pic3637.png

Every few seconds, I had to call out to her — to keep her from  
slipping on a puddle or crashing into a wall. And she'd always look up  
at me with this bashful smile on her face.

pic364.png

<Rook>  
“Here ya go.”

pic3641.png

We walked to Sixth Street in relative silence and entered the  
bookstore. She looked about in wonder at all the books that were  
lining the shelves. I was afraid she'd get lost for hours inside this place,  
but she quickly chose a book for herself and came back.

pic3642.png

Thad the agree ring up the purchase, and I handed the book to my  
companion.  
  
Who hugged it to her chest with a look of such bliss that I almost felt  
guilty.  
  
= oor oe

pic3643.png

Thad the agnor ring up the purchase, and I handed the book to my  
companion.  
  
Who hugged it to her chest with a look of such bliss that I almost felt  
guilty.  
  
= oor oe

pic3644.png

She whispered with a smile.  
It was the same expression of warmth and relief that she put on  
whenever she saw Analye ...

pic3645.png

She whispered with a smile.  
It was the same expression of warmth and relief that she put on  
whenever she saw Analye ...

pic3647.png

So, I grabbed my companion's hand and ducked into a nearby store.  
She was taken completely by surprise, but she followed me in  
regardless.  
  
m4

pic3648.png

So, I grabbed my companion's hand and ducked into a nearby store.  
She was taken completely by surprise, but she followed me in  
regardless,  
  
4

pic3649.png

It was the same guy from before, but it didn't look like he'd noticed  
us. It was more that he was tracing the trail that my companion had  
taken to get to me in the first place.

pic365.png

He put gargantuan fish-and-yegetable burgers grilled to perfection  
before each of us. La's looked almost as big as her head, but she  
bravely grabbed it with two hands and started digging in nonetheless.

pic3650.png

I watched him systematically stop by every store along the way and  
talk to the shopkeeper.

pic3651.png

He was probably inquiring about my companion here.  
And he was coming this way — which meant he'd be at this store  
soon.

pic3652.png

I took a deep breath, took my companion's hand, and walked out of  
the place.  
  
I opened up my umbrella, held the girl close to me — and walked  
right past the black suit.  
  
= oor 7

pic3653.png

We walked im silence like that fora time. I turned to look, and saw  
that the black suit had disappeared. So, he hadn't discovered us —  
thank God for that.

pic3655.png

Just then, she started struggling a little — she was probably  
uncomfortable in my grasp.

pic3657.png

<Blackiris>  
“Oh, sorry about that.”

pic3658.png

<Blackiris>  
“Oh, sorry about that.”

pic3659.png

Tlet go; she Heil back and silently averted her eyes.  
She was blushing furiously, too — I hadn't intended to hold her so  
tightly but ... that was what ended up happening, obviously.

pic366.png

‘And she dug in with total gusto; the look of delight on her face was  
just fascinating. But she'd get mad if I stared at her for any longer, so I  
turned my attention to my own food.

pic3663.png

We were nearing my apartment complex when she suddenly burst  
  
out laughing.

pic3665.png

<Gil>  
“Wow. Scary. Couldn't breathe. Glad that's over.”

pic3666.png

She said with a sigh of relief.

pic3667.png

She said with a sigh of relief.

pic3668.png

<Blackiris>  
“That's understandable.”

pic3669.png

She asked, her eyes open wide.  
And I realized — this was the first time she'd ever called me by  
name.

pic367.png

Rook watched us eating for a bit, and, once he was satisfied that we  
were satisfied, began grinding some coffee beans.  
By hand. I'd never seen him do it any other way.

pic3670.png

<Blackiris>  
“Sure I do. There's not much I'm not scared of ...”

pic3671.png

She kept on laughing gently — obviously, she thought I was joking.

pic3674.png

She started reading the book the moment we got into my apartment.  
Well, to be more accurate, she made a good effort, but she was asleep  
within minutes.

pic3675.png

Probably tired out from all that walking.  
But man, did she sleep a lot.

pic3676.png

Analye came by that evening.  
He brought some pasta and vegetables ina bag with him. He  
obviously wanted me to make dinner for him.

pic3678.png

Wren -Troooroso

pic3679.png

He said as he came to the bedside and stroked the sleeping girl's  
cheek.  
  
I got out of my chair, took Analye's bag, and went into the kitchen.  
Analye got into my chair. And stayed put.

pic368.png

Soon, the aroma of fresh-ground coffee filled the air.  
Itwas so wonderful, in fact, that it made La look up from her burger.

pic3680.png

1d co washing the OPE Lies fora salad Siren Aelia started  
talking to me.  
  
> ae

pic3681.png

1d co washing the OPE Lies fora salad Siren Aelia started  
talking to me.  
  
> ae

pic3682.png

<Analye>  
“She's started talking. A lot. Hasn't she.”

pic3683.png

<Analye>  
  
“She's never uttered a word. Not in all the time I've known her.  
  
she wants to talk. To you. That's why.”  
  
But

pic3684.png

<Analye>  
  
“She's never uttered a word. Not in all the time I've known her.  
  
she wants to talk. To you. That's why.”  
  
But

pic3685.png

I turned to stare at him when he said this.  
His eyes met mine. Narrowed. Gleaming with vicious light. And  
awfully amused. Obviously, he'd been waiting for this.

pic3686.png

So, I turned back to the salad.

pic3687.png

So, I turned back to the salad.

pic3688.png

I plated the salad and pasta and carried everything to the table.  
As approached the bed in order to wake our sleeping beauty, Analye  
casually remarked,

pic3690.png

<Analye>  
“I wonder. If you like her. You can keep her. Ifyou promise. To  
treat her well.”

pic3692.png

<Blackiris>  
“... are you serious?”

pic3693.png

But his face was its usual harmless-old-man mask — impossible to  
tell whether he was joking or not.

pic3694.png

I glared daggers at him. Maybe I was starting to get mad — maybe I  
wasn't. I didn't really know. But I had to say something.

pic3695.png

I glared daggers at him. Maybe I was starting to get mad — maybe I  
wasn't. I didn't really know. But I had to say something.

pic3696.png

<Blackiris>  
“Unlike you, I don't keep people as pets. If you really want to treat her  
well...”

pic3697.png

<Analye>  
“[ don't. I don't love her...”

pic3698.png

Really? Then why are you rmning your fingers through her hair like  
that? And why that loving look in your eyes?

pic3699.png

i. ey mp oo

pic370.png

<la>  
“... coffee?”

pic3700.png

He repeated softly. Except to me he sounded as if he were trying to  
convince himself of it more than anyone else ...

pic3701.png

Thad no idea what was going on in that mind of his.

pic3702.png

Thad no idea what was going on in that mind of his.

pic3704.png

Neither the girl nor Analye came by my apartment anymore after  
that. And as for myself — I became so busy with my own work that I  
didn't really think much about them.

pic3705.png

But there came a point when I found myself between assignments —  
and I began to wonder about what had happened to the unlikely pair.  
I'd been planning on heading out of town anyhow, so I decided I'd drop  
by the church; maybe I'd find the girl there.

pic3706.png

I was, after all, starting to get pretty worried about how she was  
doing.

pic3707.png

I was, after all, starting to get pretty worried about how she was  
doing.

pic371.png

Waita second. The way she said that, it was as if this was the first  
time she'd ever even encountered the stuff. Okay, the trolley thing I  
could explain away, but this? Curiouser and curiouser.

pic3712.png

It was an unusually sunny day.  
  
Shards of stray light flickered and faded in the puddles that dotted  
the streets. The stained-glass windows of the church came into view,  
almost alive in the daystar's shining exultation.

pic3716.png

I opened the door and went inside.  
It was pleasantly cool within; the air was quiet and still.

pic3717.png

I remembered that the girl lived in the basement.  
Except it was too dark for me to really see much — which meant]  
had no idea where the stairs down were supposed to be.

pic3718.png

But then I realized — someone was here with me. Over there, where  
the benches were.

pic372.png

<Rook>  
“Nah, not coffee at all ...

pic3721.png

She looked toward me when she heard my footsteps...  
... and her eyes went round in surprise when she saw who I was.

pic3722.png

She looked toward me when she heard my footsteps...  
... and her eyes went round in surprise when she saw who I was.

pic3723.png

She said, her eyes glittering with excitement.  
Now, that wasn'taltogether unpleasant, but man, this was making me  
want to blush.

pic3724.png

She said, her eyes glittering with excitement.  
Now, that wasn'taltogether unpleasant, but man, this was making me  
want to blush.

pic3725.png

<Blackiris>  
“Pretty much. Iwas wondering what had happened to you, as I haven't  
seen you around fora while ...”

pic3726.png

The girl's face went blank for a moment.  
But then she managed a small — and troubled — smile.

pic3727.png

<Gil>  
“Gota little busy. Couldn't leave this place.”

pic3728.png

There was something awfully suspicious about what she'd just said,  
but for now I was relieved — she was alive and well.

pic3729.png

There was something awfully suspicious about what she'd just said,  
but for now I was relieved — she was alive and well.

pic373.png

<la>  
“Ts that different from coffee?”

pic3730.png

<Blackiris>  
“Oh, thank goodness, Iwas worried — thought something might have  
happened. Anyway, I'll Jeave you be.”

pic3731.png

<Blackiris>.  
“Yeah, I've gota bunch of things to do today, so ...”

pic3732.png

And I felt sorry for her, but I did have to go; if I didn't get this stuff  
done, it never would be.

pic3733.png

She looked up at me, down at the ground, and up at me again. Then,  
diffidently, she asked,

pic3734.png

She looked up at me, down at the ground, and up at me again. Then,  
diffidently, she asked,

pic3735.png

<Girl>  
“May I? Come with?”

pic3736.png

<Gil>  
“Yeah ...”

pic3737.png

She replied sadly.  
This was the first time she'd ever asked anything of me — so  
naturally I was taken by surprise.

pic3738.png

<Blackiris>  
“But you can't go out, canyou? You don't have a Mnemonicide  
Protocol permit, so they wouldn't let you back in ...”

pic3739.png

<Gil>  
  
“There's a tunnel. Underground. Pops used it. When he used to slip  
out of town. Used the same route. To come see me. No problem if  
we take that.”

pic3740.png

There was a strange expression in her eyes now — I'd never seen it  
before. Then I realized what it was: she was desperate.

pic3742.png

<Gil>  
“Please ... [really don't want to be here. Nothing but bad memories.”

pic3744.png

I finally gave in.

pic3745.png

<Blackiris>  
“Okay — then you go ahead and use the tunel. Wait for me on the  
other end, I'll meet yon there.”

pic3746.png

<Girl>  
“Okay ... sorry about this.”

pic3747.png

<Blackiris>  
“Don't worry aboutit. Besides, I'd feel better if you came with me  
anyhow.”

pic3748.png

I replied with a smile.

pic375.png

<Rook>  
“Totally! The way the beans're roasted, how they're pressed, how  
  
much caffeine there is, how it tastes — all different.

pic3751.png

I took the trolley to First Street, walked to the gate, and showed my  
ID and my leave authorization to the guard on duty.  
  
He looked through all my documentation, nodded, and motioned for  
the gate to be opened.

pic3752.png

Not even a Mnemonicide could come and go as he pleased. Not in  
this city.  
  
I'd gotten my leave authorized over at HQ just yesterday, for  
instance.

pic3753.png

Not even a Mnemonicide could come and go as he pleased. Not in  
this city.  
  
I'd gotten my leave authorized over at HQ just yesterday, for  
instance.

pic3757.png

Iwalked out of a small side gate. The walls of the city stood behind  
me.  
  
There was nothing for miles around. No matter where you looked, it  
was all grassy hills and forests — not a single soul to be seen.

pic3758.png

Ithad beena long time since I'd last left the city.  
Maybe abouta year ago? Maybe longer?

pic3759.png

Well, first things first: time to go get my young companion.  
She'd shown me where the entrance to the tunnel was on my map, so  
it was simple enough to find.

pic376.png

Rook pulled the lever on his espresso machine as he grumbled.  
Then, after a calculated pause, he pulled the lever again. No grumbles  
this time around.

pic3760.png

And sure enough — there she was, poking her head out from a small  
hole in the ground. She came out entirely when she saw me, and ran  
up the hill to where I was.

pic3763.png

<Blackiris>  
“We're going to be walking to the closest town from here — will you  
  
be okay?”

pic3764.png

She replied with a nod — and a deep breath of fresh autumn air.

pic3765.png

She replied with a nod — and a deep breath of fresh autumn air.

pic3766.png

My companion seemed to be fascinated by every plant — every tree,  
every bush, every flower — she encountered. She went running every  
single time something new appeared on the horizon.  
  
She was going to be fastasleep when we got home, for sure.

pic3767.png

We arrived in town in due course, and I flagged down taxi.  
When I gave the driver my destination, he said,

pic3768.png

<Driver>  
“Oh, yes, that'sa lovely part of town, isn't it?”

pic3769.png

He wasn't wrong, by the way.  
That was my opinion of it too.

pic377.png

Two demitasses, each filled with this wonderful-smelling dark liquid,  
materialized before us soon thereafter.

pic3772.png

Shortly thereafter, the taxi dropped us off at our destination.  
I headed towarda house at the end of the street, with the girl close  
behind me.

pic3773.png

The house had a small garden; the lawn was green and well-kept, and  
the flowerbed was beautiful.

pic3774.png

But the most beautiful thing of all was standing there with a hose,  
watering her garden.

pic3775.png

I stopped the instant I saw her.  
My companion looked up at me quizzically.

pic3776.png

A gentle breeze swept through the area — and it carried with it the  
fragments of Maria's song. This brought back so many memories

pic3777.png

For instance, the last time I'd heard her sing this song, she'd told me  
about her dreams — to live ina little house, raising lots of flowers.  
That was all she would say.

pic3778.png

Such a little dream, yes. But not one that could ever come true in the  
city where we were born.

pic3779.png

pic378.png

Two demitasses, each filled with this wonderful-smelling dark liquid,  
materialized before us soon thereafter.

pic3780.png

to ett

pic3781.png

My companion murmured.

pic3783.png

Treplied with a smile, and tumed away.  
At the same time, I heard someone from inside the house calling  
Maria's name. To which she replied with a bright and cheerful voice.

pic3785.png

But she stayed there, looking back at Maria and her garden, fora  
long time.

pic3788.png

We got off the taxi and started heading back toward our city.  
  
