



Thezeraine

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Thezeraine

The most frightful challenge is to
live hoping for a better tomorrow

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By Luna Maltseva

§ Réveillée

Opening her diary, “Split with the Darkness,” she located a free page, titling it “Whatever us awaits tomorrow,” dated it 11/05, and composed:

“The sunset rose above the mist
To make the beauty that we have
Live on if just a moment more
Before it all becomes pitch black.”

Though she enjoyed the piece, she sank back into her chair, becoming immersed in thought. Slightly shaking her head, she sat up and began:

“The beginning and the end are concealed in impenetrable darkness.

“If time is nothing more than a learned illusion, there exists neither a past nor a future. To us, there is only the ever-lasting present—then, now, soon—which are all but a part of a single moment.

“In the old days, the stillness that comes with a non-relativistic point-of-reference could perhaps be exaggerated into being called a ‘limbo’—perhaps even promoted to ‘hell’ for its inescapable single action frame.” Allowing fear to sprinkle in, she wrote, “Yet at times even the present comes outside of our grasp. In closing one’s eyes to fall asleep, one only realizes that they had dozed off because they had woken up. If the waking-up part was suspended indefinitely, with no point-of-reference there would remain no notion of sleep—rendering the whole experience imperceptible to any naturally-existing prism of interpretation.

“What falls outside the beginning and the end”—heavily underlining the word *end*—“could not be described in terms of ‘limbos.’ With no reference frame, these ‘voids’ have no dimensions

in them—they lack both the geospatial and the chronological aspects of it and are dominated by ‘nothing’. Not vacuum, for though vacuum seems the definition of ‘nothing,’ our vacuumcraft are comfortable traversing the intragalactic medium. Vacuum is habitable—‘nothing’ is not. ‘Nothing’ is utterly barebone—it never began anywhere and will never end, and of it none will ever have any recollection.

“Death is not scary. If everything that’ll ever come of it is ‘nothing,’ then there is, from a reckless viewpoint, nothing to worry about.

“The scary part is being woken up.”

I. Off The Deep End

“It is surprising to what lengths our consciousness goes to keep our dreams alive,” she smiled, receiving a smile in return; she said, reaching out: “and oh-how-I-wish it didn’t.”

Iris opened her eyes with difficulty, faced contemplating whether she was now experiencing yet another half-*nightmare*; she tried to cognizantly transform the dream—if it was a dream—only to be greeted by the immutable dark of the maglev’s cabin. Giving up, she laid still, staring blankly into the void surrounding her.

The fluorescent cabin lights of the ASP VacTrain maglev began powering up, painting the tubular cabin in a dim and rough blue hue, followed by a gentle two-phased tone, signaling the impending arrival at Theoderau’s intercontinental maglev station 1-North in just under five minutes. It has been a couple of hours since the maglev departed from A-1’s Spaceport’s Echo Terminal for Theoderau—the only city on A-1 boasting a stable population, approximately two hundred thousand people, *notwithstanding* the vieuxtritol-poisoned biosphere.

Terminal Echo was the only commercial spaceport on Theoderau, primarily serving as a transfer to and from AZ-0’s Geostationary Intrastellar, and was located 5’600 kilometres south-east off the city, at the equatorial west of the Atlantic ocean. Despite being an overcapacity transfer from AZ-0 Geostellar via Beyon’s Hopper, the maglev was almost fully booked—recent events at blame—with some two hundred passengers on board. Now, the alighting was to happen before dawn—the sun not to rise for another hour—permitting both residents and visitors alike ample time to admire the incandescent night-time city’s paysage.

With the lights on, the passengers turned abuzz, going through their accouterments, connecting via neural ports to the maglev to sign arrival forms, diving into the cyberspace to tend to urgent

personal and professional affairs, keeping tabs on the rampantly escalating “situation;” their tetranol-powered Aegis electromagnetic shields lighting up—pulsating emerald-green under strain, further actuating the cabin lights—in order to upkeep spatial equilibrium while the maglev was proactively exuding momentum: the atmosphere of urgency and anxiety palpable—midst of all that, Ms. Feverenn continued to lie still, observing with a sense of pleasantry the sublime orchestration of the mundane, *oh-so-expertly* performed. She was a young woman, fairly tall, espresso hair and eyes, lightly augmented with NSynapse’s advanced neural cortex and Apex limb reinforcements, primarily for recon, quite slender – more so as of late; under different circumstances, she would perhaps be remarked by others for fairness, sharpness, and tenderness. The cabin lights were approaching blinding brightness, slathering the cabin in minor blue. She sighed and pushed herself onto her back, now staring into the beaming void above her.

Why me?, she internally spun at herself for the millionth time in the last two months, idly tracing patterns in the ceiling with her eyes. She reached for the bumpy white plastic texture of the ceiling, drawing her fingers across it, longing to feel some kind of sensation. Not satisfied with the resulting bleakness, she lowered her hand with a deep sigh. *Inappropriate as it is to envy others, I can't help but...*, she feebly pronounced, tears filling her eyes at the thought, *can't help but envy her*.

The maglev was perceptibly losing momentum, an item falling over somewhere in the cabin every once in a while, even with everyone’s shields having fully lit lime hexagonal outlines, water vapor trailing off them—the signature color of Powerline Energy’s tetranol, a weaker and *much* less toxic version of nitritol, being used. Iris slowly sat up on her bunk, now facing the wall in front of her. She threw a negligent glance around the populous cabin. Bunk

beds, six rows—samey porous white grainy ceilings used everywhere in transportation, lifeless smooth arsenic panel-walls to mix with the whites, accentuated with yellow ladders, navy blue with sparse-colored-dots satin beddings, curtains, and linen floor serving as the accent color—trifling her taste. Of the people she could see, most were slightly disheveled by the lengthy trip, currently on standby, ready to detrain the moment the maglev docked, meanwhile mindlessly sauntering in the cyberspace, devoid of expression.

Iris wiped her tears and silently chuckled, disconcerted. *What wouldn't I give away to lose the ability to think*, she voiced to herself, observing the rest; *or remember*. Overcome with the unbearable weight of grief, she let out a quiet sigh, destined for the abyss. *Or even both*, she concluded.

In search of a way to throw off her thoughts, she too connected to the cyberspace via Axioneer's Aurum neural network interface, in her case under the justification of "staying in the loop" with "the situation." There were more rallies at Raydeucar and adjacent cities—Meretau and Panemor being notable—A-2; a tetranol-powered Nail-Vector Swift Caoz C-178N power-propulsion rifle used by one of the "Equinox" (pro-independence) "protestor," killing six people, injuring more. *"Abhorred by Raydeucar's leadership," yeah right, sure*, she commented to herself. The violent nature of the act galvanized arguments in Thezeraine's Imperial Council, effectively polarizing the body on all levels—both branches and factions (*internally!*)—into two clashing camps, arguing over how to deal with the situation: diplomatically or by force – *Nothing unites us like a common threat, huh?* – with a popular projection stating that the ordeal had the potential to blow up into a "grave conflict" if the tension was to continue to rise. *Everything's going to hell as of late*, she thought—hardly anything nouveau, though: Raydeucar has always been a brewingland of a city for separatist

revolutionary aspirations (not sans reason), though quite rarely succeeding ones.

