you and your mate's maker to your timeline," the Ultimate One said. "I will remove your innate connection to the Black World too. The Black Ultimate One is careless in its generosity, and if allowed to grow further the paradox within you will destabilize your reality."

"I suppose that's fair." The Black Ultimate One had granted Ryan this gift because he had wished to die, but now...

Now Ryan had learned to live.

The Violet Ultimate's smaller avatar wordlessly collapsed into Violet Flux, its triangular self bathing Ryan with its eldritch light. The Plushie hopped away with one last look sent at its old friend, while Magenta waved a hand at his double. Ryan returned the goodbye with a handwave of his own, as he returned to his reality.

A second later, the courier found himself standing on a French beach in his full Saturn Armor regalia, right next to an armless and broken Augustus. Ryan looked up as a sun illuminated the night, one shaped like a man.

Leo Hargraves glanced at the courier with silent relief, then at his old, broken nemesis. It said something about Sunshine that he seemed to feel equal satisfaction and pity at the sight.

"I was worried for you," Leo admitted to Ryan.

"Didn't you hear?" The time-traveler smiled beneath his helmet. "I'm immortal."

It took them until dawn, the true dawn, to return to Italy together. Ryan carried the broken Augustus in his arms, Pieta-style. By then, Ischia Island's Bliss factory was no more than burning rubble, and the courier's allies had evacuated to New Rome's old harbor with their captives.

When Ryan and Sunshine reached the area, they found hundreds of people gathered along the docks, near transport bathyspheres. Fortuna and Felix had draped Narcinia in a warm blanket, while Mr. Wave entertained the traumatized child with tales. Len and the reformed Meta-Gang members escorted the shackled Olympians. A bound Venus walked after her husband, pushed forward by Jamie and Lanka.

The two had made the right choice in the end.

Vulcan and Wyvern arrived with other arrested Augusti lieutenants; not as enemies, but as uneasy allies. Enrique and other Private Security members escorted the gangsters towards Len's bathyspheres, which would transport them to an inescapable prison under the sea.

Yet, in spite of their grim situation, the Olympians remained confident. They trusted their invincible leader would rain devastation upon those who dared to stand against him, and come to rescue his loyal minions.

Ryan's appearance dashed their hopes. When the Augusti raised their eyes to watch him carry their defeated master in his arms, illuminated by Leo Hargraves' light, they could only respond with shock and denial. Wyvern's eyes almost bulged out of her skull, while Enrique gave Ryan a quiet,

respectful nod. Len didn't hide her relief at seeing her adoptive brother alive, and even Bianca grinned ear to ear.

Ryan tossed the defeated Augustus to the ground without a word. The broken warlord didn't rise up after hitting the pavement, his will shattered. And when they saw their invincible leader crushed so thoroughly, the remaining Olympians lost the will to fight. They lowered their heads in silent defeat, and walked to their fate.

The war was over.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

See you Saturday for the final chapter ;)

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Aleksander Z Jay Gradon ZRhulad Ethan Scott Bosse
Dietz Summercat James J Dasal Bertsteigert Nock
Kasan Kite7 Subliminary Jordan Antti Huovilainen
Minow Michael S. evilperson41 Deathburn edmuck
Gally just_a_potato Dalton Cade Spence altus Svend
Mohammed Hajjaj Cosimo Yap Michael Yamashita
charlyfu Hntpo William Johnson John Evans
HarbingTarbl Djeez Thordur hrafn KilledbyBooks
David Cox NLRUmbra hippityhoppity Wancek
Weirdisaac Thelon TaoBio Bryce Iudi Wilhelm
bengtsson Gaëtan Hillion X4D8 Bernice0311 Brody
Brown Andrew Rutherford Butler Aeon brett thomas
Thiago Ruiz Imran Comedy knight Gerrant Anonmily
William Brayer Cole Calderon Aehs Conor lennon
sedael Darien Benner Ligma Spartanstoryteller
BedlamBlade MasterofNova Walter Goggy123
Escalatus Erostan Clemens Hochstädter Brandon
Stiles mars kiyu Jacob Barger Sam Paley Aymeric
Penven Harold Sandahl IV Kody Ihnat John Puri Iresan
NeWorIDark Samuel Alexander Vall Andersen Rein