Except my companion had changed quite a bit — instead of rmmming  
around and exploring her surroundings, now she was refusing to leave  
my side.

pic3789.png

I could still hear Maria's song ringing in my ears.  
Itwas such a bright and happy voice — one I'd never heard when we  
were together.

pic379.png

Impecaable timing, as usual, since we'd both just finished our  
burgers. La picked up her demitasse gingerly, as if it were the most  
delicate thing in the world, and breathed in the rising vapors.

pic3790.png

I hadn't seen her in a year; did people really change that fast? I guess  
they did. >

pic3791.png

I mean... five years ago, I'd left the city where I'd been born, in order  
to become a Mnemonicide at all costs.  
  
I'd wanted to make Maria's dream — house and flowers and all —  
come true.

pic3792.png

That was the only reason I'd ever had. The only one I'd ever needed.

pic3793.png

And so, I lost touch with her for two years — couldn't be avoided.  
Only those with Mnemonicidal potential were allowed within the  
confines of the Academy, and no one was allowed out until  
graduation — or wash-out.

pic3794.png

The Academy was an incredibly peaceful place. I never would have  
believed it.  
  
It was filled with friendly classmates, and professors who showed  
much interest in you asa person.

pic3795.png

But I had no use for any of that. I turned it all away.  
It was unfair of me to accept the kindness of others while Maria was  
left behind to struggle in the dark.

pic3796.png

Besides — more importantly — I had no idea what to do with the  
goodwill of others. It was scary thing.  
So scary that I probably ended up hurting a lot of people.

pic3797.png

I didn't hear that Maria had undergone the Mnemonicide Protocol  
until it was too late. I just lived out my days asa student within these  
cloistered walls, without a care in the world.

pic3798.png

“She never stopped crying, ever since the day you left. You had to be  
removed from her memory — otherwise she herself would have died.”

pic3799.png

That was all Dexter would say to me when I asked him why he'd  
done it. >

pic38.png

<la>  
“None. Don't care for some things.”

pic3800.png

That was all Dexter would say to me when I asked him why he'd  
done it.

pic3804.png

I turned, only to see that my companion was now walking a little  
behind me.  
  
There were tears running down her cheeks and dripping to the  
ground.

pic3805.png

<Gil>  
“... don't mind me. I'll be fine. It's not me. See.  
  
over this.”

pic3806.png

These were the exact same words that Analye was fond of using,  
Except there was one difference: unlike Analye, this girl didn't stop  
aying.

pic3807.png

But I was jealous of her.  
Because she was doing exactly what I found myself unable to do  
  
when I lost Maria. Instead, I'd just sat down ina back alley and  
  
watched the rain come down on me. Completely useless.

pic3809.png

<Gil>  
“You're the one who's really hurting ... so its unfair. That I'm the one  
  
who's crying, Right?”

pic381.png

<a>  
“Smells good.”

pic3810.png

She tried to smile, and desperately dabbed at her eyes. But that  
didn't stop the tears. In fact, it just made her look more forlorn than  
she already was.

pic3811.png

pic3812.png

<Blackiris>  
“Maybe ... see, it's true: it hurts when you break up, or you're blamed,  
or you're hated.”

pic3813.png

<Blackiris>  
“But ... none of that hurts as much ... as being forgotten.”

pic3814.png

I finished with a smile.  
How strange. I'd never thought I'd ever be able to talk about Maria  
with a smile on my face.

pic3815.png

Because every single time I thought about her, things got difficult —  
so difficult that I completely forgot how to smile.

pic3816.png

a  
rT) Foo ooo

pic3818.png

So, I took my companion's hand; she was crying so hard that she  
couldn't see ahead of her. Let her cry enough for both of us. I began  
to lead her through the hills, back to our city.

pic3819.png

Yes, let her cry enough for both of us. The past was the past. It was  
never going to come back.

pic382.png

<a>  
“Smells good.”

pic3820.png

Yes, let her cry enough for both of us. The past was the past. It was  
never going to come back.

pic3824.png

My companion didn't seem to want to stay in the church once we got  
back, so I brought her back to my place. It was dark out; the clouds  
hung threateningly low overhead.

pic3829.png

<Blackiris>  
“Hmm?”  
  
> ae

pic383.png

Now, Rook was always this way with the ladies, but today he seemed  
to be even more effervescent than usual. Then again, La wasn't  
brushing him off the way that most women did, so maybe that was it...

pic3831.png

<Blackiris>  
“... I don't know either.”

pic3834.png

She replied with obvious disappointment.  
Well, not that I didn't know how she felt.

pic3835.png

<Gil>  
“I want to sing it too. But I've forgotten the words.”

pic3836.png

She said with a wry smile.

pic3837.png

<Blackiris>  
“I'm sorry — I've forgotten as well ...

pic3841.png

<Blackiris>  
“Huh? Well, see ... it's pretty, clean, and — it works well with singing.”

pic3843.png

She blinked slowly.  
And then — softly — she started humming the melody as she  
remembered it.

pic3844.png

Her voice was so softand gentle that the drumming of the rain  
threatened to drown it out — and yet I heard every last strain.

pic3845.png

Her voice lost its uncertainty after a while — it grew stronger and  
warmer as listened. I could feel it embracing me, sinking into my  
every pore, filling me up inside.

pic3846.png

And as long as I was like this ... I felt as if I could forget all the pain  
and the sorrow that I'd carried with me:

pic3847.png

And as long as I was like this ... I felt as if I could forget all the pain  
and the sorrow that I'd carried with me:

pic3848.png

And as long as I was like this ... I felt as if I could forget all the pain  
and the sorrow that I'd carried with me:

pic3849.png

And as longas I was like this... I felt as if could forget all the pain  
and the sorrow that I'd carried with me:

pic385.png

<Rook>  
“Oh, right. Blackiris. Got an assignment, and not from Dexter.  
Consultation requisition for a high-level Mnemonicide. Lucky you —  
  
you've been tapped.”

pic3851.png

The dark city where Iwas born. The factories where people toiled  
and died. The dead-end streets and unmarked graves. Maria ...

pic3852.png

Everything was vanishing from within me.

pic3853.png

2 >  
“vanishing?

pic3854.png

vanishing?

pic3858.png

I bolted up from my chair.  
She stopped singing that instant and looked up at me with surprise.

pic3859.png

My worst fears had come true. She had no idea what had just  
happened. So, she just stared back at me innocently. And that filled  
me with burning pain.

pic386.png

<Rook>  
“Oh, right. Blackiris. Got an assignment, and not from Dexter.  
Consultation requisition for a high-level Mnemonicide. Lucky you —  
  
you've been tapped.”

pic3860.png

<Blackiris>  
“I'm going out, I'll be right back.”

pic3863.png

I said as I ran out the door.  
I was too impatient to even take my umbrella;  
the rain. >  
  
just sprinted out into

pic3864.png

I took the trolley to First Steet — to HQ, but Analye was nowhere to  
be found.  
So I came back to Fifth, and ran to the church.

pic3865.png

I took the trolley to First Steet — to HQ, but Analye was nowhere to  
be found.  
So I came back to Fifth, and ran to the church.

pic3869.png

I was totally soaked by the time I saw the stained-glass windows in  
the distance.  
  
a.

pic387.png

<Blackiris>  
“Tapped ...? Wait. I'm currently with Guest. It's not safe or legal to  
  
double up like that.”

pic3870.png

Iran up the hill and burst into the church.  
  
Sure enough — there Analye was, standing at the podium. It took  
him a long time, it seemed, to realize that I was there. Finally, he  
turned to me and said,

pic3871.png

ee oe m1 oT) moon

pic3873.png

Analye said with his usual dry composure.  
But I had no time or patience for his platitudes.

pic3874.png

<Blackiris>  
“Just what is she? Answer me!”  
  
rion

pic3875.png

<Blackiris>  
“Just what is she? Answer me!”  
  
rion

pic3876.png

His face oft as he fell Ae  
I continued to glare at him. I wasn't playing any of his games today.

pic3877.png

<Blackiris>  
“She tried to erase my memory, just now. I don't think it was  
intentional. At least not on her part. So, tell me — just what are you  
scheming?”

pic3878.png

<Analye>  
“... oho. Pray tell. What did she do?”  
  
rion

pic3879.png

<Blackiris>  
“She sanga song, that's what.”  
  
rion

pic388.png

<Blackiris>  
“Probably justa communications breakdown. Anyway, relay my  
  
regrets for me, will you?”

pic3880.png

<Blackiris>  
“She sanga song, that's what.”  
  
rion

pic3881.png

Analye nodded. He seemed so satisfied.  
But I wasn't about to let him get away with it. So, I asked,  
  
ono an

pic3882.png

Analye nodded. He seemed so satisfied.  
But I wasn't about to let him get away with it. So, I asked,  
  
ono an

pic3883.png

... just like you.

pic3884.png

pic3885.png

He stopped smiling that: instant. Fora while, he did agar  
But in the end, he nodded curtly.  
  
y Soot

pic3886.png

<Analye>  
“Correct. That's why. I'm raising her.”  
  
rion

pic3887.png

<Blackiris>  
“To what end...?! What the hell isan Omega, anyway?!”  
  
so oe

pic3888.png

<Blackiris>  
“To what end...?! What the hell isan Omega, anyway?!”  
  
so oe

pic3889.png

<Analye>  
  
“Impressive. Most impressive. It only took you, what, three years.  
  
ask that question. I've been waiting.”  
  
To

pic3890.png

<Blackiris>

pic3891.png

I continued to glare at him. But Analye just brushed it off. His smile  
twisted a bit — obviously, he was enjoying himself.  
  
y Soot

pic3894.png

<Analye>  
“You've seen it with your own eyes. Haven't you. You've been past the  
Gate. I know you have.”

pic3895.png

.. Tight.

pic3896.png

I'd slipped past the gate on Eighth Street — the so-called Gate of  
Farewell.  
  
Every cured patient left this city through that gate — or ina body  
bag.

pic3897.png

And honestly, I hadn't had much interest in Omegas until I'd first met  
Analye, three years before.

pic3898.png

I'd known from the beginning that he was a genius, and not above  
using underhanded methods to get what he wanted.  
  
T'dalso known from the beginning that he was using me, but I didn't  
know why — so obviously, I'd been investigating on my own.

pic3899.png

So, one night, I'd waited for the changing of the guard at midnight,  
and used that opportunity to slip out of the gate. I knew that if I was  
found out, I'd be expelled from town — but I didn't care.

pic39.png

<Blackiris>  
“... um, so in other words, there are some things you don't like to eat?”

pic390.png

Rook froze, then shot me this half-sheepish, half-evil look.  
He and had been colleagues for long enough that I knew what this  
meant: he'd screwed me over.

pic3900.png

T looked around — and I realize  
had a child in it.

pic3901.png

How long was this corridor, anyhow? How many children were  
imprisoned here? I stopped looking into the rooms altogether after a  
while — I knew exactly what I'd see.

pic3903.png

It was enough to give me the worst headache of my life.  
AIlI knew was —I couldn't stay here. Which was why I running for dear  
life back into town once it was safe.

pic3904.png

<Blackiris>  
“all those children. They're all Omegas, aren't they.”

pic3905.png

<Analye>  
“Correct. Iwas one of their number. Long ago.”

pic3906.png

He said witha nod.

pic3907.png

<Analye>  
“They were all crying. Weren't they. But it wasn't because they were  
sad, themselves. It was because you were there with them.”

pic3908.png

<Blackiris>  
“... [have no idea what you're talking about.”

pic3909.png

<Analye>  
“Those children have no selves. They are empty — echoes. They take  
on the emotions of people near them. Whether they want to or not.”

pic391.png

<Rook>  
“Ahaha, no choice, man. I, uh, had to agree. Let's just say ... this new  
client is well-connected.”

pic3910.png

<Analye>  
“Because they each have a hole. A hole as big as their souls. And it  
needs filling.”

pic3911.png

<Analye>  
“Because they each have a hole. A hole as bigas their souls. And it  
needs filling.”

pic3913.png

I thought of all those children. All those tears. And I cursed.  
But Analye just smiled back.

pic3914.png

<Analye>  
“Don't feel sorry for them. They don't feel thing. No pain. No  
  
sorrow.”

pic3915.png

Oh, really? Then what about yourself? You're an Omega, just like  
them ...

pic3916.png

... and so is that girl...

pic3917.png

and so is that girl

pic392.png

While Rook himself was a competent enough Mnemonicide, his true  
talent in that arena was as a Fence; he rana black-market brokerage  
that matched Mnemonicides with prospective Guests outside of official  
channels.

pic3921.png

i. ay m1 oT) moon

pic3922.png

<Analye>  
“The worst thing? When you realize: you are you. I came to that  
realization one day. I wondered what I was doing here.”  
  
sy Soot

pic3923.png

<Analye>  
“The worst thing? When you realize: you are you. I came to that  
realization one day. I wondered what I was doing here.”  
  
sy Soot

pic3924.png

<Analye>  
“... you saw. All children. No one else. Because none of them grow  
up. They all vanish. Overwhelmed by the Psyche Corrosion. Of  
others.”  
  
y Soot

pic3925.png

<Analye>  
“T didn't want that. I escaped from my room. I wanted to live. I didn't  
want to vanish.  
  
a.

pic3926.png

He said with a wry smile.  
  
moon

pic3927.png

pic3928.png

<Analye>  
“But they didn't make me go back. They had no idea what to do.  
With an Omega who had volition. I was the first. Thus, my nickname.”  
  