All the lights in the cabin went on. Another chime.

Politics, politics, politics, she wrapped up, pulling away from the tab specifically reserved for her beloved *The Chronicle*—the only newspaper she read along with *Catalyst*, a monthly journal, both forever open therein. No further updates in her professional inbox, in spite of the growing unease at Theuneurau, capital of the Empire Thezeraine; rather surprising, given the nature of her employment, even with recent controversy. Alas, there were numerous untended messages in her personal inbox, which, not having the mental capacity to go through, she postponed replying to until another time, one that will happen under different circumstances, under a lighter and less feeble mind, she justified to herself.

Pulling out of the cyberspace, she caught the final chime—the maglev’s intercom stating arrival at 1-North, Theoderau, (*The City of Thought*, as she affectionately referred to it) with six minutes to detrain. All other passengers grabbed their bags from their compartments and poured out into neighboring cabins, to the nearest exit. Gathering her thoughts and strength, Iris properly sat up, pulled back and tied her hair, opened the compartment door in the wall with a click, sent in the prefilled form, latched onto her beloved structured bag, and slid down from her bunk onto the floor. The cabin was, by this time, nearing being emptied. Having made her bunk and pat it twice as a goodbye, she wistfully began to progress to the front exit, following others in their footsteps. She went through the first screen door and into the adjacent dining cabin—with the all-too-familiar arsenic walls, navy blue and impeccably white sofas and chairs, mramor tables and bar surface, over which so much vanity-talk had been spilled to the pizzazz of light jazz. Not giving the decor much more of her attention, Iris passed through the salon and by a person rushing to finish their

meal—as if he had something critical to attend—as she passed through another screen door. The last seating cabin accumulated a sizable queue, slowly pouring out of the maglev, which had depressurized moments prior. She looked over the seating, through the transparent infotainment displays—currently serving as windows—onto the platform. The outer cover of the maglev was actively condensing water from the air into thick white mist, partially obscuring the view. Aligning with her expectations, despite it being early morning, the station was unusually crowded—not just with those arriving for the city, but also those gravely intent on departing it.

Moving in line with the queue, Iris exited the maglev, stepping onto the wet-from-light-rain southern platform of 1-North, into Theoderau's humid and chilly night air, light rain causing the chilled metallic envelope of the maglev to hiss. The night was pitch black—a storm was raging outside the LES, the Large Enveloping Shield: an Aegis-designed gargantuan nitritol&vieuxtritrol-powered Photonic-Hardmatter (/PHm) half-sphere enveloping Theoderau, circling it by its offshore – the only thing standing between the citizens within and the vieuxtritrol-affected ecosystem without. Tonight the LES itself was not its typical homogenous hexagonal blue pattern in the sky—it had elongated yellow patches cruising through the pulsating royal blue hexagonal pattern of the shield towards the cap—a byproduct of it being run at a higher power-plan and it being stimulated by the storm.

The platform hoisted a sense of worry in the air which so often comes in times of uncertainty—a worry that materialized in the air, filling it with anxious whispers. On the platform there were faces in various states of despair, folks fearmongering and gossiping, all in the seeming pretence of indifference and annoyance. It might have been the first time Iris had ever seen Starboard—1-North's cozy lounge & cafeteria, with downward

angled reflective glass walls looking out towards the trench-like tracks, the maglev's in its reflection mesmerizing; its interior playfully mixing orange with white and blue lighting—so filled with livelihood. Clusters of people forming in and around booths, heated discussions rapturing out by the bar and adjacent tables, the jingle of the music hardly discernable amidst all the discourse – every last person was weighing in. To her surprise, even the giftshop aisle was operating. Iris attributed that to the rest of the city being dormant in the face of the night – with megatowers, such as Skyline and Atlas Rise, being only semi-operational, thus making Starboard the only on-the-table dining option so deep into the night, which, despite not having eaten in 9 hours, she decided to pass on, wanting to neither huddle and socialize nor skip on sleep, postponing her repast for solitary brunch in *her own apartment*.

Slowly walking along the roughened blue-pearl granite platform to the overpass connecting the station with Theoderau via Altaire blvd., Iris insensitively observed the “flocks” all over the station, their movements, their interactions, their dialogues; as well as the reflections of the LES and station illumination-lights glittering on the floor, the walls, the wet bushes on walls and boxes—ignoring the content of the citylights—and even the maglev itself. The halo produced by the towering city center—under different circumstances by all means breathtaking—especially Experte, a stratoscraper in the shape of a split blade, Theoderau's widely-recognized signature landmark and thus mascot—went unnoticed, filtered out by Iris, who was instead reliving the painful moments of days not so long in the past. There *was* rain, there *were* people, and though their presence *was* noticed, it was *not* acknowledged. Several minutes passed in this deep dissociative contemplation; the maglev had begun to repressurize and would soon silently take off, carrying its new payload.

Having hiked the rubber-padded overpass, Iris turned around to find the maglev missing. With no one to really say goodbye to, she turned to Theoderau and made her way across the harrowed bridge connecting 1-North Station to Altaire blvd., an arterial road spanning the city north-to-south—one out of five total. The streetcar stop on the left side of Altaire, placed to receive streetcars incoming from the roundabout on the far end of the overpass, was filled to the brim with people, their luggage piled into precarious mountains—the reduced nighttime service not being of much help. Iris shot a glance to both sides of the boulevard, checking for incoming streetcars, appreciating her beloved jungle-like dense forest hill in the middle of the roundabout to her right. Confirming the absence of incoming trams, she crossed tracks to the other side of the edgelit arch bridge, making sure to mind the curb. Turning to Theoderau, the view of the glowing citytowers from 1-North had always been astonishing, even more so now that it was night-time. The city center was a collection of flat and somewhat slender scrapers, stepping and stacked to allow for their terrifying altitude, at times invoking active PHm support even in the absence of wind, panelled, and dimly-lit-up, arranged like an inverted paraboloid; the scrapers growing in size as they neared the centre, with Experte inching over all others. Theoderau's city center (and everything else) differed from other Thezeraine's major cities: it attempted to capture and maintain the architectural zeitgeist from 13 centuries ago, hardly a dozen years before the city, and the world, collapsed. Its architecture is what made Theoderau feel like home to Iris—the view of which was most excellent from the top of her apartment building in the “Lower Southern” district; that view rivaled only by the view in front of her right now.