Warner morganmoll Warper6 Harrison Brown Andrew Holland Jdosnoen James Bbyh Xerias Maalsc Devourerofwords Desert Wreck TTG Oliverthms Siphor Malphas Nikhil Majumdar Leon Schultz Jeremy Minton Leaored Cipkenop rmb123 Ervin Ughy Shaoraka Winson Chan Slipperyfish Overlord_Grimm Svensonen agoniste Olivier Edery Brycen Legler Jonathan Spaulding Erriballon Mani Hayden H. Scott Sanjay Skovboa Taylor Tilbury Bob le Poisson Rouge David Cullen Ashley Cameron Ivan Elyshev samuel baldauf Tate Browder Joel Sasmad Bury nice Basiun Ryan Trueman Chris Roden Thomas Tessier M Clason Dark Chaos Alex Lindsay Sadinar The Knight Commissar Francis Chartier Daniel Everest Ausner Gentil LinenZero Tomas Puskas Kyle Reese Zach Peter Christensen-Calvin Murphy Jeff Gault James Teeple Dom Ceremonia Max Collins Виктор Фон Стыценкофф David Hansson Mrbuttface Matthew Sands K BlackFire13th borrk Kevin Ramos Jeremy Humphrey Israel Charles handgis closeded charter James Short Colby Hulg Gohen Sebin Paul Zadaine Audric CK Karthic 白酒鬼 PbookR Bob Smith Glader John Carroll Reviv3pls Manu quentin Corgi McStumperson RepossessedSoul Armo Daniel Mackie Chris M James Walsh Zack Jim of Trades Seadrake Marc Claude Louis Durand Rhodri Thornber Dax Sam

130: Farewell, New Rome (Ending)

Livia had foreseen this moment, but never thought she would live to see it.

The Augusti villa's marble terrace was almost entirely silent, as Enrique Manada signed the fifty-page long treaty. Wyvern and Leo Hargraves sat on his side of the table, while Vulcan and Uncle Neptune assisted Livia. Len Sabino completed the council, looking quite graceful in a summer dress, while Luigi kindly served cocktails and coffee. Eugène-Henry, that spoiled cat, napped near the pool with his belly exposed.

To Livia's eyes, the new chairman of Dynamis seemed to blur, as multiple possibilities aligned with his real self. Six phantom hands followed his motions. All of them used different signatures, but they signed anyway.

"It is done," Enrique said before closing the document, some other possibilities opening their mouths after the deed was done. "I thus officially announce the creation of the New European Republic."

Dynamis had officially ceased to exist, as did the Augusti's empire. A new structure would rise from their ashes, greater and better than the sum of its parts.

"The United States of Europe would have sounded better though," Leo Hargraves said. His presence still made Livia

and her uncle uneasy, but he would soon serve as their go-between with the newborn Republics of Bavaria and Denmark in the north. Though the seer would never quite get along with her mother's murderer, reconciliation was the order of the day.

Gentle Len smiled sheepishly. "No, it wouldn't have. Sounded good, I mean."

Livia hadn't seen a single possibility where she supported that alternate name.

"I already contacted the French, and they have shown interest in joining us," the seer explained. By which she meant that they would inevitably join the new union, though they would grumble about it first. The French *always* complained, no matter the timeline. "I believe we could unify all of Western Europe within the next two years."

"I never thought I would see that day," Uncle Neptune said, eyeing Hargraves and Manada warily. "Nor that we would end up sitting around the same table without a fight."

"Things change," Enrique replied, before joining his hands. "Though I do wonder why the architect behind this conference didn't show up."

Livia straightened up on her chair. "He left this morning, and he didn't tell me where."

"I... I couldn't find him either," Len admitted. "I thought he was with Fortuna and the others, but... no."

Livia didn't need a reminder. Fortuna and her boyfriend intended to escort Alchemo to Denmark, so he might cure Mathias' mother of her neural illness. She knew he would

succeed, but her best friend would remain abroad for months.

Livia missed Fortuna's presence already. Felix and Narcinia intended to follow her too; the former as a prelude to joining the Carnival full-time, the latter as part of her quest to find out more about her birth parents.

"I still can't believe she chose to call herself Lucky Girl," Vulcan snickered. "That's the laziest superhero name I've heard yet, and that includes yours, Laura."

"You have a point," her former partner took the remark in stride. "Wyvern was a Dynamis brand. We should think of something else."

Vulcan squinted, as she grabbed a drink. "We?"

"I hoped we could form a duo again." Wyvern cleared her throat at Vulcan's hard gaze. "Or at least, give it a try."

Vulcan wordlessly sipped her drink with a sour face.