Soot

pic3929.png

<Analye>  
“So they Jetme out. Made me a researcher and professor. Of  
Mnemonicidology.”  
  
a.

pic393.png

It was all strictly hush-hush. None of us had said a thing about it to  
Dexter, and he hadn'tasked. Our clients were diverse, but they all had  
one thing in common: they were rich and powerful.

pic3930.png

i oe m1 oT) moon

pic3931.png

He sighed deeply. He looked like he'd gained a few uit just  
telling me this story. Now his hands were gripping the podium — in  
order to support his weight.  
  
y aN ehenee tn

pic3932.png

rion

pic3933.png

<Analye>  
“But the Psyche Corrosion inside me never vanished. Not even  
afterwards.”  
  
a.

pic3934.png

<Analye>  
“I'd have been fine. If they were really mine. But these were all  
someone else's. People I'd never seen before. What was I supposed to  
do with that?”  
  
y aN mt

pic3935.png

pic3936.png

<Analye>  
“That's why I started looking ... fora pure Omega that nobody had  
found yet.”  
  
so oe

pic3937.png

<Analye>  
“That's why I started looking ... fora pure Omega that nobody had  
found yet.”  
  
so oe

pic3938.png

<Analye>  
“She's young. Too young. Can't take my Psyche Corrosion. Yet. But  
that's fine.”  
  
ono an

pic3939.png

<Blackiris>  
“So. You plan to foist your freaking Psyche Corrosion onto her  
shoulders.”  
  
so oe

pic394.png

Thad no idea where Rook found the time to own and operate this  
fine and, uh, unprofitable restaurant, given everything else he did. I  
suppose that made him something ofa workaholic.

pic3940.png

<Blackiris>  
“So. You plan to foist your freaking Psyche Corrosion onto her  
shoulders.”  
  
so oe

pic3942.png

pic3943.png

<Analye>  
“[told you. Didn'tI. That I hada use for her.”  
  
so oe

pic3944.png

<Analye>  
“[told you. Didn'tI. That I hada use for her.”  
  
so oe

pic3947.png

Analye was smiling.  
I watched him for a while — and then my hand naturally went to my  
pocket.  
Out came the gun that Analye had given me three years ago.

pic3948.png

I pointed it at him.  
And he nodded at me — gently.

pic3949.png

I pointed it at him.  
And he nodded at me — gently.

pic3953.png

<Analye>  
“AsI said. That's fine. She'll cry. And ay. And know no end of tears.  
IfI give my memories to her.”

pic3954.png

<Blackiris>  
“T won't let you.”

pic3955.png

<Analye>  
“I have no intention of stopping. You know.”

pic3956.png

<Blackiris>  
“.. then why did you give me this gun?”

pic3957.png

Fora moment, Analye couldn't find the words to say.  
But it didn't take long for him to recover.

pic3958.png

<Analye>  
“Blackiris. You fool. I made a little wager. Would you take away my  
pain first? Or would she?”

pic3959.png

<Analye>  
“Don't you see. I don't care which one itis. All the same to me. And  
equally painful for you.”

pic396.png

<Rook>  
“This case'll be a cinch, I tell ya! You'll be done in 24 hours, I  
  
guarantee it!

pic3960.png

I bit my lips and steadied the gun.

pic3961.png

<Analye>  
“You're the first. The first person I ever asked anything of ... no.  
There is another. But he didn't think like me. Too bad.”

pic3962.png

Probably the uncooperative student that he'd once told me about.

pic3963.png

<Analye>  
“He told me that he had a philosophical objection. To a healthy  
person just lying down and dying. He hated The Dolor. Heart and  
soul. And so. He could never kill me.”

pic3964.png

<Analye>  
“Butyou? You know how to handle that. I hope.”

pic3965.png

Analye sneered.  
  
All trace of any smile had now disappeared from his face — now all  
that was left was a grim and austere determination. It was almost  
majestic.

pic3966.png

<Analye>  
“So. Blackiris?”

pic3967.png

That moment, I realized ... there was no way I'd be able to talk him  
out of this. So, I said ...

pic3968.png

<Blackiris>  
“tell her ... just once ... that you love her.”

pic3969.png

<Analye>  
“You can do that. You should do that.”

pic397.png

Tt was a rare pleasure to see him groveling and begging like this.  
Except it wasn't that rare, and it was no pleasure at all this time  
around.

pic3971.png

laverted my eyes. I felt like I could face anything. Except for this.  
But Analye didn't move a muscle. He just stood there — looking  
straight through the gun and into my heart.

pic3972.png

It was startlingly clear, his stare. So clear that it burned.

pic3975.png

I made ready to pull the trigger.  
Yeah, it would be so easy — just one pull and ... and I found I didn't  
have the strength or the heart to do that.

pic3976.png

The gun felt so heavy in my hands. It was the weight of the world. I  
couldn't hold onto it. I let it all fall to the ground. The gun skidded for  
a long time. It sailed right past Analye ... and disappeared into a crack  
in the floor.

pic3977.png

<Blackiris>  
“T will not kill you!” >

pic3978.png

But it wasn't as if that girl was going to turn Analye down.

pic3979.png

No, she'd keep taking his pain away, even if she was burdened with  
all the Psyche Corrosion in the world.

pic398.png

T didn't care about this being a technical violation of the law, so long  
as the pay was good. And it was, but right now La was my Guest.  
She had priority. That was something I couldn't violate.

pic3980.png

Thad no idea what to do anymore.  
And that was just as well. Because there was nothing I could do  
anymore.

pic3981.png

I stumbled out of the church. Step by step. I could feel the Alpha of  
Omega's eyes on me the entire time. They seemed so sad ...

pic3982.png

I stumbled out of the church. Step by step. I could feel the Alpha of  
Omega's eyes on me the entire time. They seemed so sad ...

pic3985.png

It was raining harder than ever now.  
  
I just kept walking through town; I felt numb to everything around  
me. I thought maybe some brilliant idea would occur to me if I just  
did this. Talk about stupid.

pic3986.png

Because no matter how much I brainstormed, my conclusion was  
always the same: there was nothing I could do. I couldn't help Analye.  
And I couldn't help the girl.

pic3987.png

I wandered about aimlessly for a long time. But eventually I was out  
of ideas — and out of energy. I stumbled back to my apartment.

pic3988.png

It took more effort than I'd ever imagined to climb those steps, and  
then to unlock the door.

pic399.png

So, I was going to have to say no.  
But then, as if she could read my mind, La casually said,

pic3991.png

The girl was nowhere to be found.  
But I was in no condition to be thinking about that right now. I  
collapsed onto my bed.

pic3992.png

Water ran off my hair and entered my eyes.  
So I brushed it off gloomily.

pic3995.png

I fell asleep ina matter of minutes.

pic3996.png

I fell asleep ina matter of minutes.

pic3998.png

... I slept forever. >

pic3999.png

When I awoke, I hada high fever. Maybe because of the rain.  
Maybe because I was tired of thinking. I couldn't even stand.

pic4.png

And sure enough — there were still tears flowing from her eyes, but  
her facial expression was otherwise totally neutral.

pic40.png

<la>

pic400.png

<a>  
“Don't mind. Your call.”

pic4000.png

There were so many things I had to do — but for the life of me I  
couldn't move my body. This was hopeless.

pic4001.png

It took me three days. On the evening of the third day, I got up out  
of bed and stumbled outside. I had to get over to that church. Before  
it was too late.

pic4002.png

Thad to get to that girl before Analye made her take on his pain.  
And I knew — im the back of my head — that this wouldn't solve  
anything ... but I had no other course of action.

pic4003.png

Three days. That's nota long time. But it was enough time for fall to  
turn into winter. It was so cold. I felt frozen solid by the time I  
opened the door to the church.

pic4004.png

Three days. That's nota long time. But it was enough time for fall to  
turn into winter. It was so cold. I felt frozen solid by the time I  
opened the door to the church.

pic4008.png

The girl was curled up on the floor, her head in her hands.  
And Analye was lying on a bench near her.

pic4009.png

The same gentle smile that had always graced his face was gracing it  
now. Except his eyes did not open. And his body did not move.

pic4010.png

I couldn't believe it. I moved in closer — I needed to know.  
The girl raised her head from the floor at my approach. Her hair  
spilled over her shoulders. It was white.

pic4011.png

<Girl>  
“... Pops. He was always sick. He refused hospitalization. Because he  
knew. He couldn't see me. He hid it. I found him. Collapsed here.”

pic4012.png

Tears continued to stream down her face. But she didn't bother to  
wipe them — instead, she gently touched Analye's face with her hands.  
It was such a gentle act — as if she were saying goodbye to each and  
every one wrinkle on his face.

pic4013.png

<Girl>  
“Pops ... Pops...”

pic4014.png

But Analye never woke up.  
And the girl shed tears — so many tears that Analye's face was  
drenched by the time it was all over.

pic4015.png

Her tears. Her white hair. Her shuddering body. Itall filled me with  
such pain.  
So in her own way — she'd taken his pain away from him at long last.

pic4017.png

ote

pic4018.png

But at this rate — she was going to cry. Cry forever, until she, too,  
disappeared. The realization chilled me to my bones.

pic4019.png

I wasn't about to let that happen. NotifI could help it.  
  
-nnqtomon»n

pic4020.png

So, I started walking toward her. I didn't even realize I was doing it.  
I was going to try to seal her Psyche Corrosion away.

pic4021.png

... already knew — this was impossible. But I had no other course  
of action: I had to try it.

pic4022.png

She looked at me then — with such determination and rage that I  
took a step back.  
And she cried out:

pic4023.png

<Gil>  
  
“Get away from me!”  
  
nad

pic4024.png

She tore hersélf away from my gaze and started shaking her head  
violently.

pic4025.png

<Gil>  
  
“Let me go! Popsasked me. To stop. He wanted me to just stay with  
him. Just hold his hand. Until the end.”

pic4026.png

I looked back at Analye's peacefal face.  
And I knew that there was no way he could have died like this  
unless...

pic4027.png

<Gil>  
  
“But I didn't want him to leave me. Not with all that pain. Not with all  
those memories. Sol...”

pic4028.png

She backed away and glared at me.

pic4029.png

<Gil>  
  
“These aré my memories.”

pic403.png

Her speech was as curt and to-the-point as usual, but there was  
something awfully ill at ease about the way she said it. What, did she  
dislike being pampered the way the rules dictated Guests must be?

pic4030.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“.. No. No they're not.”

pic4031.png

<Gil>  
  
“But! These are all I have left! Of him! Don'tyou dare!”

pic4032.png

She covered her face with her hands and cowered.

pic4033.png

<Gil>  
  
“Don't you dare take him away from me!”

pic4034.png

With one final scream that depleted all the energy in her slender  
frame, she started crying again.  
  
I don't know why. Not even to this day —I don't understand it. I  
couldn't take another step.

pic4035.png

With one final scream that depleted all the energy in her slender  
frame, she started crying again.  
  
I don't know why. Not even to this day —I don't understand it. I  
couldn't take another step.

pic4037.png

I stumbled out of the church.  
I slumped against the wall, and sank down to the ground.

pic4038.png

Psyche Corrosion. So hard, so sad, so heavy for a soul to bear.  
  
Just thinking about her now filled me with so much pain that I found  
it hard to breathe. So, this was why Maria had chosen to forget ...  
forget it all.

pic4039.png

Psyche Corrosion. So hard, so sad, so heavy for a soul to bear.  
  
Just thinking about her now filled me with so much pain that I found  
it hard to breathe. So, this was why Maria had chosen to forget ...  
forget it all.

pic404.png

Tf that was so, she really was an odd one.  
Most Guests who came here were so starved for attention at first that  
they grew addicted to our care.

pic4042.png

oon

pic4043.png

oon

pic4044.png

I looked up. It was raining. And snowing. Winter had truly come.  
The city would be enveloped in white soon enough.

pic4045.png

Was it really true, what they said? Did it really get any easier if you  
just forgot?  
Somehow I had my doubts now ...

pic4046.png

I felt weak — the fever had come back. And itwas snowing so hard  
now. But I could still: make out a black suit.  
I needed to stand.

pic4047.png

So, Dexter knew where she was. He'd sent his agents to get her. But  
not if J could help it.

pic4048.png

So, Dexter knew where she was. He'd sent his agents to get her. But  
not if J could help it.

pic405.png

Wait, ifLa really aid dislike being waited on hand and foot, was that  
why she was assigned to a Mnemonicide who wasn't particularly good  
to his Guests?  
  
That brought up all sorts of possibilities that I didn't want to think  
about.

pic4050.png

So, I stood as quickly as I could. But everything was blurry. All my  
strength left me. And I slumped down to the ground.

pic4051.png

Then I knew no more.  
And the world — everything that I knew and loved in it — went  
completely dark.

pic4052.png

I never stopped thinking about the girl. Not even at the last.

pic4053.png

I never stopped thinking about the girl. Not even at the last.

pic4066.png

La's song was warm and sweet.  
I could feel it embracing me, sinking into my every pore, filling me  
up ... just like it had the first time, in my apartment.

pic4067.png

But I couldn't give into it ... not just yet.

pic4068.png

But I couldn't give into it ... not just yet.

pic407.png

<Blackiris>  
“All right, fine. But you owe me one.

pic4072.png

Tused my elbows to raise myself up off the ground.  
A splitting headache strong enough to shatter my head to pieces  
assaulted me the moment] tried to fight off the drowsiness.

pic4073.png

<la>  
“Don't push yourself... please ... I beg you ...”

pic4074.png

She said with an unsteady voice.  
I saw the worry written all over her face, and I managed a smile.

pic4075.png

<Blackiris>  
“I guess. You're right ... this isa little much ...”

pic4076.png

She pursed her lips and whispered that she was sorry.  
Maybe it was the haze — maybe it was the headache — but that  
moment, it looked like she was in even more pain than I was.

pic4077.png

<la>  
“You're resisting. No wonder it hurts. So please. Sleep ...”

pic4078.png

<Blackiris>  
“... okay. Close your eyes; then I'll do as you say.”

pic4079.png

Ianswered witha smile. La looked at me fora second. Then she  
nodded.  
  
There was something more than a little weird about that. She had  
the upper hand by a long shot here. Why was she obeying?

pic408.png

<Blackiris>  
“All right, fine. But you owe me one. Oh, don't bother calling me at  
my apartment — I'm not there. I'm amrently at the house on top of  
the hill at Eighth Street, so send your client there.”

pic4082.png

Tran my fingers down her cheeks. Then I drew near — and kissed  
her.  
  