The recollection of that view made her nauseous: her head feeling heavy. Even though she reduced her pace, she caught herself midfall, and having regained balance, halted, middle of the bridge,

scrutinizing glowing Theoderau with a cold-blooded stare. The ashen sidewalk of the bridge felt bleak and forlorn to Iris' judgement, with seemingly not a soul in sight: the world empty, ravaged, and ruined by uncertainty. Iris scoffed. Surfacing at last from the boiling tar of her thoughts, with two heavy swift steps, she steered herself towards the edge of the bridge, slamming her hands against the railing, breathing shakily and trembling from powerlessness. She let herself collapse onto the deck of the sidewalk, her structured bag bouncing away from her. Cursing inwards, she allowed tears to flow unobstructed, quietly sobbing; *of all places*, she thought. Trying to calm herself down, she inhaled the cold air, freezing her lungs, observing the edging lights, examining how light bled onto other surfaces. "Beautiful can, these things be," she uttered with difficulty—difficulty which, she would be lying if she said she didn't enjoy. She pulled out a pillcase, popping alprazolam, putting up her back against the parapet, she looked above the horizon, through the LES, past the en'storm outside, trying to focus on feeling the rain as it fell on her skin.

"Is everything alright, dear?" a woman came up to her, kneeling down.

Iris replied with a trembling voice, looking up, "Yeah, everything is alright, just, not having the best of nights."

The woman inquired, "Would you like to share? I'm Parker." She seemed marginally older than her, in minimalist darkened beige clothes, blonde hair and emerald eyes, with no obvious implants—*civilian, chances are*.

Iris stood up and picked up her structured bag, greeting her, "Hi, Parker. Iris. Just living through a very rough patch in my life. It's... work, had a," she paused temporarily, sighing, "close friend die on me."

With sorrow notes, Parker said, "That is awful, I am so sorry you had to go through that, Iris. Can I be of any help to you?"

Iris smiled, “No, thank you, Parker, for being so kind.”

“I know, from personal experience, that at times like these, loneliness can be excruciating.” Iris slightly nodded. “Would you like to join me on my way downtown?”

“No, no,” Iris returned politely, “Thank you for the offer; I’m going to be fine.”

Weighing it, Parker returned, “Okay,” she smiled, “it’s your call. Would you like a hug?”

Iris hesitantly agreed.

Having parted with her transient acquaintance, she turned to the sea, looking out towards the continental Aethelon. Sighing deeply, she slammed her fist on the handrail, reveling in the sharp burn of pain. Waves from the ocean were breaking on the rocky shore. The elevation of the bridge exceeded fifteen meters in the middle. Without a word, her left hand swiftly reached for the Aegis shield fixed to her right lapel, powering it off, and her right hand mirrored the action: both of her shields now black reflective surfaces, with a hardly discernible underlying gray outline to the shields’ hexagonal pattern. She leant on the parapet and appeared to intensely examine the raging ocean below, hearing loud thuds for every pulse of her ramping up heart: every sound so much louder and clearer. Slowly letting the cold breeze fill her lungs, she let the latch of her structured bag slide off her shoulder; the bag hit the bridge’s deck behind her with a metal twang moments after—a twang which, to her surprise, she did not hear. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and straightened out, moving closer to the parapet. With another deep breath she set out her hands as supports and leaned on them.

“Iris!” a familiar voice seemed to cheerfully call her up, coming from the northern side of the bridge.

Snapped out with terror, Iris slightly backed away from the edge, turning her head to the source of the voice, frightened; her

vision somehow blurry and head ringing. “Orion?” Iris inquired, turning to the figure, confusedly, somewhat disappointed, returning to partially lean on the parapet.

“What is Ms. Feverenn, the-sunshine-of-Theuneurau, doing here at this hour?” Orion cordially inquired, walking up to her.

She smiled, innerly glad to see a familiar face after so long. He was not much taller than her, though about one and a half times her age; part of Hover’s engineering lead, specializing in external system integration—similarly lightly augmented, with implants designed to allow for precise movement, close in shade hair, blue eyes. Iris knew him from a fairly young age, admiring him not so much for his technical skills as for his knowing a way around things. Now, as they stood on the bridge, while her smile had not yet dissolved, she had become visibly immersed in thought, borderline dissociating.

Orion came up to the parapet, and initiated, glancing towards her, “You haven’t been replying to messages lately. Are you doing okay?” Iris maintained her fading façade, slightly lowering her eyes to greet the ocean. Orion examined her saddened countenance. After a small pause, Orion walked around her, picking up her structured bag from behind her, jokingly commenting, “Not worried of a tetranol leak?” Seeing that his remark received no reaction, he continued, “I wouldn’t say this is *exactly* the best place to go diving. The water is rather shallow,” looking over the parapet into the waves below. “Could break a few bones.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Iris replied gently, placing her elbows on the parapet, looking down at the waves.

“Aren’t you always a joy to converse with,” Orion jokingly remarked, speaking directly at Iris. She carelessly observed the ripples in the water as they glared with reflections of the yellow patches on the LES. Sighing, he continued, “As... Her close friend, I am really doubtful that *this* would be what she’d want right now.”

Holding out the silence, she asserted, “Dead people don’t seem to want anything;” sharply turning to Orion to flatly ask, “do they?”

“Well, in that case, imagine for a second she is alive, would you say that—”

“I am *tired* of doing *that*,” Iris uttered, trembling with frustration, stepping away from the parapet, with tears in her eyes. Orion stared at her, startled by the sudden escalation, though not surprised; trying to find the best approach for the situation at hand. He momentarily delved into the cyberspace with an expression of what Iris read as remorse. Running through the list of possible implications of that action, her heart skipped a beat. She decided that the best course of action would be to try to make amends and play the waiting game. She wiped her tears and apologized, “I’m sorry. I’ve been on edge recently I—.”

“It’s okay, I get it. No need to apologize,” Orion interposed, looking out towards the city, admiring it, lightly swinging Iris’ bag in his hands, “Tell you what, I need to get to Experte; why don’t you give me some company on the way, seeing as it is in the general direction of where you *should* be headed?”

Iris professed contrite agreement, and they both started moving away from the scene. Orion passed the bag to Iris, and she slung it onto her left shoulder—always her left shoulder—automatically circling around Orion to be to his left. The gentle, cold, and salty-to-the-taste breeze loosened the tension in the air, allowing Iris to take deep breaths. In the ensuing silence, Orion prompted, “Would you care to explain what that was about?”

Iris took a while to respond, looking around while contemplating an answer. “Not something I could put into words—call it emotions running high, and,” she admitted, defeated, “Simply found myself in a place where things accumulated beyond a reasonable threshold; all I can say.”

As Orion was getting prepared to speak, Iris interjected, “Let us do without lectures, please? I know, I acted selfishly and made a mistake which could have proven costly, if not for myself, then others,” adding under her breath, “believe me, I know that.” *If others even care.* She continued, after a pause: “I appreciate your care and concern, but all I really need at the moment is familiar company. Could we switch to a different matter?” Receiving a “very well,” she inquired, “So, what is it you’re summoned to Experte for?”

Allowing for a change of character, Orion returned, “Not ‘summoned;’ I am here simply on a corporate diplomatic mission—an appointment with A-1’s council, to discuss Hover’s affairs.”

“Being part of Hover’s exec has altered more than your thinking patterns,” Iris remarked, turning to Orion, “it’s all about optics now;” she added, chuckling.

Without much protest, Orion admitted to being guilty—pointing out that the same was true for her.