Wyvern awkwardly shifted on her seat, and Enrique spared her further discomfort. "I've agreed to your proposal about Rust Town's renovation, and to give Miss Sabino complete autonomy on that front," he informed Livia. "The Meta-Gang members who submitted to treatment will join the program, and your donation will cover seventy percent of the budget."

"It might have come from drug money, but these funds will serve a higher cause now," Livia replied with a nod. Finally, she could use her father's ill-gotten resources to do good.

Rust Town's denizens would only be the first to benefit from them. Livia intended to fully fund a Think Tank of Geniuses

to help rejuvenate the Earth. The Architect would get to build her self-sustaining cities, Dr. Tyrano's knowledge would be directed towards developing better healthcare, and Vulcan would equip a peacekeeping force to neutralize the Genome warlords ravaging the countryside.

Maybe in time they would introduce Mechron's safe Elixir knockoffs and give everyone the chance to gain superpowers. But that would wait until after Europe had stabilized.

"Why me?" Len asked with a frown, her fingers fidgeting.
"Why put me in charge?"

"Because you have lived among the locals and seen their struggles," Enrique replied. "You understand their needs better than I do from my ivory tower. We bear the responsibility for Rust Town's current state, so I don't expect that we will prove adequate at resolving its issues."

"And you have more than earned our trust, Len," Livia added with a bright smile, knowing it would reassure the Genius. After facing so many trials together, the seer almost considered the underwater Genius as a sister-in-law. "You have done more for this place and its orphans than anyone else. You should get recognition for your efforts."

"I..." Len cleared her throat, before offering a thankful nod.
"I shall prove worthy of that trust. I swear. For the people of Rust Town."

The rest of the meeting was spent ironing out details about the new order of things, though Livia more or less zoned out. She had already predicted how things would unfold, and so spoke on autopilot. Still, she would rather take that boring, but constructive monotony over a bad surprise.

"Miss Augusti, a question before I leave," Leo Hargraves said, and Livia already predicted what he would say before he even opened his fiery mouth. "How is *he* doing?"

Livia didn't need to see the future to understand who he was referencing. "My father is..." She cleared her throat. "Alive."

"That's better than he deserves," Wyvern said harshly. "He should be imprisoned in a cell at the bottom of the sea, like his lieutenants."

"My brother is already in a cell," Uncle Neptune replied with a scowl. "One he will never escape."

Livia glanced at a window on the villa's second floor.

Her father was watching the scene through the glass, sitting in a wheelchair. Or at least his eyes gazed at the garden, while his mind wandered elsewhere.

Sometimes, he apologized to Livia, to her mother, to the world. Mostly, he remained silent, or sobbed. Though the body endured, the proud, powerful warlord whom Livia had known all her life had perished in France. Only his ghost remained, trapped in a broken, indestructible body.

Her father would rather have died than live like this, weak and catatonic. And... she knew he would get his wish in less than two years. His daughter had seen it across multiple possibilities. Janus Augusti had triumphed over many powerful foes, but in the end, he couldn't outrun cancer.

In her sleep, Livia had dreamed that her father would set aside his criminal ways, seek repentance, and live the rest of his days in peace. It had been a sweet dream, and she had felt great sorrow upon waking up.

Reality wasn't the ideal ending she had dreamed of, but it was an outcome that she was happy with nonetheless. Ryan had kept his promise and spared her father. She couldn't blame her boyfriend for fulfilling her wish in an unexpected way.

Livia would care for her father for the little time he had left, and mourn for him afterward.

But she wouldn't pity him.

"I see," Hargraves replied. He understood that Livia's father had paid for his crimes. "In that case, I will take my leave too."

"I believe it is the first time that your Carnival leaves a city with more members than it arrived with," Enrique noted.

The Living Sun nodded. "I will take that as a good sign, and I know our new recruits will prove themselves. Atom Cat will do very well, and the Panda has his heart in the right place."

"I'm still sad to see Felix go," Wyvern said. "He was a good element."

"He was," Livia agreed, though not without some regrets of her own. Though she had moved on from their relationship, she still considered Felix a close friend. Someone with his resolve would have helped make New Rome a better place, but Livia understood that her ex-boyfriend would only truly feel happy on the road, fighting the evils of the world. Felix was born to become a wandering knight, not a nation-builder.

Enrique's group soon left after a few handshakes, leaving Livia alone with Len and her bodyguards. "Fuck her," Vulcan

said, once Wyvern was out of earshot. "Fuck her better-than-you attitude."