Her eyes fluttered open in surprise for a second, but she did not resist  
me.

pic4083.png

I could see flecks of blood — my blood — on her cheeks now. I  
wiped those away gently. Once that was done, I said,

pic4084.png

<Blackiris>  
“Tove you, La.

pic4085.png

She blinked. Once. Twice. Obviously she was shocked. But I had no  
idea whether she'd heard me. So, I said it one more time, loudly.

pic4086.png

<Blackiris>  
“love you.”

pic4087.png

Just three little words. That was all. But they were the hardest three  
words I'd ever said. I couldn't do anything more. That was okay,  
though — because she'd heard me this time. She was starting to blush  
furiously.

pic4088.png

<la>

pic4089.png

I could tell she was trying to say something — but that she couldn't  
put it into words.  
So I just smiled. And waited. I was prepared to wait forever.

pic4090.png

My head hurt as badly as ever, but that didn't matter anymore. I'd  
finally said what I'd set out to say.

pic4091.png

<la>  
“Blackiris, you're ...!”

pic4092.png

<Blackiris>  
“Hmm?”

pic4093.png

<la>  
“... so cruel.”

pic4094.png

She burst into tears.  
I just ran my fingers through her hair — gently — and waited. I  
could feel the headache leaving me already.

pic4097.png

When she finally looked back up at me, her face was completely wet  
and her eyes were red.

pic4098.png

<Blackiris>  
“La. Why did you try to erase my memory?”

pic4099.png

In response, she stared down at the ground. Obviously, she was  
  
trying to figure out what to say.  
Her tears fell and splattered on the floor as I watched.

pic41.png

Great. Man, I wasn't getting anywhere today, was I?

pic410.png

<Blackiris>  
“Nice and peaceful, actually. So much so that I've half'a mind to move  
there permanently.”

pic4100.png

<la>  
“Because. You were in such pain. I thought. Because of me. Because  
of Pops. Because ...”

pic4101.png

<Blackiris>  
“... because Dexter told you so?”

pic4102.png

She started to nod — but then she shook her head frantically.

pic4103.png

<la>  
“He said that. But no. You're wrong. I chose to do it. Myself.”

pic4104.png

<Blackiris>  
“... and why would you do that? So, you thought so little of me that  
you didn't care that I'd forget you?”

pic4105.png

I said halfjokingly. But I saw the hurt in her eyes when she glared  
back at me.  
Now she was crying harder than ever.

pic4106.png

<la>  
“That's not true ... and you know it

pic4107.png

... well, fair enough. That was a bit much.  
She'd been cautioning me about that all month now.

pic4108.png

<la>  
“But what I said to you. It was horrible. You've been so hurt. You've  
been through so much. But I hurt you more ...”

pic4109.png

<la>  
“So I thought. You'd be happy to forget me. I thought. It's my duty to  
cure you.”

pic411.png

<Blackiris>  
“Nice and peaceful, actually. So much so that I've half'a mind to move  
there permanently.”

pic4110.png

<Blackiris>  
“Horrible? You said something horrible? Wait, what was that ...?”

pic4111.png

<la>  
“I told you to get away from me...”

pic4112.png

I smiled despite myself.  
I'd been shocked to hear that coming from her lips, all right.  
However ...

pic4113.png

<Blackiris>  
“Oh, La, you're wrong. I was hurt by the choice you made then. But  
that's something I could easily recover from ...”

pic4114.png

Because she'd chosen — not to forget Analye. Maria had made the  
opposite choice.

pic4115.png

<Blackiris>  
“... because to be honest, it made me happy. I'd never met anyone  
who'd decided to do it the hard way ...”

pic4116.png

... which was why my choice — when it came — had been simple: no  
way in hell I was going to forget her.

pic4117.png

<Blackiris>  
“And besides — I'd never agree to have my memory erased.”

pic4118.png

She opened her eyes wide when I said this. Clearly, she couldn't  
believe me.

pic4119.png

<Blackiris>  
“I don't know what happened between the two of you, but I never  
asked Dexter for this.”

pic412.png

<Rook>  
“... oh, get off it, man. You're not old enough to retire yet. Anyway,  
  
thanks a bunch for this. I'll have the client at your location by the day  
  
after tomorrow.”

pic4120.png

The black suits had caught us at the church.  
  
After that, we were probably brought before Dexter, and had our  
memories of the experience erased — so La could work as an Omega,  
and I could continue my work as an Alpha.

pic4121.png

And then we both arrived at that house on Eighth — doomed to  
repeat the same mistakes our forgetful minds had committed over and  
over.

pic4122.png

<Blackiris>  
“I never asked to forget you. I never want to forget you. That's the  
honest-to-goodness truth.”

pic4123.png

<Blackiris>  
“...and I'd really appreciate it if you stopped trying to erase my  
memory now, thank you.”

pic4124.png

I said witha smile. But La — she slid forward against me, putting her  
arms around me as she wailed,

pic4125.png

<la>  
“Tl stop ...!"

pic4126.png

<la>  
“Tl stop ...!"

pic4128.png

I just held her in my arms. She kept crying. I was starting to get  
sleepy again ... except this was just because I was so relieved. When I  
awoke, my memories would still be there. And so would La.

pic4129.png

Besides — I'd never known that it would feel so good to hold her in  
my arms.

pic413.png

<Rook>  
“... oh, get off it, man. You're not old enough to retire yet. Anyway,  
  
thanks a bunch for this. I'll have the client at your location by the day  
  
after tomorrow.”

pic4130.png

There wasa soft, vulnerable smile on her face when we let go of each  
other.

pic4131.png

I heard her say good night to me. But drowsiness overtook me fast,  
and I was asleep before I could say anything to her. >

pic4132.png

I heard her say good night to me. But drowsiness overtook me fast,  
and I was asleep before I could say anything to her.

pic4136.png

When I woke up, the first thing I saw was La snuggled up right next  
to me, using my arm as her pillow.

pic4137.png

The next thing I saw was that she'd puta pillow under my head and  
draped a blanket over me. That was really nice of her.

pic4138.png

Lalso saw that she'd bandaged up my injured hand.

pic4139.png

I reached out and ran my fingers through her soft hair. She wriggled  
a little, and her eyes fluttered open.

pic414.png

<Blackiris>  
“Roger that.”

pic4140.png

<Blackiris>  
“Sorry, did I wake you up?”

pic4141.png

She shook her head no.  
When she realized exactly where she was, she blushed deeply — and  
scrambled out of the blanket.

pic4142.png

It felt kind of cold now that she'd done that.  
Now I was regretting ever having woken her.

pic4143.png

I still felt kind of sluggish, so I just lay back fora while. But only for  
a while — I had things to do.

pic4145.png

The loose-leaf paper from La's binder were still scattered everywhere  
in the living room. I reached out for one of them ... only to find that  
La was scampering about picking them all up.

pic4146.png

The loose-leaf paper from La's binder were still scattered everywhere  
im the living room. I reached out for one of them ... only to find that  
La was scampering about picking them all up.

pic4148.png

<la>  
“.. yeah. Butstill. It's embarrassing.”

pic4149.png

<Blackiris>  
“And what are they about?”

pic4151.png

<la>  
“Experimental notes. The erasure of a Mnemonicide's memory.”

pic4152.png

<la>  
“Experimental notes. The erasure of a Mnemonicide's memory.”

pic4153.png

‘And that was understandable. No matter how deeply you searched  
through the literature, you'd never find so much as a case report of  
this. It wasa highly theoretical matter, not even thought possible by  
most.  
  
So I was a guinea pig. That didn't make me feel so good.  
  
=

pic4154.png

<la>  
“Dexter wouldn't allow me. To erase your memory. But he did let me  
stay with you. Fora month. For this.”

pic4155.png

She finished putting her papers back in her binder. When she tuned  
back to me, there was embarrassment — and a little bit of shame — in  
her smile.

pic4157.png

<la>  
“Um. Uh. Good morning...”

pic4158.png

<la>  
“Um. Uh. Good morning...”

pic4159.png

I could tell from her bashful reaction that yesterday hadn't been  
some kind of weird dream after all. And, why, when I thought back on  
it ... I felt just as bashful.

pic416.png

The three of us killed some time together after that. La and I would  
have stayed longer, but it became obvious that the clouds were  
preparing to burst with snow. So, we left in hurry.

pic4160.png

Except La probably had no idea that I felt justas embarrassed as she  
did. It happened when you had a poker face like mine, I guess.

pic4162.png

<Blackiris>  
“Well, let's have some breakfast, and leave this place. Wouldn't want  
Dexter's goons to find us here.”

pic4163.png

I was a little worried that someone might be waiting for us outside.  
But if that were the case, they could have dragged us off yesterday  
night — and nothing had happened.

pic4164.png

<Blackiris>  
“We're leaving this town, La.”

pic4165.png

La nodded firmly in response.

pic4168.png

We packed our bags and left the house.

pic4169.png

T looked back — so much had happened here.  
It felt more like home than my apartment on Fifth, asa matter of  
fact.

pic417.png

Luckily, we found our way back to our place on Eighth Street before  
the first flakes began pouring from the sky.

pic4170.png

La kept looking back at the house — even when we got to the grove  
of trees — over and over again. She couldn't let go. And I completely  
understood.

pic4173.png

We walked on down to Sixth Street.  
It was still early — most of the shops were closed.

pic4174.png

Buta few were open. Like AROMA, for instance.

pic4177.png

<Rook>  
“Luggage? Dude, ya planning on goin’ somewhere?”

pic4179.png

His mouth fell open so much that I was worried that he'd dislocate  
his joints. Now this was funny — Rook being rendered speechless. So  
instead, after giving Jackal a pat on the head Lips asked,

pic418.png

Luckily, we found our way back to our place on Eighth Street before  
the first flakes began pouring from the sky.

pic4181.png

<Lips>  
“With La?”

pic4182.png

She sounded just as Peril as Rook looked.

pic4183.png

<Blackiris>  
“That's right.”

pic4184.png

<Blackiris>  
“That's right.”

pic4186.png

<Rook>  
“Reeeeeally? So, ya finally made yer move, didja, your big playboy you!  
I'm proud’ve ya, man!”

pic4187.png

I wanted to tell him no, that was totally wrong, but that would have  
caused more trouble than it was worth.  
Besides. Ina way ... he wasn't wrong at all.

pic4188.png

I wanted to tell him no, that was totally wrong, but that would have  
caused more trouble than it was worth.  
Besides. Ina way ... he wasn't wrong at all.

pic4189.png

<Rook>  
“Feh, I never thought you'd beat me to the punch.”

pic4190.png

She said with a voice fuller of happiness than I'd ever heard it  
before. Jackal looked up atall of us, his tail wagging furiously.

pic4192.png

<Lips>  
“Please drop by, okay?”  
  
o —o

pic4193.png

Lips Re EeEeMET ec Ta was, and gave her a big hug. Jackal  
leaped up, trying to lick La on the face. La just laughed — it was such  
a dear, warm sound.

pic4194.png

<la>  
“Oh, of course ... thank you, Lips. And you, Jackal.”

pic4195.png

<la>  
“Oh, of course ... thank you, Lips. And you, Jackal.”

pic4196.png

Laand Lips both burst into laughter when they saw the mock-forlom.  
look on Rook's face.

pic4197.png

Laand Lips both burst into laughter when they saw the mock-forlom.  
look on Rook's face.

pic4198.png

<Blackiris>  
“Very carefully.”  
  
o —

pic4199.png

<Rook>  
“And Dexter?”

pic4200.png

<Blackiris>  
“Don't tell him anything, will you?”

pic4201.png

<Blackiris>  
“Don't tell him anything, will you?”

pic4202.png

We nodded at each other. Ths was it, hed  
Rook extended a hand to me.

pic4203.png

Wr RATIO ooo ooo)

pic4204.png

<Rook>  
“See you around, man.”  
  
o —o

pic4205.png

T took his hand and shook it firmly.

pic4206.png

<Blackiris>  
“We'll meet again. I know it.”

pic4207.png

And then La and I left AROMA forever.

pic4210.png

From there we walked to Fifth Street.  
Td originally settled here on Fifth because I'd liked the dark,  
crisscrossing back alleys, and the relative quiet.

pic4211.png

But the sun was shining so hard today that there wasn'ta single  
shadow to be found anywhere.

pic4214.png

We reached the old church and walked inside.

pic4215.png

Analye had taken his last breath here — surrounded by rust and  
decay and ruin in a world where nothing, not even this church, was  
sacred anymore. And yet he died in peace — because La had been  
watching over him.

pic4216.png

<la>  
“This way.”

pic4217.png

La led me down into the basement. And from there, we'd take the  
tunnel out.  
Once we emerged, we'd be home free.

pic4218.png

But before we could go any further, we heard a door opening behind  
us.

pic4219.png

We turned — and sure enough, it was Dexter.  
He had an empty smile on his face. Anda gun in his hand.

pic422.png

Another day passed.  
One thing had become painfully apparent by now: La was oblivious  
to the ways of the world.

pic4220.png

<Dexter>  
“Just as I expected. You know, you guys and Professor Analye —  
you're all too easy to figure out. Boring, really.”

pic4221.png

<Blackiris>

pic4224.png

I made sure La was behind me. And then I took stock of the  
situation.  
I needed to put some serious distance between us and that gun.

pic4225.png

<Dexter>  
“I'd like you to hand over that little lady there, please.”

pic4226.png

<Blackiris>  
“That's nota command I can obey. Sorry.”

pic4227.png

La'd been gripping my arm tightly — but just now, her grip loosened  
up.  
  
I could see her biting her lips. Clearly, she wanted to say something,  
but...

pic4228.png

<Blackiris>  
“La, nota word. I'll get mad if you say anything weird now, okay?”

pic4229.png

I wasn't leaving without her. No matter what she tried to say.  
But La gulped — and nodded.

pic423.png

It was tempting to chalk it up to her being a stuck-up spoiled little  
princess, but, uh, she wasn't stuck-up, she wasn't spoiled, and she  
didn't put on airs like a princess.

pic4230.png

Dexter took one step — and then another — toward us.  
‘And we matched his steps — except backwards. Soon, though, we  
were pressed up against the podium. Dead end.

pic4231.png

<Dexter>  
“Whata shame. I'd hoped I wouldn't have to kill you.”

pic4233.png

Iglared at him furiously. But he just smiled, and said,

pic4234.png

<Dexter>  
“That was for your sake, my good man. Come — are you that dense?  
The world is full of sad things. You can't possibly take them all in and  
expect to survive.”

pic4235.png

His finger tightened on the trigger.  
I grabbed La and dove for the floor.

pic4236.png

The gun went off.  
I could hear the bullet hitting the wall right above me.  
Thit the ground — cold stone scraped against my cheek.

pic4237.png

Then I thrust my hand in the crack between the podium and the  
floor.  
  
I felt something cold and metallic. I knew what this was. I grabbed  
it.

pic4238.png

And before he could do anything more, I pointed the gun at Dexter.

pic4239.png

<Blackiris>  
“But you know — there are some things that you're better off  
remembering.”

pic424.png

Generally, the Guide is supposed to take care of all the housework.  
La, however, was actively helping out in any way she could. She  
couldn't keep her hands to herself if she tried. And she wasn't trying  
anyhow.

pic4240.png

Like this gun that Analye had given me so long ago, for instance.

pic4241.png

Like this gun that Analye had given me so long ago, for instance.

pic4245.png

<Dexter>

pic4246.png

Dexter slowly lowered his gun.  
But I kept mine pointed at him.

pic4247.png

<Dexter>  
“... so. Aren't you going to shoot? You could probably kill me in an  
instant, you know.”

pic4248.png

Dexter smiled wryly. I smiled right back.

pic4249.png

<Blackiris>  
“Perhaps. But if I did that, the person you gave the music box to would  
ay, wouldn't she now?”

pic425.png

The weird thing was — it wasn't because she felt sorry about making  
me do all the work. The way her eyes glistened, the way she skipped  
and hopped about, it was obvious that she was having the time of her  
life.

pic4250.png

Dexter blinked. He wasn't expecting this, obviously. But then he  
nodded quietly.

pic4251.png

<Dexter>  
“Yes. She would.”

pic4252.png

I lowered my gun, and turned to La.  
She was looking up at me with great concern. I just smiled at her —  
and urged her into the tunnel.

pic4253.png

Dexter holstered his gun, turned around, and started walking out of  
the church. I bowed deeply.

pic4254.png

Dexter holstered his gun, turned around, and started walking out of  
the church. I bowed deeply.

pic4256.png

<Blackiris>  
“Thank you for everything.” >

pic4257.png

I didn't think he heard me, at first.  
But then — before he disappeared out the door and into the light —  
he raised one hand in valediction. He did not look back.

pic4258.png

I didn't think he heard me, at first.  
But then — before he disappeared out the door and into the light —  
he raised one hand in valediction. He did not look back.

pic426.png

There were some ways in which this came asa relief.  
  