She protested, “Please, that *stunt* has surely proved optics are not at the forefront of my mind. Then again, I sincerely doubt my regular *surface-level* work will ever get to my head,” her voice noticeably trailing off.

Surface-level, huh? I am certain you would prefer its advantages, Orion voiced internally, an expression of doubt materializing on his face.

Stepping past the “welcoming” Ziro Haven autoscan turrets at the end of the bridge into Falcon park, Experte was but four city blocks away. Theoderau was truly tiny. It took about three and a half hours (at Iris’s moderate pace) to completely circle its perimeter—starting from Ridgeway on the respectively named island, North via Westcross onto Theoderau’s Radiance beach, then fully east by Sinclair through Falcon Park, fully south via Axisgate, and finally back west by Westcross onto Ridge island. Yet what it

lacked in area it amply made up in volume. Even buildings at the edge of Falcon and Knox rivaled the height of the park's white oaks, while middle-Knox left its pines in the dust, their crowns tens of degrees above horizon-level line of sight, with citytowers and Experte soaring higher yet, barely fitting into one's field of vision top-to-bottom even this far out. Despite their height, Theoderauyan skyscrapers were unbothered by violent upper-altitude wind—the LES being to blame. For a time in its history, the city *had* no wind, until vegetation and estates began showing signs of decaying structural integrity, at which point artificial biosphere management systems had been implemented, with wind, rain, and sunshine managed by the circular structure on which the LES was sitting.

Theoderau's active nightlife had faded around two hours ago, and daytime would only start in one—Falcon park therefore devoid of intransient visitors, though in letting through next to all in- and out-bound traffic for 1-North it was far from empty. Murmuring banter, so distinct from the anxiety of 1-North, and the occasional humming streetcar, filled the midnight park. Hefty, rocky, lush hills, with ferns and shrubs and dwarf trees, artistically arranged to be pleasing to the eye, kept in pristine condition; winding wooden trails diverging into the park from dual-lane now brick Altaire blvd., with naturalisesque stone benches and two streetcar stops placed adjacently; cobblestone bridges over streams and a pond of crystal-clear water; lamp-posts providing just enough illumination—everything was made to be as soothing as possible. Iris smiled. Though, the storm on the outside, unlike life on the inside, was visibly intensifying, with small white cracks appearing in the center of the yellow islands cruising through the LES.

The rustle of wet leaves filled the cold night air. On the topic of nature and parks, Iris continued, “Just step outside the LES and it is like this for tens of thousands of kilometres: *magna natura*. Aside

from the corroded *vetus mundus* and its undiluted *vieuxtritol*.” *Vieuxtritol* was the marketing name of Thezeraine’s early-days’ nouveau energy source “nitritol.” Organically stable, easily absorbable, biomechanically disruptive, incredibly toxic, and deadly. Though not entirely dissimilar to modern day nitritol, *vieuxtritol* gathered such a horrendous reputation of ripping one’s skin with mottling scars upon contact it *had to be* distanced from. What was worse, A-1’s biosphere evolved primitive plant forms, sparkles, that, on critical mass, produced and stored *vieuxtritol* as an energy source, destining A-1 to irrecoverably be filled with poison.

“What a suicide mission that would be, even with proper gear,” Orion pointed out, *and for what?* looking back for a glimpse of the LES, noticing the signatures of “white death” in the shield—discolorment that comes with high nitritol discharge, the en’rainfall from the storm boiling off.

The sky above was covered by rainless ironwood clouds; the lightly tilted lithosol slope on which they were now, intermittent with black bedrock, with scattered patches of dirt, mixed with sand, and gravel; patches of grass dispersed all around, at times featuring a lonely pine. The steppe was hardly a dozen kilometers off the shore of the Atlantic, in a shadow zone following eastside sierras, with Theoderau not more than a hundred clicks away. Orion sat chipping away at a display, trying different configurations for a trailing Aegis shield, spun by an extendable arm with an adjustable RPM. He put down the tablet, and leant in his helmet against his thick shielded gloves in disgruntlement. The wind was picking up, making the grass rustle. Raising his head, he became captivated by the patterns air produced as it ran through the grass. *So many years on, and we still try to catch up to nature.* Orion looked back at the team, with such strong collaborative effort assembling the Hover. *Carpe diem—*, he chuckled, *today’s the day. With luck on our side,*

anyway. He turned back to fiddling with power curves. Seeing some progress, he sat back with a smile.

He jolted back by his tablet beginning to fizzle, a black area on the screen making it scream. He ripped out the plug for the arm, coming in on the radio, “En’rain! En’rain!”

“Affirm; retire to safety,” he received from Seth, the operation lead. Powering on the Aegis shields above the exo-suite, he briskly walked to the team, almost slipping on the gravel. He assisted in the retrieval of critical components, lending number 17 a hand in getting down from the wing with the Central Control Block, himself moving around to rip out prototype trailing Aegis blocks, keeping them safe from the rain as he and so many others moved to camp.

Sitting by the operation control panel in the garage, Orion ranted to Seth, “En’rain—in a shadow zone! So much carcass going to waste...”

Even inside the suites, one could hear the screeching boil of vieuxtritol against the fully-powered nitritol aegis shields. Seth laclusterly replied, verifying functionality of the retrieved devices, “The priciest parts have been salvaged; rebuilding the rest will take only a bit of time.” Orion sighed, hearing Seth continue, “Just be thankful it’s just en’rain, Endell. Could be much, much worse.”

Iris turned to Orion, her eyes shining with the desire to make the perfect witty remark, but she deemed it inappropriate and stopped herself. Orion continued, “That which is most captivating is often the source of the greatest peril. Coined that piece of wisdom in an engineering test.”

Iris guessed, “I would suppose that to be the purpose of your ‘corporate diplomatic mission’?”

Orion smiled. Iris continued her inquiry, pitching in a salesmanish manner to the trees to the sides of Altaire, arms spread wide as if the sidewalk of the boulevard was a runway podium, turning to various sides—her bag turning about with her, catching

stray glances, “Vacuum Tunneling—all over every Thezerainian media outlet! The long awaited solution to maglev maintenance made possible by Hover’s and Aegis’s *tireless* collaboration!”

“Whoa there, tune down the enthusiasm. Maglevs aren’t going anywhere,” Orion joyfully assured her.

Iris momentarily turned her eyes to Orion in slight disbelief, then gaily continued, “Picture the convenience of a hover passing through the LES and docking safely in the Ridgemere harbor—no more hour long train rides, no more navigating Theoderau’s befuddling city grid, no more——!”

As Iris was looking around, searching for inspiration for a third point to her argument, Orion interjected, laughing in disbelief, “You are unbelievable—an AV won’t suffice?” adding, “and hadn’t you slept on the transit back?”

“Details,” Iris quickly returned, “—but how do you know?”