"You will get to pick the name," Livia pointed out.

"Fuck you too, Nostradamus," the weapon-builder replied. "It's only because you warned me of Daddy Dearest's intentions that I haven't shot you yet."

"And because I'm a good boss too?" Livia asked mirthfully, having given Vulcan complete autonomy and a large budget to pursue her intellectual interests.

"Don't push it." Vulcan put her drink aside. "Would you even be okay with this?"

"We have become a single government," Uncle Neptune said, while examining his copy of the European accords. "It doesn't matter which ministry you choose."

"We are all friends now," Livia pointed out with a smile.

"You disgust me," Vulcan replied before turning at Len. "Hey, Underdiver."

"Uh, yes?" Len asked with a frown.

"Let's go to my workshop afterward. I've got a great idea, but I'll need a smart assistant to improve it."

Livia gave it a fifty percent chance that Vulcan and Wyvern would end up forming another duo, and forty that they would create a new superhero organization. Beneath all the rage, bitterness, and her inferiority complex, a part of Vulcan had never truly given up on making the world a better place. Her pride would always come first, but now that Wyvern gave her the respect she felt that she

deserved, the short-tempered Genius would mellow out in time.

Len's newfound idealism would have a good influence on her too, making Vulcan realize that even her weapon-making power could be used for constructive purposes.

Humans needed to be together to lift each other up.

"It's really happening," Uncle Neptune said, as he slouched on his chair. Though he looked very much like Livia's father, the expression couldn't be more different. Uncle Neptune was amiable and cautious, with the look of a loving grandfather; while Dad had been a grim and implacable patriarch. "I've prayed for this deal for years, and I still half expect it to blow up in our face."

"It won't," Livia reassured him.

"I always told your father that we should go legit, even when we were a normal mob," her uncle said. "That way of life, it only ever ends up with a coffin or a cell; no matter how powerful you are. Now my brother is dead inside, and my sister imprisoned. I feel like my dreams and nightmares came true all at once."

Livia knew her uncle was sorely tempted to raise Len's underwater prison from the depths and free her aunt. In a few possibilities, he almost did.

But he never went through with these plans.

"Auntie doesn't want to talk to us," Livia said with regrets. "Not since we refused to break her out."

"Can't blame her," her uncle replied with a sigh. "But better jailed than dead. Do you think she will come around one

day?"

"Maybe," Livia admitted, though the possibilities she had seen were remote. Deep down, her aunt loved to kill. It would take her years of introspection before she could even begin to improve as a person. "But not before many, many years."

Neptune sighed. "It all feels so bittersweet."

"Why did you go along with these reforms?" Livia asked her uncle. She predicted a few answers, but she wanted to hear his thoughts from his own mouth. "You never agreed with Father, but you always went along with his wishes."

"Because I loved him, and I thought I could curb his worst ideas," Uncle Neptune replied with a shrug. "The family that puts the family first will always prevail over the family that puts the whims of its members first. I love Janus, and my sister too... but you're our family's future, Livia. I think the path you chose is the only one where you'll live a long and happy life. Janus wouldn't, *couldn't* see it, but I do. We old people should make sure younger generations live a better life than our own, not repeat the same mistakes."

Livia smiled, and bowed. "Thank you, Uncle. For supporting me in these difficult times."

"It's only been two weeks and a half since Janus fell, and it feels like years already," her uncle said with a shrug. "There's still a lot of things to do ahead of us. Enemies to fight, roads to build. But you can count on me."

Livia kissed him on the cheek, her uncle smiling in response.

Before she left with Vulcan, Len wanted to ask the seer a question. "Livia..."

"You worry about Ryan," Livia guessed.

"I can't find him, and he doesn't answer on his phone. I'm... I'm worried."

"It's alright," Livia reassured her. Though her knight spent his nights with her, he usually wandered off in the morning to run errands. Or side-quests as he called them.

This time though, she had a pretty good intuition of where he had gone. "I think I know where he is."

It was May 31st, and the sun set on New Rome.

Sitting at the edge of the promontory, Ryan thoughtfully gazed at the horizon. His legs dangled in the void, while his loyal Plymouth Fury waited behind him with his mask and hat on the hood. The wind brushed against his cashmere suit and his naked face, and his eyes wandered from one district to the next.

Though it had changed, the city looked the same at first glance. All dazzling neon lights and towering skyscrapers, the glorious promise of a new future for mankind. He had spent the whole day marveling at its beauty, watching people living out their lives to the tune of his Chronoradio.