Thad not, for instance, been looking forward to the prospect of doing  
a girl's laundry. So obviously, I was more than happy to let La take  
care of it.

pic4262.png

The sun was so brilliant when we came out of the tunnel that I had to  
shield my eyes.  
La took my arm and gently guided me into our new world.

pic4264.png

My back hurt from having to craw through that small tunnel.  
I sighed, and took a deep breath of free air. It was fresh and clean.

pic4265.png

My back hurt from having to crawl through that small tunnel.  
I sighed, and took a deep breath of free air. It was fresh and clean.

pic4266.png

Tasked as surveyed the rolling hills and forests all around us.  
La thought about this fora moment. She didn't have to think long,  
though:

pic4268.png

<la>  
“I want to see! The mountains and the ocean!”

pic4269.png

<la>  
“I want to see! The mountains and the ocean!”

pic4270.png

WIFI ooo

pic4271.png

Treplied with a smile. But obviously, La wasn'tas amused.  
Her glare vanished in a matter of seconds, though — she'd gotten just  
as used to getting teased by me as I'd gotten used to teasing her.

pic4272.png

r sodas on

pic4273.png

<Blackiris>  
“Anyway, it doesn't matter. For now, let's go -.

pic4274.png

mr 3} —— room, ——

pic4275.png

We walked for a long time. When we got to the top of an especially  
large hill, we turned around. Our city — the City — shone radiantly in  
the brilliant morning light.

pic4276.png

A large city. A clean city. A city where people came to be healed. A  
city where memories came to die.

pic4277.png

I tuned to La — only to find that she was also looking down on the  
City.  
  
Tears were running down her cheeks and being carried away by the  
gentle breeze.

pic4278.png

ron —

pic4280.png

She dried her tears.  
And she smiled — just for me.

pic4282.png

oon

pic4283.png

<la>  
“It's because I'm happy, Blackiris.”

pic4284.png

<la>  
“It's because I'm happy, Blackiris.”

pic429.png

When I told her which buttons to press, her eyes lit up, and off she  
went.  
Trial. Error, Trial again. Success. Such were the patterns of that

pic43.png

<la>  
“You're not very nice.”

pic433.png

Now it was around time for this other Guest to arrive.  
  
ah

pic434.png

I hadn't been able to take La out anywhere yesterday, just in case  
Rook might need to get ahold of me. I'd probably be stuck here today,  
too.

pic435.png

After all, if really only had one day with this Guest, finding and  
obliterating his Psyche Corrosion was going to be priority number one.

pic436.png

Now, I'd expected that La would be bored out of her mind, but she  
never had a word of displeasure for me. In fact, she seemed to be  
enjoying herself, judging from the spring in her step and the twinkle in  
her eye.

pic437.png

Every so often, though, she would come to me with loneliness and  
loss written all oyer her face, and she would stay by my side in silence  
for hours.

pic438.png

If it were not for these times, it would have been almost impossible  
to believe that she was afflicted with The Dolor at all.

pic439.png

I immediately abandoned my dishwashing and rushed to answer, but  
by the time I rounded the corner to the foyer, he'd already started  
knocking again.

pic44.png

<Blackiris>  
“I get thata lot. So, what don't you eat?”

pic443.png

When I opened the door, I was surprised to be greeted by a face that  
was much lower to the ground than I had expected.

pic444.png

<Boy>  
“Uh, um ... I, uh, was referred.  
Blackiris, the Mnemonicide ..  
  
I have an appointment with Dr.  
  
is he here?”

pic445.png

<Blackiris>  
“He happens to be me.”

pic446.png

<Boy>  
“Wha-? Oh, I'm sorry, sir. It's just that you're a lot younger than 1  
thought you'd be.”

pic447.png

A lot younger, eh?  
That was my line. Rook, man, you're killing me here. You didn't tell  
me you were starting a babysitting service.

pic448.png

I mean, he was younger than La, even. A lot younger.  
  
When Rook had told me that this client was well-connected, I'd  
assumed that he was talking about a governmental official or a captain  
of industry, not this.

pic449.png

<Boy>  
“Um, my name is Marcello. Nice to meet you, sir.”  
  
rr:

pic45.png

<la>  
“\_.. carrots.”

pic450.png

<Blackiris>  
“The pleasure is mine. Please come on in, then, Marcello.”

pic451.png

<Marcello>  
“Um, you may call me Mar, if you please.”  
  
rr:

pic452.png

“Ifyou please”, huh?  
Well-dressed, and with a haughty manner of speech, to boot. So, I  
was definitely dealing with a rich kid, then. Great.

pic456.png

When Mar stepped into the living room, La almost dropped the plate  
she'd been washing and stared. Not surprising — she'd probably been  
expecting someone a lot older. And taller.

pic457.png

‘After an uncomfortable moment, she whipped back to her dishes,  
squeezing her sponge so hard that suds frothed out onto the sink.  
Her surprise, however, was dwarfed by that of our new arrival.

pic46.png

<la>  
“... carrots.”

pic460.png

He suddenly — and inexplicably — bowed his head in apology. Now  
Thad no clue what was going on anymore.

pic461.png

And, seeing as he was flushing beet red, I didn't want to know what  
was going on inside his head right now, either.  
So I sighed and hastened to explain the situation, but...  
  
on eo

pic462.png

And, seeing as he was flushing beet red, I didn't want to know what  
was going on inside his head right now, either.  
So I sighed and hastened to explain the situation, but...  
  
on eo

pic463.png

<Mar>  
“Uh, oh, I, uh, I'm so sorry! I had no idea your, uh, lady friend was  
  
here! Uh, uh, give me a moment, I'll leave right away!”

pic465.png

... Mar didn't even let me finish my sentence. At the very moment  
that he finished his sentence, though, La's fingers chose to go  
completely nerveless. The unfortunate thing was that she kind of had  
a plate in them at the time.  
  
a.

pic466.png

‘There was a crash, and much tinkling. White porcelain shards spread  
all over the kitchen floor. And now we had not just one, but hwo young  
people blushing so furiously that they might as well have been on the  
  
surface of the sun. I just wanted to bury my head in my hands and be  
done with the day.  
  
eo

pic467.png

<Blackiris>  
“La happens to be my Guest. Just like you.”

pic468.png

<Blackiris>  
“La happens to be my Guest. Just like you.”

pic469.png

<Blackiris>  
“Well, hopefully you have one now.”

pic47.png

That was pretty cute, actually. In its own way.  
A half-smile rose unbidden to my lips, but then La glared at me, and  
that was that.

pic470.png

Mar sank loud onto a chair, as if his last words had saat all the  
strength out of him.

pic471.png

<Blackiris>  
“Oh, La, be careful not to get cut, there. Want some help?”

pic473.png

<la>  
“N-no. Thanks. I'll be fine.”

pic474.png

That didn't make me worry any less about her. But now that she'd  
said she'd be fine, there wasn't much I could do.

pic475.png

So instead, I turned to Mar and began anew.

pic477.png

<Blackiris>  
“Asyou already know, I am Blackiris, a Mnemonicide. I will be your  
  
Guide fora short time. Should you wish to call me by any other name,  
  
go ahead and do so; I won't mind.”  
  
a.

pic479.png

<Mar>  
“Thank you, sir. Glad to be in capable hands.”

pic48.png

That was pretty cute, actually. In its own way.  
A half-smile rose unbidden to my lips, but then La glared at me, and  
that was that.

pic480.png

<Blackiris>  
“We'll see about that. Now, won'tyou tell me a little about your  
Psyche Corrosion? How did it start, do you remember?”

pic481.png

<Blackiris>  
“We'll see about that. Now, won'tyou tell me a little about your  
Psyche Corrosion? How did it start, do you remember?”

pic482.png

But La was a severe case, necessitating a long internment here. In  
her case, my only course of action was to chip away at her Psyche  
Corrosion slowly, over weeks and months. I had no choice — how  
could I, when my Guest was clearly numb to the depths of her own  
sorrow?

pic483.png

In comparison, Mar's Dolor was only mild. Guests in his situation  
usually knew exactly where their Psyche Corrosion was coming from,  
and could point me toward the source with relative ease.

pic484.png

Then I could move in with surgical precision and cut the memories  
out deanly. Quick and simple.

pic485.png

Mar shot me a confused look, and then spoke hesitantly:

pic486.png

<Mar>  
“Psyche Corrosion? No, um ... actually, uh, I just want you to erase  
every last memory I have.”

pic487.png

<Blackiris>

pic488.png

He was joking, right? If he was, that was pretty fumny.  
But the way he was looking at me, it was quite obyious that this was  
no joke at all.

pic489.png

I felt, rather than saw, La poking her head out of the kitchen.  
  
Obviously, she'd overheard everything. Obviously, she was quite  
intrigued by this turn of events. It wasn't entirely obvious whether or  
  
not she'd finished cleaning up the broken porcelain.

pic490.png

I felt, rather than saw, La poking her head out of the kitchen.  
  
Obviously, she'd overheard everything. Obviously, she was quite  
intrigued by this turn of events. It wasn't entirely obvious whether or  
  
not she'd finished cleaning up the broken porcelain.

pic491.png

<Mar>  
“Fifteen, if you please.”

pic492.png

<Mar>  
“Fifteen, if you please.”

pic493.png

<Bladdnis>  
“My apologies, then. I'm afraid that's...”

pic494.png

... he was really fixated on this Alpha thing, wasn't he?  
Or was he just trying to provoke me, trying to provoke me into  
action by slandering my abilities asia Mnemonicide?

pic495.png

If he was, he was making a big mistake. I had no such pride in my  
profession ... but then again...

pic497.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“I do not recall ever having used the word, ‘impossible’.

pic498.png

Tanswered honestly.  
But this did not seem to make Mar particularly happy; I could hear  
him muttering “so you can do it” with an almost dispirited air.

pic499.png

Teena Teele fora long time indeed before I “a saying  
more.

pic5.png

Not sad, but definitely not happy either.

pic50.png

<la>  
“No. Need anything?”

pic500.png

<Blackinis>  
“Yes, I can. But some preparations are necessary. I think I'll be ready  
by nightfall. Can you wait that long?”

pic501.png

<Mar>  
“Uh... oh, of course. I will wait...”

pic502.png

<Blacdinis>  
“All right. Then feel free to do whatever you like until then.  
anything you need, just holler —I will be around.”  
  
If there's

pic503.png

<Mar>

pic504.png

T left Mar where he was and headed i into the kitchen.

pic509.png

La looked a little concerned.

pic51.png

<Blackiris>  
“Thank you, but I've got things under control. Just have a seat, relax.  
T'll have dinner ready soon.”

pic510.png

<la>  
“Total erasure? Impossible. Right?”

pic511.png

<la>  
“Total erasure? Impossible. Right?”

pic512.png

<Blackiris>  
“Who knows? I've never tried it before, but I think it can be done.  
Probably.”

pic513.png

<Blackiris>  
“We Mnemonicides do have some  
What, are you afraid?”  
  
... interesting capabilities, you know.

pic514.png

La looked down at the floor fora moment. When she snapped her  
head up again, there was something akin to anger in her eyes.

pic516.png

<la>  
“No way!”

pic517.png

She turned heel and stormed out of the kitchen.  
  
... me, me. So, I'd made her mad, huh?

pic52.png

I couldn't very well have my Guest cook, after all.  
La shot me a disappointed look, but then shrugged and walked out of  
the kitchen.

pic522.png

Fora long time after that, the three of us quietly waited for the  
passage of time.

pic523.png

I sat ona stool im the kitchen, and watched La and Mar. La was  
reading a book. Mar was sitting a little apart from La, and patiently  
waiting for nightfall.

pic524.png

But this odd arrangement didn't go on a long — soon enough, Mar  
turned to La and hesitantly broke the silence.

pic525.png

But this odd arrangement didn't go on a long — soon enough, Mar  
turned to La and hesitantly broke the silence.

pic526.png

<la>  
“.... Psyche's Gatekeeper. By Analye.”

pic527.png

<Mar>  
“... pardon me?"

pic528.png

I couldn't help but suppress a smile at this. For sucha haughty  
individual, Mar certainly had no idea what he was — or wasn't —  
talking about.

pic529.png

Then again, itwas surprising that La would even know of, let alone  
read, this particular book.

pic530.png

<la>  
“Psyche's Gatekeeper. A book. Written by Analye.”

pic531.png

<Mar>  
“Oh, ub, right. Of course. Um, pray tell, what kind of book is ...

pic532.png

La just t smiled at this.

pic533.png

La just t smiled at this.

pic534.png

And Mar blushed furiously in response. Not that I could really blame  
him — La was really cute when she smiled.

pic536.png

<Mar>  
“O-of course! Please, by all means!”

pic537.png

What an irony, I thought. A markedly blunted affect is reported in  
virtually every case of The Dolor, and yet my two Guests here don't  
seem to have that problem. Atall.

pic538.png

<la>  
“A treatise on Mnemonicide: the protocol for the systematic erasure of  
memories. The writer isa Mnemonicide himself.”

pic539.png

<la>  
“A treatise on Mnemonicide: the protocol for the systematic erasure of  
memories. The writer isa Mnemonicide himself.”

pic541.png

<la>  
“Really. Dr. Analye, Class Omega Mnemonicide. Or so it seems.”

pic543.png

<Mar>  
“C-class Omega? Wait, uh, I thought they were an urban legend, a  
fairy tale, you know, uh....”

pic544.png

<Mar>  
“C-class Omega? Wait, uh, I thought they were an urban legend, a  
fairy tale, you know, uh....”

pic545.png

Actually, the proportion was even lower than that. There were  
perhaps ten known Class Omegas in the entire world at present.

pic546.png

From Class Epsilon up to 0 Class Alpha, there was a smooth, linear  
progression of ability. But Class Omegas? They were a different kind  
of beast altogether.  
  