“I assumed; you *did* blow past me on the VacTrain,” Orion said, watching Iris connect the dots, snapping back to the topic: “Though, the act of ‘Hover will be utilizing Aegis shields to dynamically construct a portable vacuum tunnel’ does not necessarily entail that ‘Hover will be introducing technological interdependence into critical apparati,’” Orion said, turning to Iris, “with the current situation at hand, the last thing anyone could possibly want is a ‘Light Thezeraine’-esque fait accompli—or that of Nolan Forgrave, at that.”

Leaving the park, the breeze behind them was fading—the city ethereal, shining like a violent starwind aurora, splurging its iridescent palette onto everything. It was quietened in the face of the night, though not devoid of its enchanted nocturnal admirers—as Iris put it, ever an idealistic romantic—murmuring in the night streets – their sights kept off the ground by radiant skystrips and jumbotrons, keeping the city flashing as ever: the city made so much more embellishing by the glittering wet surface

reflections of their illumination. On the street-level, to either side of them were dark fashion storefronts with glowing fascia and blade signs, deserted in the night cafés, their decorative flowery vegetation being sprinkled by the night rain, lone plastic benches for the weary commuter that were made ever so slightly inoperative by the rain, courtyard chairs folded and put away with stacked tables – Iris had entertained the thought of whether the tables, too, were “contaminated” with discourse regarding Raydeucar. Above the immediate street, amidst the lightstrips and jumbotrons were offices, studios, and apartments: some still having their lights on, the city never fully asleep. Iris, making an instantaneous associative connection, was struck mentally off-balance—internally attempting to switch gears in a way to throw off her thought process. Failing to do so, she fell back into conversation by allowing Orion to spin the preaching that was perceptibly on the top of his mind, opening for dialogue with the first example he mentioned, “How is interdependence connected to having your Caoz gun forcecooked?”

That *Light Thezeraine*, the daughter of the last pre-collapse emperor, is the person whose untimely death is said to have triggered the empire’s downfall is common knowledge. Her death occurred in a crackdown raid on under-the-counter vieuxtritol production deep in the Lumen district, Theoderau, which was the then-capital of Thezeraine—during which her Caoz rifle is said to have been remotely overcooked as a result of its opulent Anti[E]therium Generators (AEGs) being inundated and exploded with the purple terror. Specifically in Theoderau, her legacy is a weathered bronze statue at the corner of Crescendo and Blackstone, in Portland—and a widely-preached tale of corporate security caution.

As anticipated, the subject clearly having been grounds for thought, Orion began, “After doing some research, it was

established that the sole culprit of the *accident* was a three-way, although sophisticated and secure, AL-2 link between Hover, Caoz, and Aegis devices. A quantum encryption vulnerability allowed for a vectored attack, issued from none other than her own compromised hover—you know the rest.” Iris moodily nodded. Unconsciously skimming through the dark interiors of establishments while brooding over the matter, he shook his head, adding, “No, every single n’n’a-powered (nitritol n’ antitherium) device must function standalone. Considerable as the benefits would be, the risks are never going to be worth it.” After a pause, he continued, “What makes ops such as G7-V masterclasses is the presence of multilevel fallbacks for every stage.”

Really was born a millennium and a bit too late, Iris voiced to herself, perseverating, content with the change in her mood, allowing Orion thoughtspace. *Things have never been the same without you two, you know that?* she internally asked, neither expecting a response nor ever receiving one. With her true-haven axiom falling apart the more she gave it thought, Iris relegated her focus back upon the city. *Theoderau*—she took the city, with all its sparkling magnificence, in with a breath of warming air—the *magnificent city of thought*. Theoderau’s inner-ring—coupled with Ridgeway Island—formed a rather unique architectural gradient between outer-ring apartmental buildings and the City Center’s stratoscraper. Altaire, in living up with its name, had by this point spread out into a fully fledged boulevard, with streetcar rails put over a grassbed between its brick lanes, now sighting one running every so often due to three overlapping routes. It was touched up with flowery shrubs, purple butterfly, pink azalea, and red camelia among others, and dwarf pines—though, this was very Theoderau-anesque, and *tonight there was no reason to adore the ordinary*. Drifting along their side of the lane, her eyes snapped on a Maison Floiré cafe, a chain for which she harbored a particular

fondness, with some ill-will. It was not that long ago that she would at times stop by and grab a salmon croissant—the best item on the menu to this day, according to her—after the day at the academy, in-lieu of dinner. A long, drudgerous couple of hours of ingesting information behind, with more hours to let her creativity *ablaze* by the warmly-sterile hue of her desk lamp queued in – with a croissant or another baked good to break up her day. Whether she missed those days or not she could not tell—and if she did, it was not because of “things being simpler” or “times being better,” for she was young enough to remember those things to not be true. What she had lost was the innocence of ignorance, of unawareness, of having no other choice—for the choice of the salmon croissant was no choice at all, as a selection *must* have been made at the end of the day, even that of no dinner at all—but in return she gained a certain Invictus-esque self-cognizance, of the usefulness of which she was either unaware or uncertain, and perhaps ignorant. In any case, she resurfaced: had it not been late in the night, she would have perhaps gone in and grabbed that croissant—after a bit of further thought, she decided to rainticket that idea. For after all, between Evenfall and its ops and the latest drudgery, spending a night in the fresh air was, to her, the best place she could hope to be.

“Iris?” Orion asked for her.

“Yeah?” she jolted her head in response, adjusting back to reality.

“Awfully silent again. Just checking.”

“No reason for concern,” she explained, “I was just reminiscing over my days at TCA.”

“Harboring fond memories of Theoderau Central?” Orion inquired in a pleased manner, turning to Iris.

“Some,” she shrugged in return, adding with a disappointed sigh, “most of them involving Sonnet.”

Following the sudden drop of poise, he remarked, “I am sorry to have heard about her.”

Iris tilted her head skyward, letting the rain fall on her face, her sight ripping past the titanium-framed skyscrapers, focusing on the storm beyond the chromatically-flowing blue, green, yellow, white LES. Lowering her head and breaking the silence, she said, tearing up, “Matter of life, I suppose.” Orion sighed, unnerved with compassion, looking downward. After a while, Iris hesitantly resumed, with palpable difficulty, “I remember this...” Orion looked towards Iris, partaking in her sorrow. “It was my sophomore year of senior period, and I violently choked the half-semester of multivariable differential analysis. Happens, right?” she asked, looking towards Orion for affirmation – he returned a slight gesture of agreement, “Anyway, I came straight home, breaking my familiar routine, and completely broke down, not without reason, but I just... fully lost it.” Taking a deep breath she continued, with a slight uplift in her tone, “Yet not an hour later, Sonnet and I were on 15th, a bench looking out towards the infinite coastal line bordering the Atlantic trailing off into the horizon, my beloved salmon croissant lying on my lap,” sighing, she concluded, “Comforted.”

In response to the ensuing silence, Iris continued, hopefulness in her voice, “There were darker times, of course, but... We all persevered.”

“Perhaps this time it will not be all too different?” Orion suggested.

Iris sighed, “Yeah, well...” trailing off, becoming stale.