For a full day in a long, long time, Ryan had stopped to enjoy the moment and think. To ponder what he should do next.

He heard a car stop behind him, and peeked over his shoulder. Livia stepped out of a Mercedes, wearing the same red dress as on their first date. The sunlight reflected on her platinum silver hair, and illuminated the smile on her face.

"How did you know I would be here?" Ryan asked his girlfriend with a knowing grin. "I thought you couldn't see me, Miss Augusti?"

"I can't see you, Mr. Romano," she replied with a playful tone, "but I still know how you think."

"I stopped at this promontory when I first came to New Rome, many loops ago," Ryan explained, as she walked to his side. "I heard it was the best view of the city."

"You were lied to," she replied. "Our house has the best sight."

Our house, Ryan thought. Two simple words, and yet they meant so much.

"I thought I would come back to this place after I completed my Perfect Run," Ryan admitted. "I imagined that I would take one good look at the city, go back to my car, and then drive into the sunset towards new adventures. Maybe with Len in the backseat."

She joined her hands together with a hint of anxiety. "Will you leave?"

"No," Ryan replied, to her relief. "I was only ever comfortable on the road, mostly because that's all I ever knew... but that wasn't what I wanted."

"You came for Len. For a friend."

"I would have been happy if I could at least have one friend who could remember me. I spent centuries on a comedy roadshow, trying to fill the void with entertainment. Trying to stave off the loneliness. And now..."

"Now you're no longer alone," Livia said, as she knelt at his side. "And you shall never be again."

"No. And though the universe is vast and full of wonders... What I want above everything is to spend time with those I love. I see that now." He chuckled. "I guess I'm old enough to settle down."

She giggled like a young maiden. "You sound like my uncle, Ryan."

"I'm eight hundred and sixty years older than you, young woman. I'm a cradle robber."

"Will Grandpa Romano let me climb on his lap then?" She asked him with a coy look.

"Sure, Papa Beaver will tell you a tale." Livia climbed on Ryan's lap, and he put his arms around her. "You've gotten a little heavier."

Livia looked cute when offended. "Are you calling me fat?"

"It's fine, you started a little too skinny," Ryan replied before kissing her on the neck. "But you should stop overeating."

"I will," she said while resting her head against his shoulder. "The stressful days are over now that we've hammered out a constitution. Things will slowly settle into a new, peaceful status quo."

"How peaceful?" Though Ryan enjoyed the current peace, he wouldn't mind a little action in the future.

"As quiet as a republic of Genomes can be... at least for the next few years." She rolled her shoulders. "Afterward, who knows? I foresee dangerous threats, but whether or not

these distant possibilities will materialize or not, we won't face them alone."

"About that, I want to talk about the 'we' part." Ryan looked into his girlfriend's eyes. He had thoughtfully considered something, and he wanted to broach the subject with her. "Livia?"

"Yes, Ryan?" she asked, a little anxious.

"Will you marry me?"

She responded with a giggle, her face turning as red as a Communist flag. "Ryan, you already proposed to me."

"Yes, but I'm serious this time." She was the one Ryan wanted to share the rest of his life with. He could feel it, deep within his bones.

"I... let's settle on a two year betrothal, alright?" she said with a sheepish smile, as her face regained its original pale complexion. "I love you, Ryan, but I think we're skipping a few intermediary steps. We just moved in together, for God's sake."

Well, Ryan guessed it meant he had the time to prepare for the perfect honeymoon. "And if we stay together for over two years? Because we will, and you know it."

Her face beamed like the sun. "Then I will gladly become Mrs. Romano."

That was what Ryan had hoped to hear. He kissed his girlfriend on the cheek, making her blush. "Hypothetically, how do you feel about having kids?" he asked her. "After we marry, of course."

"I thought you were afraid a child would inherit your powers?"

"I was. But I talked to my Elixir, and it will make sure it won't happen. Though our offspring will probably be even more overpowered than your dad."

"Mmm..." Livia thought about the proposal. "I would love to have children one day, yes."

"And if they're half of me, you won't see them. Or maybe they'll blur your sight?"

"Whether I can predict their actions or not, I would love them all the same." Livia looked at the twilight sun. "Though I draw a blank about what we should call them. Maybe Iris, if we have a girl?"

Ryan suddenly felt a surge of divine inspiration course through his mind. "If it's a boy, how about we call him Eugèn —"

"We are not calling our hypothetical future son after your spoiled cat, Ryan Romano!" Livia exploded in laughter. "You're such a gallant fool."