To put it another way: without them, a true cure for The Dolor would  
be impossible.  
  
ry

pic547.png

Even an Alpha like me could not permanently erase the memories of  
my Guests; I could only make them go away fora time. Sometimes  
that was a long time. But never forever.

pic548.png

I just held those memories at gunpoint, for as long asI was able. But  
a Class Omega could — and would — pull the trigger.

pic549.png

All Guests left this town with holes in their heads. Whether this was  
accomplished through the tender mercy of self-slaughter or the cruel  
anointing of a Class Omega's touch — was it notall the same?

pic551.png

<la>  
“Happy memories. Sad memories.  
  
Gatekeeper’.  
  
. All guarded by ‘Psyche's

pic552.png

<la>  
  
“A steadfast warden. Won't let you in. Even if you want to forget.  
Especially if you want to forget. Mnemonicides are thieves. They trick  
Psyche's Gatekeeper. ‘Emulation’. That's what they’ call it”

pic553.png

And once the gate is open, a Mnemonicide could walk right in and  
take whatever he wanted. Come to think of it, that did sound an awful  
lot like a thief, didn't it?

pic554.png

Fortunately, I didn't have to think much about such philosophical  
implications. I was just here to do my job.

pic555.png

<la>  
“Child Mnemonicides have no power. They grow stronger with age.  
More complex. Stronger gates demand greater power.”

pic556.png

<la>  
“Why? Simple. Takes a crazy son ofa gun to Emulate the  
complexities ofa well-fortified gate.”

pic557.png

<la>  
“Why? Simple. Takes a crazy son ofa gun to Emulate the  
complexities ofa well-fortified gate.”

pic558.png

<la>  
“The more powerful the Mnemonicide, the more bizarre he tends to  
be. An Alpha like Blackiris here will almost always be a royal pain in  
the neck ...

pic559.png

As annoying as it was, it was all true. Even] knew whata hopeless  
eccentric I was.

pic560.png

As annoying as it was, it was all true. Even] knew whata hopeless  
eccentric I was.

pic561.png

<la>  
“Flattering, but no. Had to reread it. A Jot. Still don't get most of it.”

pic562.png

Actually, her summary was more or less correct, and in fact she'd  
been able to explain it all in her own words.  
  
She knew what she was talking about, obviously. She'd read into it  
quite deeply. Mar was more correct than he knew — La was damn.  
intelligent, all right.

pic563.png

Actually, her summary was more or less correct, and in fact she'd  
been able to explain it all in her own words.  
  
She knew what she was talking about, obviously. She'd read into it  
quite deeply. Mar was more correct than he knew — La was damn.  
intelligent, all right.

pic565.png

<la>  
“... just curious. You don't have to answer this. What do you plan on  
doing after your memories are erased?”

pic566.png

<Mar>  
“Well, I, uh...”

pic567.png

<la>  
“Want to wipe yourself away? Start clean? Is that it?”

pic568.png

<Mar>  
“... that may well be.”

pic569.png

Mar muttered as he nodded, weakly. But instead of pressing him, La  
simply waited, quietly, for his next words.

pic570.png

She didn't have to wait for long.

pic572.png

<Mar>  
“Iam not strong, nor am I intelligent. I cannot even converse  
smoothly with other people. I am a failure, without any recourse.”

pic573.png

<Mar>  
“Even were my mother and father to have any expectations of me, I  
would never ina million years be able to meet them, it would be  
  
better if I were dead. It would be better if I had never been born...”

pic575.png

<la>  
“... your parents say that?”

pic577.png

<Mar>  
“N-no, notatall! They would never say anything like that! They have  
always said that they love me, just the way Iam. And that makes me  
very happy, but still...”

pic578.png

<Mar>  
“N-no, notatall! They would never say anything like that! They have  
always said that they love me, just the way Iam. And that makes me  
very happy, but still...”

pic58.png

Or not. She was just sitting on a chair, so motionless that she might  
have been mistaken for a wax doll.  
  
Her hands were clasped neatly on her lap, and her eyes were sharp  
and focused straight ahead.

pic582.png

<la>  
“Enviable ...”

pic583.png

<la>  
“.. that you have such loving parents.”

pic584.png

<la>  
“.. that you have such loving parents.”

pic585.png

<Mar>  
“They truly are ... and I truly appreciate alll they've done for me.”

pic586.png

<la>

pic587.png

<Mar>

pic59.png

So, she'd been like this the entire time?  
Didn't that get really tiring after a while?

pic590.png

pO ea a

pic592.png

T got off my chair and walked into the living room.

pic593.png

<Blackiris>  
“It's time, Mar. My preparations are complete. We can begin at your  
convenience.”

pic594.png

<Mar>  
“Huh? Oh, of course ...”

pic595.png

<Blackiris>  
“Very well. Final confirmation: you want me to erase all fifteen years  
of your past existence.”

pic596.png

<Blackiris>  
“Very well. Final confirmation: you want me to erase all fifteen years  
of your past existence.”

pic597.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“T will not, however, tamper with any memories that are necessary for  
your basic function. Like going to the bathroom, eating, things like  
that. I trust you understand why thatis.”

pic598.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“I will not, however, tamper with any memories that are necessary for  
your basic function. Like going to the bathroom, eating, things like  
that. I trust you understand why thatis.”

pic6.png

<Blackiris>  
“T've had Guests say that to me before. Usually, it's because they have  
a sorrow so deep that they themselves are numb to the fact.”

pic60.png

<Blackiris>  
“Um, La? There's no need to be so tense. Come, loosen up. You're  
one of us now.”

pic601.png

<Blackiris>  
“... will die.”

pic602.png

<Blackiris>  
“Correct.”

pic603.png

He gulped loudly. His eyes were wide as saucers.

pic604.png

T gazed back at him coldly.

pic605.png

<Blackinis>  
“The loving kindness of your parents, too, will die. Along with you.”

pic607.png

Now Mar grew very pale, “tr started shivering.  
  
He struggled to gain control of himself for a while, and eventually  
managed to issue some noises that sounded vaguely like words from  
his quavering lips.

pic608.png

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He struggled to gain control of himself for a while, and eventually  
managed to issue some noises that sounded vaguely like words from  
his quavering lips.

pic609.png

<Bladdnis>  
“Changed your mind, have you?”

pic61.png

Until her Psyche Corrosion disappeared, that was.  
I couldn't really say when that would happen, though. Could bea  
week from today, could be three months from today. I'd heard that  
  
some exceptional cases even took years.

pic610.png

<Mar>

pic611.png

He nodded slightly. Obviously, he was close to tears.  
I let outa sigh.

pic612.png

He nodded slightly. Obviously, he was close to tears.  
I let outa sigh.

pic613.png

<Blackiris>  
“... I'm afraid it's a bit too late for that now.”

pic614.png

<Blackiris>  
“Mar. To be honest, I initiated the treatment phase of the  
Mnemonicide Protocol a long time ago, when we first met.”

pic615.png

<Mar>  
“What? But... how in the world ...”

pic617.png

<Blackinis>  
“Did I not tell you from the very beginning? My name is Blackiris. I  
am aalled that fora reason. All had to do was look you straight in the  
  
eye to begin the process.”

pic618.png

<Mar>  
“No way... that means ...”

pic619.png

<Blackiris>  
“Yes, thatyou are slowly losing yourself as we speak. Impossible to say  
exactly how long it will take, but rest assured that your memories are  
  
withering away and dying, one by one.”

pic62.png

<la>  
“Not tense. It's just...”

pic620.png

<Blackiris>  
“Yes, that you are slowly losing yourself as we speak. Impossible to say  
exactly how long it will take, but rest assured that your memories are  
  
withering away and dying, one by one.”

pic622.png

<Blackiris>  
“.. so gently, in fact, that you yourself will never notice.”

pic623.png

<Mar>  
“Tt can't be ...!”

pic624.png

Tears began to flow from his eyes, as if some dam inside of him had  
burst at last. I stood there silently, waiting for his next move.

pic625.png

No no no no no! I beg of you, give me my memories back!”

pic626.png

<Blackiris>  
an

pic627.png

<Mar>  
“Please! I'll do anything! Just give them back!  
Give my self back! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!”

pic628.png

<Blackiris>

pic629.png

<Mar>  
“LI don't care anymore about the stuff I said before! I have to be  
myself... or else I really would be better off dead!”

pic63.png

Before she could finish her sentence, her belly made an unhappy  
empty sound.  
This explained everything. Kind of.

pic630.png

Words failed him after that. He just wept and wept and wept.  
La and I had nothing to say, either.

pic631.png

We just stood there, waiting for the flood of tears to end.

pic632.png

We just stood there, waiting for the flood of tears to end.

pic634.png

We waited forever.

pic635.png

Silence draped the room like virgin snow. Mar looked exhausted.  
He stared up at me with eyes nearly as empty as my own.

pic64.png

Before she could finish her sentence, her belly made an unhappy  
empty sound.  
This explained everything. Kind of.

pic641.png

<Blackiris>

pic642.png

<Mar>  
“... Dr. Blackiris. Thank you for everything.”

pic644.png

<Mar>  
“Now that I have had a chance to reflect upon it, I think I could have  
  
grown to like myself. But I was too stupid to see what was right before  
  
my eyes, and now it's all gone.”  
  
on eo

pic645.png

<Blackiris>  
“... [hate having to say this to you — it feels too much like a sermon to

pic646.png

<Blackiris>  
“... [hate having to say this to you — it feels too much like a sermon to

pic647.png

Mar nodded smoothly.

pic648.png

<Mar>  
“Absolutely. Therefore, until all my memories are gone, I shall strive  
to get to know myself as well asI can. It's the most fitting kind of  
  
funeral I can think of.”  
  
a.

pic649.png

<Mar>  
“Absolutely. Therefore, until all my memories are gone, I shall strive  
to get to know myself as well asI can. It's the most fitting kind of  
  
funeral I can think of.”  
  
a.

pic65.png

La just blushed and glared at me. She must have seen how hard I was  
trying to contain myself.  
  
But the thing was — no matter what my instincts told me, I couldn't  
just laugh. There were tears in her eyes again.

pic650.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“Certainly. You know, though, your new self will probably be much  
the same. He'll probably worry about the same things, and he'll  
probably be loved the same way by your parents as you were. Or at  
least, so. I hope.”  
  
eo

pic651.png

<Mar>  
“.. that's so very kind of you, Doctor.”

pic652.png

<Mar>  
“.. that's so very kind of you, Doctor.”

pic653.png

<Mar>  
“T assure you that I am not angry with you at all, sir.”  
  
—.

pic655.png

<Blackiris>  
“No, but you will be.”

pic656.png

Suddenly, it was I who could not bear to look Mar in the eye, not the  
other way around.  
  
—.

pic657.png

. - great, now what?  
Why the hell did I do that?

pic66.png

Whether that was due to The Dolor, embarrassment, or chagrin was  
immaterial. I wasn'tabout to make a girl cry.

pic660.png

<Blackiris>  
“Um, well, you see, uh...”

pic661.png

<Blackiris>  
“Um, well, you see, uh...”

pic664.png

<Mar>  
“Pardon me?”

pic665.png

<Bladdinis>  
“The truth is, I haven't done a thing to you all day.”

pic666.png

<Bladdinis>  
“The truth is, I haven't done a thing to you all day.”

pic667.png

<Blackiris>  
“I have not initiated treatment at all. Your memories have nothing to  
fear — they won't disappear from you.”

pic668.png

<Mar>  
“What the ...!

pic67.png

<Blackiris>  
“Wait just a bit longer, okay? I've gota delicious stew coming right  
  
up.

pic670.png

<Blackiris>  
“... that's right. I'm sorry.”

pic671.png

<Blackiris>  
“... that's right. I'm sorry.”

pic672.png

<Mar>  
“Sorry? Sorry?! Wait, that means

pic673.png

Mar yelped in utter consternation. He looked so wretched now that I  
quite regretted what I had done.  
.. but it was too late for apologies, or so I thought...

pic674.png

But the reflective mood left as quickly as it had come, for Mar burst  
into peals of unstoppable laughter.

pic676.png

<Mar>  
“Haha, hahahaha, ahahahahahahahaha! Ahahahahahahahahahaha!”  
  
—.

pic677.png

He was laughing so hard that at first, I thought that he'd gone off the  
deep end for good. But there was something about his smile — the  
first real smile I'd ever seen from him — that told me otherwise.

pic678.png

He was laughing so hard that at first, I thought that he'd gone off the  
deep end for good. But there was something about his smile — the  
first real smile I'd ever seen from him — that told me otherwise.

pic679.png

Oh well, whatever, I could live with this every once in a while.  
As long as it was a long while.  
  
—.

pic68.png

But by this time, La was already staring pointedly out the window,  
ignoring me.

pic680.png

Oh well, whatever, I could live with this every once in a while.  
As long.as it was a long while.  
  
—.

pic685.png

After thanking me fauna over and over again, Mar left our home  
for the trolley station. He boarded the last train to First Streetas we  
watched.

pic686.png

Assuming that the trolley ran on time, Mar would be able to get out  
of town before the gates closed. That was the right of any Guest who  
chose not to participate in treatment.

pic687.png

Night fell on the town where memories come to die.  
La and I watched Mar's trolley until it disappeared into the darkness,  
and then we began heading back home.

pic689.png

<la>  
“Blackiris. Total erasure. Isit really possible?”

pic690.png

<Blackiris>  
“Let's see. I'm confident I could cause a serious bout of amnesia for a  
while, but recovery would probably be pretty rapid.”

pic691.png

<la>  
“Isee. You're a good man.”

pic692.png

<la>  
“I see. You're a good man.”

pic693.png

<Blackiris>  
“... uh, La? You're not supposed to say such things so seriously.”

pic695.png

La ran ahead of me, skipping and hopping all the way. I sighed,  
smiled, and then spoke to her from behind.

pic697.png

<Blackiris>  
“If you're wondering why I did that, it isn't because I'm a good guy, or  
a bad guy. Justa lazy one. I have a hard enough time babysitting one  
kid, see ...”

pic699.png

<la>  
“Babysitting?!” >

pic700.png

<la>  
“Babysitting?!”

pic702.png

As! limped behind her, I thought of something.

pic705.png

<la>  
“Mmhmm?”

pic706.png

I'd thought she'd still be at least a little mad, but when she tured to  
me, there was this sweet little smile on her face.  
Thoroughly defeated now, I smiled right back at her.

pic707.png

I'd thought she'd still be at least a little mad, but when she turned to  
me, there was this sweet little smile on her face.  
Thoroughly defeated now, I smiled right back at her.

pic708.png

<Blackiris>  
“No, it's nothing.”

pic709.png

From the experiences of today, La had gotten an eyewitness  
experience as to what erasure of Psyche Corrosion really was.  
When it came her turn, would she grow so terrified as well?

pic710.png

From the experiences of today, La had gotten an eyewitness  
experience as to what erasure of Psyche Corrosion really was.  
When it came her turn, would she grow so terrified as well?

pic712.png

But I chose not to ask that question.  
It was much better this way.

pic713.png

For her sake. And for mine ...

pic714.png

For her sake. And for mine ...

pic717.png

LA  
  
To be continued:

pic718.png

YA  
  
To be continued:

pic723.png

“Rule #1. Know that youare you.”

pic724.png

We'd come out from a dark place. Hand in hand. Ries  
everything. I couldn't see.  
  