She became overrun by the sensation of a gaping wound in her chest, carved in by anxiety. Unable to chalk it up, she let it eat at her, meantime trying to keep an eye on her surroundings; looking for control; shifting her focus from glittering lamppost, to soaked-through bench, to the adjacent lush privet. She was noticing objects but was finding it increasingly difficult to see them.

Managing her breathing similarly amounted to nothing. She was accustomed to routinely ruminating over present matters while being fully engulfed in her memoir—recently, mulling over news of Raydeucar, revelation of Vacuum Tunneling, *her last failed clandestine op, the...* Iris sultrily observed how the outlines of objects began to merge and blur, smearing; her vigilance becoming substituted by haze, dissociating, alprazolam kicking into gear; how she was moving forward, but every step felt like a retreat, a turn, sinking her deeper and further into the insurmountable maze that everything was. All while pondering three questions: *Was that life really better? Was it more preferable? What about now?*

Orion noticed her once again turning silent, but allowed her to take her course, trusting she would find a way out. All the while, he had been rehearsing key points for the upcoming meeting and simulating probable stations the meeting could sojourn. *"Vacuum Tunneling may prove of critical importance at providing the upper hand shall the not unlikely doomsday prognosis take place,"* he internally repeated, *"not being able to secure an immediate choke-hold on the situation in the event of an escalation will come costly."* He threw a glance around Altaire, always boiling with life but now so unusually still. *Curse it all...,* he thought, *I'm an engineer, not a harbinger. All of this is just playing on fears: VT guzzles up so much power it depletes nitritol as if it were an actual supercapacitor. The prospect of using antitherium in a highly mobile craft should by itself alienate anyone in their right mind, less they make-wish a portable supernova. The technology is just plain not ready for deployment.* Orion sighed, raising his head to sideline a glance towards Atlas Rise, a soaring skyscraper to his right and the last vestige of Knox before Centrale. He gave it a welcoming smile expressing a fondness of the place.

The effervescent and bright conjoint play of the orchestra spun the expanded atrium, intensifying the vivid colors under the flowing lights, sparkling so deep in the Friday evening. The

dripping light strips, harmoniously pulsating with the sound, illuminated the array of two-seat metallic glass dining tables, covered by vinyl tablecloths with cutlery and low cuboid vases filled with seasonal pansies on top, positioned to face the elevated stage—the wall behind it made up of tinted displays, adjusting the visuals to accompany the symphony as it progressed. Opposite the stage was a bar, lit up in green and teal lights, with seated upon bar stools members enjoying the show, layers and layers of rooms and zones echoing above them. Reclining on a table positioned to his side, Orion observed the synchronous movement of the ensemble, brooding over Hover's latest affairs, axially rotating a glass of rum in his left hand. He looked to his right, where Atlas Rise opened through a large panel of glass towards continental Aethelon. Taking a glance at the orchestra, Orion lightly, yet firmly, put down his glass, waiting for an interlude to occur. Once the atrium erupted with applause, he discreetly made his way through the crowd towards the balcony, passing the glass doors, and breathing in the cold air—the balcony fervent with feisty cocktail discussion, clusters of people discussing latest policy matters over filled with sparkling champagne flutes, enjoying the heightened view over the streets below. Orion made his way closer to the guardrail, placing his hands securely on it, admiring the golden-sunset view from the top of the world, regretting he couldn't enjoy it. *Curse it all...*, he flung to the world, his face acquiring a degree of distraughtness. Scanning his surroundings, he went over the barely visible in the dusk Aethelon, lit Theoderauyan streets, the streetcars moving along Altaire below, an AV rushing by via its air-canal towards Portland, the city grid opening to the central lineup, with Trinity row running alongside them, and the life inside, beside, and above him. Orion sighed in frustration, gently hitting the guardrail. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath of fresh air in. Tilting his head to view the balcony, as he was about to turn back to his

melancholy, he recognized a familiar face, who in turn noticed him. After the palpably prudent figure excused themselves from the group with a polite smile and a gesture, they headed towards Orion.

“Orion,” the councillor called up with shining cordiality, positioning themselves to his side, grabbing onto the guardrail.

“Marcus.” Orion acknowledged.

“Quite the while since I last sighted you at Atlas, wouldn’t you agree?” he politely inquired in return.

“You could say that again,” Orion prolonged with an unexcused sigh, “At some point, work just consumes you whole, especially if you let it,” he laughed off.

Marcus replied, “Would that be the reason why you find fresh air more enticing than the Friday evening symphony?” Turning to Orion, he smiled, voicing with reassurance, “It is quite the lovely evening.”

Orion took a deep breath and turned towards the city center, eyeing Shardline for a couple seconds before letting the air out in a deep sigh.

Continuing the conversation, Marcus remarked, “I have heard that Hover’s Engineering Board is doing particularly well.”

“As always.”

Marcus smiled. He continued, “Well, I personally do find this aerosplit prototype rather enticing. It is, but, *a matter of getting the right people interested.*”

“Not exactly our prevailing priority,” Orion once again prolonged.

“And being a downer of course contributes to the aim,” Marcus returned.

“It’s——” Orion tried, but stalled in not knowing how to proceed.

Breaking the silence, Marcus asserted, “When you are a leader, those around you watch your every step, every shift in sentiment.

Learn to manage your own psychology or succumb to the most common pitfall: *resentment*.”

Orion looked straight ahead, slightly nodding to himself. He checked on Iris, quite silent, whose eyes had not considered him in a while, arms crossed, only being on the look-out for the occasional curb; her Aegis shields were disabled, everything otherwise seemed in order. Orion smiled. *But what risks wouldn't we take for our safety... At the end of the day, I just hope Auralie gets to see a fraction of the benefit everyone reaps from her ploys at Raydeucar.*

Disenchanting nighttime Theoderauyan streets, Iris began, “Though, I suppose it would only take one hover to turn Theoderau into a large-scale domino tray.”

“Pardon?” Orion asked, presenting an addled façade to Iris, though quite happy to see her persevering on her own. *Hasn't lost it all, contrary to what everyone believes.*

“VT interconnectivity—I mean,” she clarified, “Don't believe the board would exactly turn *ecstatic* upon contemplating that possibility in the framework of my proposal,” smiling to herself, quietly adding, “though I do suppose they would've thought of that within the first few moments?...”

Orion smiled.

Revitalized, taking a few brisk steps, and beginning to walk backwards, confident in not falling over, Iris continued, “Speaking of the council: as VT is a collaborative effort between Hover and Aegis, I would assume another party to be present during the discussion...?” she hung in the air, tilting her head in the inquiry.

Orion admitted, “You would be correct.” With a note of pride, he added, “Amelie Flanigan will also be present at the meeting.”

Hearing that name, Iris almost paid the price for her cockiness to the bricklane, taken aback and stared at Orion, bewildered, ever so slightly shellshocked.

“En route—and yes, VT’s of *that* significance. Darius would also be here, were the situation not what it is.” Orion sighed, “Urgent affairs at every HQ, Aegis’s included. You know why firsthand. Learning of the delay, thought of staying back for a couple of moments at Atlas, nostalgia being the driving factor.”