"And you love me for it."

"I do," she replied softly, before closing her eyes and moving her face closer to his. "I love you, Ryan."

As their lips met in a tender, gentle kiss, Ryan froze time and counted to ten. He wanted to immortalize this moment in his own way.

The world turned violet, the shadow of an eldritch pyramid manifesting over New Rome. The purple reflection of a man

running towards the future flickered into sight, joining with Ryan to fuse past and present into a new history.

The last remnants of the Black Particles inside the Violet Genome vanished to make the save possible without destroying the space-time continuum. They escaped his body to ascend towards the heavens above... and as they did, visions filled the courier's mind. Wordless pictures as vivid as a lucid dream, fragments of time itself. They flashed one after another in quick succession, all of them showing people the courier had crossed paths with.

He marveled as Len oversaw the cleaning up of Rust Town's atmosphere. The Meta-Gang's cured members helped clean up the roads, all of them wearing vests with the words '*community service*' written on their back. Jerome looked happy with the mundane menial work, while Helen, Vladimir, and Bianca simply accepted it as temporary penance for old crimes. The likes of Mosquito, the Reptilian, and Rakshasa's gremlins raised new houses without enthusiasm, but had no say in the matter. Rust Town's orphans played with Henriette in a new, green park built over the Junkyard's crater.

He felt satisfaction, as the Olympians and their kind wasted away in an underwater prison far away from civilization. Venus raged in the cell she shared with her husband, while Mars looked through his oceanic window with remorseful acceptance. Pluto read a book with a scowl on her face, while Mortimer, Night Terror, Sparrow and Cancel played a board game in their shared prison. In his own cell, Hector Manada wrote letters asking his son to appeal the courts' decisions. None would be opened.

He watched Enrique Manada oversee a new team of superheroes, one dedicated to the public good. Wyvern

smiled at him while offering a military salute, while Wardrobe gave Jamie, Lanka, and Ki-Jung their new dazzling uniforms. Soldiers stood at their side, making a vow to serve the Republic and its people instead of the almighty Dollar. Vulcan overshadowed them all, wearing a new red power armor worthy of a hero of legends.

He gazed at Alphonse Manada floating aimlessly in the void of space, looking at the Earth with heavy regrets. Maybe one day he would return to it a changed man. He also caught a brief vision of Ghoul's space cell, and the screaming immortal prisoner within it.

He cheered as he saw Felix, Fortuna, and Shroud fight a vicious Genome warlord as a team... no, a family. Sunshine and the Carnival took care of the mooks, though none kicked more ass than the Panda among them. After they had won, Mr. Wave patted the manbear in the back before offering him a black and white cashmere suit.

He observed Alchemo tend to mentally ill patients in a Danish hospital, with the Doll dressed as a nurse. A blonde woman which Ryan recognized as Mathias' mother exchanged words with a sentient toaster, while a mad priest received medical treatment. One day he would find his sanity back... and perhaps the road to redemption too.

He cheered as Simon, Martine, and Monaco's survivors planted the French flag over the rusted ruins of the Eiffel Tower. Far away, a sphere of reinforced glass isolated a cursed city like a giant snow globe, preventing it from ensnaring anyone ever again.

He watched Narcinia plant a garden in a greenhouse, one that would one day feed millions of people across Europe. His vision expanded to reveal a new shining city over the

ruins of Sarajevo, its construction overseen by the Architect herself. Mighty humanoid dinosaur workers carried the building material.

He glanced at a strange rabbit running in a purple world, and a blob of darkness floating amidst the void. Both waiting for him beyond the veil of time, until the end of all things.

“THIS IS THE FUTURE YOU FOUGHT FOR.” The Ultimate One’s voice echoed across time and space, as it vanished from Ryan’s sight. “IT MAY COME TO PASS, OR IT MAY NOT. IT IS ALL UP TO YOU.”

Maybe the deity meant these visions to serve as a warning not to slack off, or as an encouragement to carry on. But whatever the case, Ryan loved what he saw.

His save complete, time resumed at once, yet the kiss continued. Livia's lips tasted of strawberry, of love and passion.

They tasted of home.

And like all good things in this world, the kiss ended way too soon. The couple exchanged one shy glance, and then watched the sun vanish behind the horizon.

Ryan Romano had completed his Perfect Run.

And he was happy at last.

THE END

THANKS FOR COMPLETING THE PERFECT RUN!