So I couldn't see what he was talking about, either.

pic725.png

The rest of his rules go like this: a |

pic726.png

“Have pride. If the going gets tough, then get going. Raga  
a mask. But keep moving forward. Then sadness will have no prite in  
  
your heart. Someday.” >

pic727.png

They're mine to keep. Pops would roll in his grave CURgag Pre  
importantly: if they break, I break.

pic728.png

His last words to me were, i |  
  
“[love you’ and “I want you to be happy”.  
I finally understand what he meant. I think.

pic729.png

... how, on the other hand ... a |  
Anyway. This much is obvious. I can't stand still.

pic73.png

I stopped eating altogether and focused on La.  
  
Maybe it was a trick of the light, but I could have sworn that she  
almost looked happy. First time I'd seen her that way in all the (short)  
time I'd known her...

pic730.png

My mame is La a |  
And that is why Iam here. >

pic731.png

My name is La, a |  
And that is why Iam here.

pic734.png

Il: the self-deceived =)

pic735.png

Il: the self-deceived snl

pic74.png

I stopped eating altogether and focused on La.  
  
Maybe it was a trick of the light, but I could have sworn that she  
almost looked happy. First time I'd seen her that way in all the (short)  
time I'd known her...

pic740.png

Blackiris isn'ta morning person.  
He tries to hide it. He fails. Two weeks of living with him have  
made that obvious.

pic741.png

He eats breakfast. He washes dishes. He drinks coffee. Half asleep  
the entire time.  
  
I know. He sleepwalks all day long. Makes everything look easy.  
I'm just saying. It's most pronounced in the mornings.

pic742.png

I don't get it’ He washes dishes. He brews coffee. All better and  
faster than I can. Eyes closed. Both hands tied behind his back.  
Am I of any help to him? No. No way.

pic743.png

If | were to mention this, all he'd say is “you're my Guest, so there's  
no need for you to help out’. Or something. But I can't just leave it at  
that.

pic744.png

... which is what makes me a fool among fools.

pic745.png

Blackiris is good. Frighteningly good. At everything.  
Is it because he's a Guide? Or was he like this to begin with? I don't  
know.

pic746.png

I do know this. He makes me realize just how much I don't know.  
So much to learn. I'm ashamed to admit it. I must become self-  
sufficient. I must.

pic747.png

Because Pops isn't around to take care of me anymore.

pic748.png

<Blackiris>  
“La, want to go out today?”

pic749.png

Blackiris says, after taking a long sip of coffee.  
I just stare at him fora moment. I've still got Pops on my mind.  
Hard to break free.

pic75.png

<la>  
“... stop staring. Hard to eat that way.”

pic750.png

I can feel the tears on my cheeks.

pic751.png

I can feel the tears on my cheeks.

pic752.png

His stony countenance softens a bit.

pic754.png

<la>  
“Sorry about that. Can't help it sometimes. I'll try harder.”

pic755.png

Irub my eyes. Hard. The crying doesn't survive for long. Usually.

pic756.png

Iknow. You can't cy in front of others.  
I'm nota kid. Notanymore.

pic757.png

Blackiris just stares at me. He's waiting. Waiting for the tears to end.  
He does this out of habit. Not malice. I get that. But still. It doesn't  
help.

pic759.png

<la>  
“.. and where are you taking me?”

pic760.png

mr com, +

pic761.png

<Blackiris>  
“Well, hmm. How about the park, or perhaps the library?”

pic763.png

<la>  
“Yay! Let's go!”

pic764.png

No, I'm not faking it.  
Blackiris is antisocial. He'd stay at home all day if he could. He's  
never taken me anywhere. Other than Rook's. But that doesn't count.

pic765.png

T'm not allowed to wander anywhere. Not without my Guide. Suits  
me fine. I don't haye a choice anyway. I'ma patient here.

pic767.png

It's beena long time. I love going out.  
I wonder where this park is. The weather's perfect for a stroll.  
That'd be fun.

pic768.png

And if we're going to the library. So much the better.  
I've read all my books. I want to borrow some more. That'd be fun  
too.

pic769.png

Either way, I can't wait!  
I gulp down my cafe au lait and jump to my feet.

pic77.png

<la>  
“Am I weird?”

pic770.png

<la>  
“Give mea couple minutes. Weather's good. I'll go hang up the  
laundry to air. Be done soon! I swear!”

pic771.png

<la>  
“Give mea couple minutes. Weather's good. I'll go hang up the  
laundry to air. Be done soon! I swear!”

pic772.png

<la>  
“[ know you better than that. You meanie. I'll be done before you  
change your mind. I promise. So don't leave me; okay?”

pic774.png

<Blackiris>  
“.. okay.”

pic778.png

So, I grab the laundry basket. Out into the garden — ah, the  
clotheslines. Good. Time to start hanging stuff.

pic779.png

Odd. Where are the ashen clouds? Where is the snow? Not that I'm  
complaining. It's still freezing out here. But look — see, there. You  
can feel winter's timid light whisper between the high trees.

pic780.png

Odd. Where are the ashen clouds? Where is the snow? Not that I'm  
complaining. It's still freezing out here. But look — see, there. You  
can feel winter's timid light whisper between the high trees.

pic781.png

... could be a dog or a cat.  
If it is, I hope it's nice. I want to pet it.

pic782.png

But what if it isn't? I'm kind of scared. Oh well. Let's take a look  
and see.

pic788.png

I say to the girl who has just appeared ... well, no. The girl who has  
been here the entire time. That's more like it.  
  
She stares at me. She stares at my laundry basket. Then she presses  
her slender fingertips together. Looks like she's ata loss for words.

pic789.png

Um. What now?  
I'm ata loss for words too. So, we're reduced to staring at each other.

pic79.png

<Blackiris>

pic790.png

<la>  
“Um ... are you lost?”

pic791.png

<Girl>  
“N-no, I'm not. I, wh...”

pic792.png

The girl suddenly hangs her head.  
Okay. So, she's not lost.  
  
rye carn

pic794.png

A thief, maybe? Then I shouldn't be standing here talking to her.  
I should go call Blackiris.  
  
rye carn

pic795.png

Okay. If she doesn't talk, I'm going to bolt. I begin to turn back  
when...  
  
rye carn

pic797.png

<Girl>  
“Wait! I'm looking fora Mnemonicide. Ifyou... uh... happen to be  
one...”

pic798.png

The girl cuts herself off. In silence, she stares down at her clenched  
fists.  
Isee. One of Blackiris’ patients.

pic799.png

<la>  
“The Mnemonicide? He's indoors...

pic8.png

<Blackiris>  
“Perhaps. But I agree with you; you'll be fine. Relax, you're my Guest.  
We'll have you better in no time at all, I'm sure.”

pic80.png

<la>  
“Am I weird? Why do you keep staring at me?”

pic800.png

<Girl>  
“... thank you. Thank you very much.”

pic801.png

No point in taking the back door. Front door it is. The girl remains  
silent. There's a look in her eyes. Full of hidden things.  
Has she got The Dolor too?

pic803.png

Seem

pic804.png

4 r-rel)

pic805.png

<Blackins>  
“You take quite a long time for someone who's ina hurry... huh ...?”

pic806.png

Blackiris looks all prepared to go out. What he's not prepared for is  
the girl behind me.  
Wait. Then she's not one of his patients?

pic807.png

Taine dante dane eb aoe on no no oo nna ann aR

pic808.png

<Blackinis>  
“... who is this?”  
  
--4 TOIT

pic809.png

4 r-rel)

pic81.png

<Blackiris>  
“Oh. Uh. No, you're not strange. I just kind of spaced out, that's all.  
Bad habit of mime ... you certainly do eata lot, that's all.”

pic810.png

<la>  
“Uh. No idea. Found her in the garden.”  
  
4 r-rel)

pic811.png

nh dain dane nb aaa on pon ooo ahaa

pic812.png

Blackiris just sighs. Then:  
  
--4 TOIT

pic813.png

<Blackinis>  
“La. You shouldn't talk to strangers, let alone invite them into your  
house like that. It's dangerous, you know ...

pic814.png

He turns to the girl, you can tell. He's not happy. She's scared.

pic815.png

She starts trembling. She stands frozen fora moment. Then she  
finally looks up at him. Oh, wow. She's cute. Cute asa button.

pic816.png

- =e mdreet de ee  
  
Sern oooooomm®n

pic817.png

<Ginl>  
“Memy name is Irina, sir. I've come seeking treatment for The Dolor.”

pic818.png

<Blackiris>  
“And? You think that gives you the right to trespass?”

pic819.png

pic82.png

Oops.  
T'd just told a girl that she “ate a lot”.  
... how was I going to get out of this one?

pic820.png

Thave to say something. Otherwise this will be bad.

pic822.png

It's obvious. He's going too far. The poor girl's quivering. In shock.

pic823.png

But Blackiris sighs again. He turns to me.  
  
oro

pic824.png

But Blackiris sighs again. He turns to me.  
  
oro

pic825.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“Look. When someone climbs over your wall and hides herself in your  
garden, around these parts we aall that ‘breaking and entering’. It'sa  
crime, just so we're on the same page.”

pic827.png

<Blackiris>  
“.. wait. I'm not mad at you, La, so chin up, okay? It's just that I  
realize that I was little sloppy there.”

pic828.png

<Blackiris>  
“You're absolutely right — it really doesn't look like Irina here was  
planning on doing anything bad. But if she were, then we would have  
  
been in big trouble, see?”

pic829.png

Jenin ck he RE nen oo oe oo oo Ln GT

pic83.png

Oops.  
T'd just told a girl that she “ate a lot”.  
... how was I going to get out of this one?

pic830.png

<Irina>  
  
.. 1... I'm so sorry. I really didn't mean to trespass. I swear, I'm

pic831.png

<Blackinis>  
“What's done is done. Don't worry — let he who is without sin cast the  
first stone, right? That isn't me. I won't report you. What] will do,  
however, is ask you what in the world you're doing here. Fair?”

pic832.png

<Inina>  
“., well, sit, see, I'really had to get in touch with a Mnemonicide ...”

pic833.png

<Blackins>  
“And why, exactly, is that?”  
  
4 r-rel)

pic834.png

<Inina>  
“Huh ...? Obviously, in order to be cured. Whyever else would I  
  
4 r-rel)

pic835.png

<Blackins>  
“And yet... Iwonder. Do you really suffer from The Dolor?”  
  
4 r-rel)

pic836.png

Tenia Gh ie ho Gc eo oe oo 0 2 Ls

pic837.png

<Irina>  
“.. wait! Sir, I have a certificate right here  
  
=

pic838.png

Irina produces. thin scrap of paper. Then she thrusts it at Blackiris.  
Who glances at it once, and pushes it back.

pic839.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“Very well, I believe you on that. The certificate's genuine, or such a  
good forgery that I can't tell. But tell me, where is your permit for the  
Mnemonicide Protocol?”

pic84.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“Nothingwrongwiththatatall!  
Infactitmakesmehappytoseeyoueatyourfill!!!”

pic840.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“You don'thave one, do you? You shouldn't even be here. Not fora  
long, long time. If you're found, you're going to be imprisoned here,  
for life, with no chance of parole. I'm sure you're well aware of that,  
right?”

pic842.png

Her lips have frozen. In terror. There's fear in her heart. There are  
tears in her eyes.  
Blackiris shrugs. He waits. And he turns to me.

pic843.png

ac nina ho mb ha dain oon on 0 on oo oo Lanna

pic844.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“We've wasted quite enough time, don't you think? Let's get gomg —  
no need to worry about her. She's resourceful. She got into town on  
her own. She'll figure out a way to leave without getting caught, I'm  
  
4 a

pic846.png

This is cruel. She's shaking. She's crying. Blackiris is toying with her.  
Like a cat with a mouse. I can't bear it. Blackiris — please stop.

pic847.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“Now, now, don't hold back. It's okay to get mad here, really mad.  
After all, now it's getting kind of late to be going anywhere. And this is  
all her fault. You were looking forward to the excursion, weren'tyou?”

pic848.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“Now, now, don't hold back. It's okay to get mad here, really mad.  
After all, now it's getting kind of late to be going anywhere. And this is  
all her fault. You were looking forward to the excursion, weren'tyou?”

pic849.png

True. I was looking forward to it.  
But this is even truer: I need to do something for this girl. No matter  
what.

pic850.png

Qne problem. That means screwing Blackiris over. Again.

pic851.png

--ea4rwWiy98:.:srmTn 7 ae

pic852.png

<Blackiris>  
“.. oh, fine. Man, I guess there's no two ways about it. You're too soft,  
Ia, you're too soft. I swear...”

pic853.png

Blackiris sighs for the third time. The final time.  
He turns to Irina.

pic854.png

Blackiris sighs for the third time. The final time.  
He turns to Irina.

pic855.png

<Blackiris>  
“My namélis Blackiris, and 1am a Mnemonicide. Should you wish to  
call me by any other name, go ahead and do so; won't mind.”

pic856.png

sree) 7 ae

pic857.png

<Irina>  
“.., huh? Then you mean...”  
  