Still in shock, Iris halted, with Orion following suit. She looked onto Atlas Rise, catching a glimpse of it before turning to Orion and politely inquiring whether he would prefer to go through with the original plan.

“A compelling option, yet I am still intent on arriving at Experte—let the past beget the past;” Orion replied, “Furthermore, I find it difficult to trust a certain someone enough to let her wander off on her own.” Iris looked down, asking, “Please?”

Orion looked away, likely considering the best response to the situation at hand. Iris added, “I will let you know when I get to the apartment,” becoming mortified at her digging her own grave. After a while, Orion turned back, beginning, “Alright, there are two things I will say: I hope you have taken to heart how stupid what you tried doing today is.” Iris lowered her eyes further yet. “Second,” Orion paused for a second, attempting a change of tone, “I can’t imagine how difficult things have been as of late, but that is no reason to let up. Lighter days are still to come, just give them a chance.” She silently nodded. Orion finished with, “Alright, then. Hop onto 7th—I believe it moves to Ridgeway?²—and do ping me back when you land in one piece. Take care.”

“Have fun,” Iris replied.

One-on-one with Theoderauyan streets again, her wariness starting to take over, she limped over to the nearest stop, feeling the falldown of the day. Disenchanted with the city in this sorrowing night, all she began to long for is to get to the refuge of her apartment, the stillness of it becoming ever so enticing. As she was checking for trams before crossing the boulevard, she gave a glance

to Shardline—a two tower building, which unlike the now adjacent cascading blades of Experte, was blocklike, stacking down—admittedly finding it ironic that, for all the time spent in qualifying on the 61st floor, how little assistance it proved at the most critical moment. Distraught, she pulled up the schedule of the 7th route via her neural interface, realizing she would have to hurry up to catch it in a minute's time. Shifting from Knox to Centrale, it became prominently convenience-oriented, with courts shifting further inwards and supportive outdoor public infrastructure – in turn of which slick items were favored: soaring strip displays, living plant walls, piled signage – experiencing a noticeable cut as to not obfuscate the grandeur of the architectural pinnacle that were the aspiring stratoscrapers and allow for greater transportation throughput. “Enchanting enough to be satisfactory,” would be how Iris often put it during her ventures in the “city of thought;” perhaps somewhat biased by TCA, two blocks southeast from where she was positioned now, whose indoor spaces were entirely enviable. Between it and Shardline, she found the former infinitely more preferable for its interpersonal-interaction-oriented approach, zones changing thematically top to bottom, each area having a unique layout, fostering independent study by inspiring curiosity as the core of its interior design—as opposed to Shardline; at the end of the day, she would classify Evenfall as the merging of the two.

Getting to the metal-carcassed stop on time, shielding from the rain with glass ceilings and being home to a moss wall on the rear, she entered the white-blue streetcar on the far end, and put herself to recline against the back of the cabin, preferring it to the cushty sitting. The 7th line running from west to south-east, it was not subject to the transportation crisis of the two lines delivering traffic to the station, which perfectly explained the two cabins being relatively next to empty. As the streetcar began to accelerate, she let

her head rest on the back glass display. Looking to her right, she gave a shifting sight to Shardline as the streetcar was drifting onwards to Bloomfield avenue; as it were, it seemed to her that everything was intent on reminding her. *Of all things that could have happened during “Pisces...”* Iris thought, defenseless.

Sitting behind her desk in the third live operation room in the B2 layer of Evenfall—a large box, with three step-up layers, filled with operators; the wall before her a geometric labyrinth pattern on top of triangular sound-isolation foam; to her left, an underpass at the back of the first level, delving under the second layer to lead to a corridor—she was directing Sonnet with rigidity, “Signature on W.X., level. Maintain course, possible lefthand hazard.”

“Is epsilon holding up?” Sonnet inquired over the radio.

“Excellently,” Iris replied, with an audible smile.

Her anxiety pumping up in fear of hell breaking loose, she was ravenously reading into the metrics and telemetry provided by the live feeds, put up on large panels in front of her, giving insight into apparati temperature, wear, damage, dissymmetry, dynamic environment scans, reads of ongoing operational signatures, status, statistics, perspectives—acting as an assistive copilot, providing quintessential intel alone—she maintained her poise under pressure, reporting back to her, continuing communication, “status green, apparati in order, path unobstructed, keep con-ops.”

Overhearing instances of excessive calling, she received “Shots fired behind,” from Amber. “Investigating,” she replied immediately, beginning to rapidly read through logs and others’ feeds, and after gaining the revelation of a penetration by Raydeucar’s Elite Force—getting fortuitously entangled in the op, acting against it, unaware—proclaimed, leaning in: “E.F. caused distress calls behind. Crossfire. Extraction alpha advised. Hovers are on standby,” receiving strong-worded frustration in return, “Not a fucking option, Iris. We’ll push.”

“Copy. Restructuring,” Iris replied, switching comms to Taylor, one-up visor, and pitching him: “We have 1-81, 1-81. Extraction declined by team. Actionplan?” — “We’re on it! Push!” Iris returned to Sonnet, pronouncing: “Idris will switch to follow. Uhh,” she panicked, making a call, “S.Q.D. is 30 off set to defense. Trying to reach E.F. to clear up. Push greenlit.” — “Copy.”

Though trying to not let it show in her voice, Iris sat petrified, realizing the threat that the pivot presented—taught how to deal with distress, but *not* when there were personal matters at stake. Iris, momentarily glowering over, thought over the warning she received from Preston Scofield, head of division, regarding the dangers of professional entanglement, *this cannot be happening, no, not again, not again!* Raising her head, she fearfully pitched in, “Incoming, dual sequence, breaker swifts, Equinox, support system warmed up, initialize Aegis.” Watching the readings tick up, measuring seconds by every third heartbeat, towards contact with breaker-type vector Caoz rifles with terror, *just our damn luck to have triple-T piercers against breakers, even if they’re tetranol; come on, Amber, Sonnet, I know your reaction times are superior;* she gravely asserted, “Inbound,” watching the encounter unravel.

As Iris said that, the radio clicked – comms went down.

Iris stood in the streetcar, holding onto a rail by her hip as it was turning right on Westcross, she observed the discolored cabin, dispirited. Though her perception was not completely off, the cabin was far from sterile. In spite of not being empty, hosting approximately a dozen people, it was quite dormant, with every passenger appearing to have worked a day-long shift. There was, nonetheless, a sense of buoyancy, so lacking in other parts of the city. *Why me?* she spun at herself again, *I wish I lost the ability to...*, lowering her ambitions with a scoff, sentencing: *No.* The interior of the streetcar strongly resembled that of the VacTrain, with the exception of it focusing on short-term travel—numerous cerulean

poles stemming, from in between the numerous lightly blue-cushioned gray transverse seatings, towards the singular row of yellow overhead-lighting panes. To all sides, there were transparent infotainment displays—featuring headlines, *Raydeucar, as per usual*, scrolling downwards; alongside a shrunk right-side column, hosting current time, next stop, the path of the line with the current position, and the running schedule—with an approximately 1.8m main diagonal. Every four metres, the cabins were segmented by black rubber spacers, allowing the tram to turn—it being on rails, often over a grass path, allowed it to both run with superior efficiency, silence, and throughput: the main reason Theoderau did not allow to have any other forms of transportation without a special permit—emergency services and VIP transportation being allowed to use tram-tracks and strictly-defined air-corridors—besides bicycles.