[GAME CREDITS]

Author, Game Designer, and Level Designer - Maxime J. Durand, aka Void Herald.

Beta Tester and Proofreader - Daniel Zogbi.

Cover Artist - Vitaly S. Alexius.

And my most sincere thanks to all of **my supporters on Patreon!**

START A NEW GAME?

Hi guys, if you have enjoyed the story, please consider purchasing or reviewing the Perfect Run on Amazon and Audible to help me keep posting free content. It really helps!

Perfect Run III Ebook



And,

Perfect Run II Audiobook



AFTERWORDS

And so it ends.

First of all, I would like to offer special thanks to my long-time editor and proofreader, Daniel Zogbi, whose invaluable feedback greatly helped in making *The Perfect Run* the novel it is today.

As far as I remember, I always had a peculiar relationship with time. One of my first story ideas involved a man with the ability to see the remaining ‘hours’ of people before their death. I always wondered what would have happened if I could relive my life, make different decisions, etc... I believe everyone has wondered the same at one point or another.

I also pondered how it would feel to relive one’s life again and again. What kind of person someone trapped in an eternal recurrence would grow into? Would they go mad, or achieve some kind of enlightenment and state of content acceptance, as Nietzsche believed? Is there a force greater than us that predetermines our actions, some cosmic order behind the randomness of existence?

I ended up writing *The Perfect Run* partly to examine these questions in an entertaining way... and because I’m a huge fan of time-loop stories, but couldn’t find one set in a superhero universe. I always found it weird, like, like superheroes are popular, time-loops too, so why did nobody combine them?

Anyway, so... what was planned, and what wasn’t? I always had the ending in mind. I knew *The Perfect Run* would always end up with Ryan dueling Augustus and having a chat with the Ultimate One about the nature of time. The Bloodstream case, the long-term romance with Livia, the nature of Elixirs and the Alchemist, Darkling, all of these were planned from the beginning.

Other things came organically, like the original Jasmine/Ryan romance or the entire Meta-Gang Run (probably the run I had the most fun writing). I had intended to give Lanka and Jamie a greater role, but in the end the Panda, Wardrobe and Felix seized more focus because of their chemistry with Ryan. I feel like the plot should always take a backseat to organic character interactions, because in the end, it's the people inside a story who make it feel real.

I know many of you wanted Jasmine back, but... well, her disappearance feels all the strongest because it cannot be undone. I wanted readers to understand how it felt to be in Ryan's shoes; to have the power to turn back time itself, and yet lose people you had grown close to due to circumstances outside your control. To be always one moment away from doing it *all over again*.

Some believed that the story would end with Ryan's final death, but *The Perfect Run* was never about an immortal man looking to end his eternal life. It was about a gamer achieving his perfect ending; an immortal finding meaning and happiness. It's no coincidence that Ryan becomes less maniacal as the story goes, and his loops last longer. He starts not caring about anything but his entertainment, numbing his emotional pain with adrenaline, and slowly rediscovers his humanity. By the end, he has found something worth fighting for, and he is no longer alone. He has found a family in Len, a new love in Livia, and friends in the people he met in New Rome.

Ryan has found something to live for.

That was always the point of the ending: that life is beautiful and worth fighting for. That people can lift each other up to reach a brighter future.

So is this the end of the Perfect Run universe? Well, probably not. I've actually been in love with the idea of a *Leaf & Seed* spinoff for a while (basically a Metroid/western fusion, with a badass female Genius wandering the ruins of post-Genome War America with her plucky unpowered sidekick), and I will certainly propose the concept in a future Patreon story poll. But that will wait until after either *Kairos* or my new story *Underland* are finished; and of course, it will only be a story choice among others. We'll see.

As for Ryan? Well, much like Vainqueur or Walter Tye, his story is done. He has reached the best ending he could, tied up all loose ends, and defeated his strongest enemy. If he reappears in a spinoff, it would be as a secondary character. I have finished the story I wanted to tell, and it's time to let Ryan Romano enjoy his rest.

Because he WILL marry Livia, they WILL start a family, and they WILL live happily ever after.

Otherwise, what's next on the story project? My new story ***Underland*** is now available on RR (<https://www.royalroad.com/fiction/47557/underland/chapter/769236/1-beneath-the-earth>), though it will be very different from my previous works; a shorter Lovecraftian Horror/Dark Fantasy tale with little to no comedy element. I'll be sure to post a link here once it's out, for those who are interested. I hope you'll enjoy this new tale.