--4 TOIT

pic858.png

Inna looks up at Blackiris. She looks surprised. And delighted.  
Blackiris, meanwhile — he nods. With disgust.

pic859.png

4 r-rel) se

pic860.png

<Blackinis>  
“Save it. Thank Ia if you must. Oh, and La — satisfied?”

pic861.png

<Blackinis>  
“Save it. Thank Ia if you must. Oh, and La — satisfied?”

pic862.png

<Blackins>  
“Oh, you did nothing wrong, so there's no need for you to apologize.”

pic863.png

4 r-rel)

pic864.png

<la>  
“Then thank you...”

pic865.png

<la>  
“Then thank you...”

pic866.png

ede)

pic867.png

<Irina>  
  
=

pic868.png

Blackiris just nods. Coldly. There's hesitation, though. I can feel it.  
Maybe he’s ashamed of himself. A little.

pic869.png

.. but ifI point that out he'll yell at me. Probably. Oh well.

pic871.png

<Blackiris>  
“Irma. Did you smuggle yourself into town empty-handed?”

pic872.png

<Irina>  
“Qh, no sir. I left my luggage in your garden, I'm afraid.”

pic873.png

<Irina>  
“Qh, no sir. I left my luggage in your garden, I'm afraid.”

pic874.png

--ea4rwWiy98:.:srmTn >

pic875.png

<la>  
“Tl go get it.”

pic876.png

<Irina>

pic877.png

aan wteoeemn mon

pic880.png

I turn to leave. Irina rms after me.  
We walk together im silence. Time to take a good long look at her.

pic881.png

She's not crying anymore. That'sa relief.  
I hurt inside when I see people ay.

pic882.png

<Irima>  
“Thank you so much, um ...”

pic884.png

<rina>  
“Miss La, then? I fear that if it weren't for you, I would have been  
done for.”

pic885.png

<Irina>  
“Miss La, then? I fear that if it weren't for you, I would have been  
done for.”

pic886.png

<la>  
“Not atall. Blackiris meant to take you in. From the start.  
He just needed an excuse.”  
  
I think.

pic887.png

<la>  
“Not atall. Blackiris meant to take you in. From the start.  
He just needed an excuse.”  
  
I think.

pic889.png

Irina giggles. Hesitantly.  
Like a little songbird. Yes. She's so much cuter this way.  
  
rye carn

pic89.png

Not that I was in much better shape; while I was pretty used to this  
job by now, the first couple of days with a new Guest were always a  
delicate phase.  
  
Best to end the day early and get a good night's sleep, so we'd both  
be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed come the morrow.  
  
-

pic890.png

Irina giggles. Hesitantly.  
Like a little songbird. Yes. She's so much cuter this way.  
  
rye carn

pic892.png

<Irina>  
“Oh, just call me Ilya, please. No need to be so formal, yes?”

pic894.png

<Ilya>  
“Oh, wonderful, dear! Now, where were we?”

pic895.png

<Ilya>  
“Oh, wonderful, dear! Now, where were we?”

pic896.png

<la>  
“Were you hiding in the garden? The entire time? Weren't you cold?”

pic897.png

<Ilya>  
“Oh, love, I've been here since dawn. Ahaha, I honestly thought I was  
going to freeze to death. You saved my life in more than one way,  
sweetie.”

pic899.png

Her laughter. So soft. So warm. Can't help but join in.  
A tender flower. That's what she is. So obvious. It's not right to let  
Psyche Corrosion rust that smile of hers away.

pic9.png

<Blackiris>  
“Perhaps. But I agree with you; you'll be fine. Relax, you're my Guest.  
We'll have you better in no time at all, I'm sure.”

pic90.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“La, I'll be doing dishes down here, so why don'tyou go ahead and  
take a shower and go to bed? There should be a bathroom at the end  
of the corridor.”

pic900.png

Her laughter. So soft. So warm. Can't help but join in.  
A tender flower. That's what she is. So obvious. It's not right to let  
Psyche Corrosion rust that smile of hers away.

pic902.png

She's in Blackiris’ hands now. Thank God.  
Lucky her. Unlucky him. I'll make it up to him. Someday.

pic903.png

She's in Blackiris! hands now. Thank God.  
Lucky her. Unlucky him. I'll make it up to him. Someday.

pic906.png

AtAROMA. With Blackiris. And one other.

pic909.png

Rook's at his counter. As usual. Phials lined up in front of him. He's  
labeling them. Carefully.

pic91.png

I started to stand, but La just sat there and stared at me as if there  
was something she wanted to say but couldn't quite articulate.

pic911.png

<Rook>  
“Nah, just keepin’ the place decent. Welcome ...

pic912.png

<Rook>  
“Nah, just keepin’ the place decent. Welcome ... the hell, man, yet  
another broad?

pic913.png

<Rook>  
“Nah, just keepin’ the place decent. Welcome ... the hell, man, yet  
another broad? Hey, Li'l La, you gonna stand for this? He's two-timin’  
ya, girl! Now — see here —a real gentleman like me wouldn't do  
  
nothin’ like that.”  
  
morrcywrrwrcom®© in 2 an ee

pic914.png

So. Rook's noticed ya Look athis face. Half envious. Half  
stunned. All too complicated.

pic915.png

Coo <r cererewrcmtaran ooo

pic916.png

<Blackiris>  
“This is Irina. I took her in as my Guest today.”

pic917.png

<Blackiris>  
“This is Irina. I took her in as my Guest today.”

pic918.png

<Blackiris>  
“Tl burn that bridge when I get there. Or something like that. On that  
  
note, I've gota favor to ask of you.”  
  
sorpprercwrrwrc™m

pic919.png

<Rook>  
“Aha, so hell has frozen over. You? Askin’ a favor? Ya gotta be  
  
kiddin’ me ...”

pic92.png

I started to stand, but La just sat there and stared at me as if there  
was something she wanted to say but couldn't quite articulate.

pic920.png

Rook sweeps up the phials. His hands move fast)) So fast it all a  
blur.  
  
Fora moment I think about asking what's in those phials. But it's too  
late. They're all racked. Inno time.  
  
morrcywrrwrcom®©

pic921.png

<Blackiris>  
“I want you to supply her with a Mnemonicide Protocol permit.”

pic922.png

<Rook>  
“...a trespasser? This li'l mam'selle here? Rock. Ya hooked a real  
  
lively one this time around, eh, Blackiris?”  
  
sorpprercwrrcwrc™m

pic923.png

<Rook>  
“... a trespasser? This li'l mam'selle here? Rock. Ya hooked a real  
  
lively one this time around, eh, Blackiris?”  
  
sorpprercwrrcwrc™m

pic924.png

Rook whistles. Then he leers. At Ilya. Of course.  
Tlya smiles back. Kind of. More like squirms.

pic926.png

<Blackiris>  
“And I seem to remember that you owe me.”

pic927.png

pic928.png

<Rook>  
“. right. Quid pro quo. This'll even us up, eh?”

pic929.png

Rook just laughs. Like it's alla joke. To him.  
... is it going to be that easy? How will he pull it off?  
Task him this. But he just turns to me and says:  
  
srr arryroml|®

pic930.png

pic931.png

<Rook>  
“Best that a young lady like you not know, ya get what I'm sayin'?”

pic932.png

So. It'll be dangerous. Great. Everything's my fault. Now even  
Rook's mixed up in this.

pic933.png

Corr er cwreyrcomarem: oo oor ooo

pic934.png

<Blackiris>  
“La. The decision to take Irina on asa Guest was mine. Mine and  
mine alone. Do you understand? You have nothing to do with this.”  
  
morrcywrrwrcom®©

pic935.png

.. Blackiris can see right through me sometimes. That bothers me.  
See, I'm an open book to him. Not happy about that. Notall the  
time.  
  
morrcywrrwrcom®©

pic936.png

<Blackiris>  
“frina. I know you already know this, but you've been diagnosed with  
a very mild case of The Dolor. Therefore, you will be my Guest for a  
day only. But if you don't have a permit, you won't be allowed to  
  
leave, so  
  
ap morrcywrrwrcom®©

pic937.png

Sooo er cwrryrcomarrn oor ooo

pic938.png

<Rook>  
“Tl have somethin’ ready by first light tomorrow.”

pic939.png

<Blackiris>  
“... so you'll have to stay in town with us until then. Agreed?”

pic94.png

<la>  
“I'm not worried about that! ... it's the room

pic940.png

<Blackiris>  
“... so you'll have to stay in town with us until then. Agreed?”

pic941.png

<Blackiris>  
“All right, then let's get started. Can you tell me what happened to  
you? What caused your Psyche Corrosion?”  
  
morrcywrrwrcom®©

pic942.png

<Blackiris>  
“All right, then let's get started. Can you tell me what happened to  
you? What caused your Psyche Corrosion?”  
  
morrcywrrwrcom®©

pic943.png

<Rook>  
“Aha, that's my cue. Gotta get this done for ya, and you don't need me  
here.”

pic944.png

Rook nods. He knows what's going on. He stands up, walks to the  
door. He closes up shop. Then he leaves.  
  
ocr,

pic948.png

eH  
  
codtT

pic949.png

I guess that's my cue too. But what to do? I can't go anywhere. Not  
without my Guide. Not without Blackiris.  
T'm stuck. I think. Oh, but wait. Ilya's started to talk.

pic95.png

<Blackiris>  
“The room?”

pic950.png

<Ilya>  
  
“I'd like for you to erase my memories of my family, sir.”

pic951.png

Waita second. She can't be serious. Right?  
Wrong. That look on her face — it's obvious. She's serious. Dead  
serious.

pic952.png

Waita second. She can't be serious. Right?  
Wrong. That look on her face — it's obvious. She's serious. Dead  
serious.

pic953.png

<Blackiris>  
“Your memories of your family. You say that they're at the root of  
your Psyche Corrosion? Tell me more, if you please.”

pic954.png

<Ilya>  
“Yes sir. In my family ...”

pic955.png

Blackiris makes a motion with his hands. Cuts s Ilya off.  
He doesn't need any more than this. He knows what his target is.

pic956.png

He doesn't have to know how his patient has been affected. He  
doesn't have to know how Ilya was hurt. That's irrelevant.  
Tcan tell. I'can read him likea book. But only once ina while.

pic957.png

But Ilya just keeps talking. Her face is drawn. Her eyes are soft,  
unfocused,

pic958.png

<Ilya>  
“My mother died when I was very young, so my father raised me for  
most part. We were always destitute, and my father ... well, my father,  
  
he...”

pic959.png

Ilya stops there. She's having a hard time. With whatever it is she's  
  
trying to Say.  
Her father what? What did he do?

pic96.png

<la>  
“There's ... only one bed.”

pic960.png

Tcan'timagine. Pops was the only father I had. He was wonderful.  
... Iwas blessed, wasn't I? Because I can't imagine.

pic961.png

<Ilya>  
“My father left home when I was sixteen. He abandoned me, and  
never looked back. I haven't been in contact with him since.”

pic962.png

ein te ck ie hn cn nn nn oo eo 0 a a Gn a ee,

pic963.png

<Ilya>  
“... oh, heavens, I tried to forget about him. Tried and tried and tried.  
  
But I couldn't! When I close my eyes, I'm right back, chained by a  
voice that keeps telling me that I'll never be free. Of him.”  
  
--9 rr qreONitm$§: -—

pic964.png

Now there's cold steel in her eyes. This is hard for her. Even to  
retell. Obviously.

pic965.png

How? How can you be chained to someone who's disappeared?  
Oram I chained to Pops? Is that it?

pic966.png

<Ilya>  
“... I'm going to be getting married soon, you see. For the first time in  
my life — ever — I'm going to be happy! I can feel it.”

pic967.png

<Ilya>  
“But that's just the problem — what do I do when my father comes to  
  
mind? T can't escape it. I'm so scared, don't you know? It's going to  
happen, sooner or later. And ... I'm sure you understand, that just  
  
syon't do.”  
  
49971)

pic968.png

pic969.png

<Ilya>  
“So I beg you, kind sir. Please, please, take my memories of my family  
away. Cure me of my Psyche Corrosion, so I can live my life.”

pic97.png

... oh. So, this must have been why she was so uptight before dinner.  
Totally understandable, although that didn't stop me from sighing. I  
mean. ... all right, now what?

pic970.png

Tlya bows low. Her hands are clasped together at her lap. Clasped so  
tightly they're going white. As if she's enduring the most exquisite  
pain.

pic971.png

Blackiris is glacial. Calm. Unperturbed. As if he hasn't been  
listening. | Except he has, and ...

pic972.png

<Blackiris>  
  
“T understand the etiology of your Psyche Corrosion well enough.  
Thank you. Now, your permit will arrive tomorrow morning, so we'll  
wait. Until then, our place is yours.”

pic973.png

Waita second. There's something we're forgetting here.  
This is bad. Real bad.  
We've only got one bed.

pic974.png

Blackiris still sleeps on the sofa.  
Tasked him if we should buy another bed once. I was denied. He  
told me it was a waste of money.

pic975.png

See. Pops leftme some money. Nota lot. But I've saved it.  
T told Blackiris T wanted to buy a bed with that. He still shook his  
head.

pic976.png

Should I bring this up now? Or not?  
Oh. My head is spinning. I have no idea what to say. So, I won't say  
anything.

pic977.png

No need to smother Ilya. Definitely no need to make more trouble  
for Blackiris.  
Tl just have her take the bed tonight.

pic978.png

The bell sounds.  
And Rook walks in. Wow. Thatwas quick. Is everything okay?

pic979.png

<Rook>  
“That'sa wrap. There'll be a little somethin’ for your lady Guest by  
  
tomorrow mornin’. Ifya know what] mean.”

pic98.png

Come to think of it, I'd never been assigned a female Guest before.  
They always made sure you got someone of the same sex ... well, at  
least up until now. Whata headache.

pic980.png

eH  
  
codtT

pic981.png

Oh. Well. How nice. Rook really came through. Unexpected.  
Ilya sighs. She looks relieved. Me, too. One less thing to worry  
about.

pic982.png

aan  
  
codtT

pic985.png

<Ilya>  
“Um, would you mind horribly if I cooked dinner tonight?”

pic986.png

Ilya suggests softly. ‘She takes the lead, Hosirgne aigaotl dae

pic987.png

Blackiris tries to protest. Says thatasa Guide, he can't have his Guest  
doing work. The usual. But Ilya's just not giving up.

pic988.png

Blackiris tries to protest. Says thatasa Guide, he can't have his Guest  
doing work. The usual. But Ilya's just not giving up.

pic989.png

Funny. Blackiris isn't going to win this one.

pic990.png

Funny. Blackiris isn't going to win this one.

pic991.png

<Ilya>  
“Oh, La, honey. Is there anything that Dr. Blackiris really likes?”

pic992.png

She whispers. Ugh. How am I going to answer this?  
Well. At least he isn't with us. He's waiting outside. It's just us girls.

pic993.png

She whispers. Ugh. How am I going to answer this?  
Well. At least he isn't with us. He's waiting outside. It's just us girls.

pic994.png

<la>  
“Well. He ... doesn't dislike anything. No. Wait. Don't see him eat  
sweets much. But things he likes ... not sure about that.”

pic995.png

<Ilya>  
“Ahaha, I guess we're back to square one, then. In that case, La, what  
would you like to eat?”

pic996.png

<Ilya>  
“Ahaha, I guess we're back to square one, then. In that case, La, what  
would you like to eat?”

pic998.png

Ilya giggles at this,

pic999.png

Ilya giggles at this,  
... odd. Blackiris laughed about this too. Is there something the  
matter? About not eating carrots?