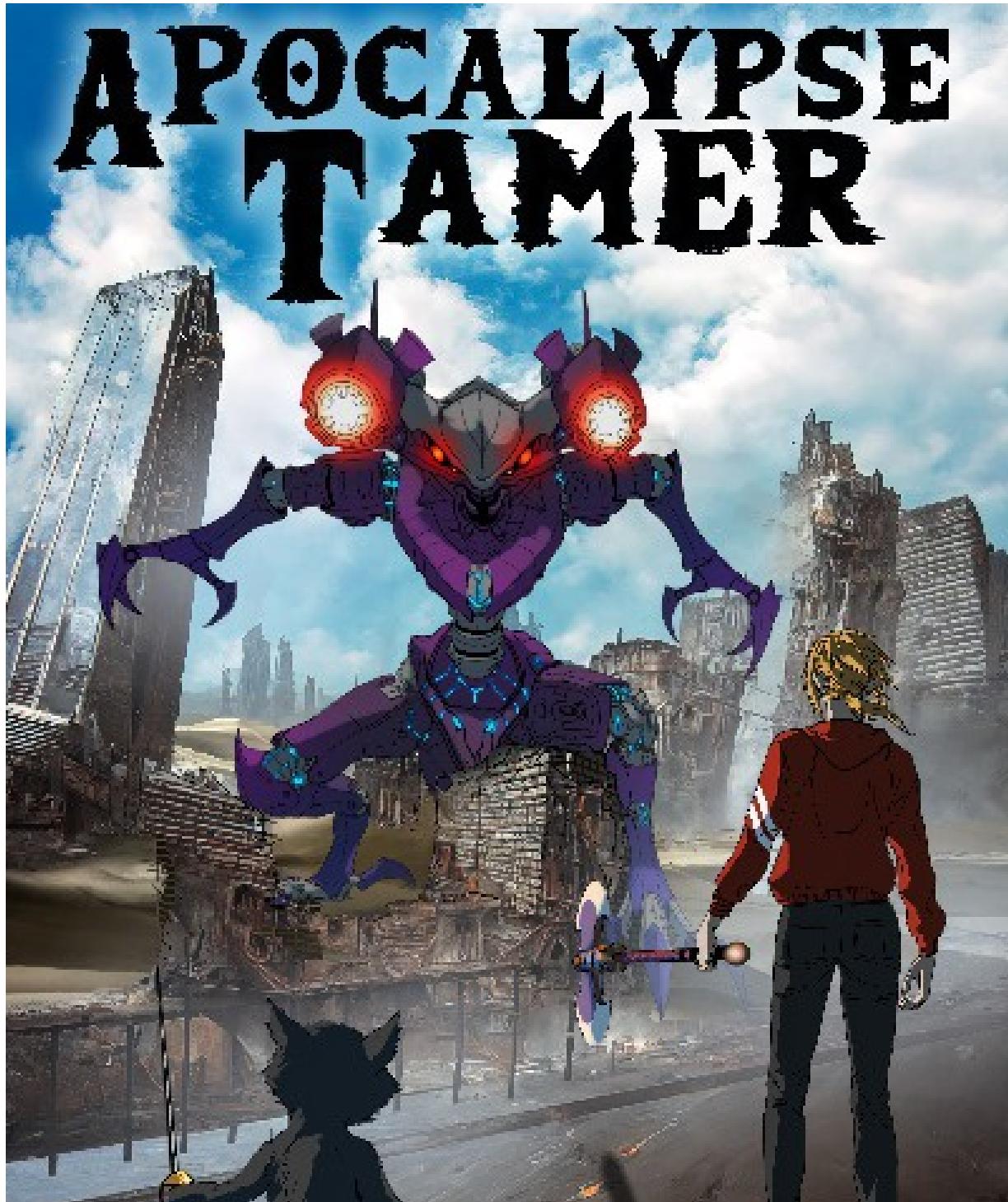
So... thanks everyone. Thanks for following *The Perfect Run* all the way to its conclusion. I hope it gave you great joy, many laughs, and helped open your mind. I wish you a great day, and I will see you again for *Underland*.

Best regards,

Your friend Voidy.

A note from Maxime J. Durand (Void Herald)

If you want to read more stories from me, you can check out my new novel, [Apocalypse Tamer!](#) A System Apocalypse full of adorable monsters, Kaijus, and epic storylines!





Link: <https://www.royalroad.com/fiction/55672/apocalypse-tamer/chapter/932077/chapter-1-man-vs-wild>

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