Iris lightly hit her head against the back pane. With sharp mental pain, she returned, *that soul-crushing silence after the click—no matter how much you call, there is simply no reply*. To her left, was the opening towards the infinite cobalt Atlantic running along the coast of Aethelon. Lifelessly remembering all the great moments she had on this view, she tore at herself, *and how much more painful that becomes, when a beloved part of you is ripped out—by your own doing, too. The only thing I am glad about is being left uncaught in the ensuing scandal centering around making Raydeucar so “antsy.”*

Having informally reported to central control regarding the incident, she observed the operation crumble, stuck in a state of disassociation, not able to feel or think in the state of shock. The flashing green dots trickle down to red before turning off completely, more and more so, carving out a disproportionate portion, but, nonetheless, being swamped. In retrospect, the unanimous decision to charge ahead rivaled the absurdity and

amplitude of powergate. Having been briefed on the fact that the op was rigged, she submitted the “*accident*” report, and sat through the fallout of *piscesfall* blowing past her, being elevated higher and higher in the execution chain, over to the in the night Imperial Council, the toll of heads rolling increasing long after the drapes had been hung on the grounds of the bloodbath.

A couple of hours down the line, very early in the morning, extremely sleep deprived, she was sitting across Yasmin—her friend with whom she bonded over the nightmares of TCA—who arrived early to provide mental support, similarly shellshocked by *pisces*, in the cafeteria of Evenfall.

“God...” Yasmin said.

Iris sighed. “Yeah...”

“Were you close to your third operatee?” a woman asked her, wrapping up the questioning.

Looking down at the steel table stained with her blood, she replied, “Yes.”

“We appreciate your definite recollection of events, and we are very sorry for your loss, Ms. Feverenn,” the woman gravely asserted, “However, as you yourself understand, you are in no condition to remain in Evenfall Q3. You are discharged until further notice.”

“Undestood.”

Standing alone in the hallway next to a potted plant, she scoffed. “Fucking Amber.” Having, by this point, substituted grief with rage, she screamed: “When we meet, I will fucking rip you apart!”

The cafeteria where she was now sitting was a truly lovely place, though none of its comforts cured the morning of the eeriness in the face of the events that unfolded tonight. Iris had ordered nothing but dark coffee, which had turned cold. Yasmin inquired to her, “What happened to your hand?”

Moments before piscesfall had begun, she temporarily left her desk, and walked outside the live-ops room into the dimly-lit and silent in the face of the night corridors to the nearest restroom. Putting her hands onto the blackstone countertop, staring into the mirror. She noticed her own paleness, examining it further from different angles, looking onto the black backwall. After washing her hands, she listened in, hearing nothing but mortal silence. She wiped her hands dry, and tore into her left hand to mute her scream, digging into the flesh with her prominent fangs until she felt the bittersweet taste of metal, releasing it and beginning to cry, putting her ripped up hand over the sink, blood dripping; breaking down over the stained sink.

“Exactly what happened to all of us,” she replied to Yasmin with a shallow smile, picking up the teaspoon to stir her coffee.

The streetcar making its penultimate stop before she'd have to step off, Iris looked at her masked scars, *at least you never had to live with the excruciating pain of being the central cause of so much harm, walking out of the massacred lake completely dry, unstained. Perhaps the best thing I could do is join you... two.*

Hearing the pling, she walked out of the streetcar to the stop in the middle of Ridgeway Island, on Sixth. She turned to head to her apartment building, now but a couple of deep breaths away. Ridgeway, in many ways, resembled Lower Western with its countless apartment buildings, though scaled inwards and expanded upwards, up to eighteen floors at the highest, made panelled, with variable extrusion and vertical and horizontal planks of contrasting colors to emphasize the character of the buildings; the full-height windows made of polarized glass, allowing for variable transparency, though the lobbies often were semi-transparent. The rain had ceased, though the street was still wet, and the walls occasionally sent droplets to splatter on the ground. The storm outside had calmed, the sky was getting lighter

in the face of dawn, turning to an aegean hue in the east. Somewhat revitalized, Iris walked through the familiar streets, paying little attention to the corner shops, the excessive courtyards, the trails leading down to the promenade, the one of the six playgrounds in the entirety of Theoderau. Having made her way across to the corner of seventh, she stepped up the slate stairs of her apartment building, opening the reinforced glass doors with a biometric scan. Walking through the doors, the lobby blasted out a gust of warm, dry air, reminding her of the late ventures she would make into the city not that long ago, before everything had fallen apart. She gave a glance to the modern organic lobby, with a marble floor and pillars running up to the white concrete ceiling; the left hand side featured living spaces, with growing birch trees spacing the walls; opposite that was the check-in terminal and the reception & bar services volumetric-geometry wooden desk; finally, before her was the decorative wooden maze leading to the two building elevators and public services—the space oftentimes used for public social events. She walked to the check-in system, authenticated, and placed an order for groceries, scheduling it to come in to the 85th in ten hours, hoping to have had enough sleep by then. She turned back and made her way past the overrun-by-magazines glass coffee table featuring a sapling of a cherry tree surrounded by the slightly worn felt chairs and the reception desk's banker lamps to the elevator corridor.

She was pleasantly surprised to find one on the floor level, guessing it to have been an early-bird on their way outside. As she pressed the button to open the elevator door, she noticed the cranberry juice spilled on the floor—or at least it smelled like that. Getting inside the Auerolin elevator, she leaned onto the control panel for support, noticing the cranberry juice on the floor, pushing the button to rise to the 8th floor, quickly following it with the “close the doors” buttons. As the elevator began moving upwards,

Iris let out a relieved sigh. Looking up to the white dots that were the elevator lights, she became mesmerized, contemplating the effect the elevator becoming stuck, as it once did on her, would have. Looking below, she felt like she picked up a rusty scent, though did not give it much further thought.

Disenchanted from her reverie by the elevator's doors opening as it arrived on 8th, she made her way on the lined carpet, to her apartment, 85, and unlocked it with a card. Walking in, she undressed without much care, putting matters of tidiness off until later today, like many other things. She dropped off her aegis shields and apartment card on the counter, turned dusty of it not having been cleaned in the last three weeks; all its 51 sqm being uncared for, though not made a mess off. On her way to drop off her structured bag in her room, the smaller of the two—though there has been no reason to stay in the smaller one for the past two months—yet halted in the hallway, putting her structured bag down. She reached for a photoframe on the wall, cleaning it off with her healing wrist, looking at it with a warm and tender sight. The group photo featured herself at a very young age, the photo being taken around eighteen years ago. She continuously looked at the photo, becoming more and more immersed in thought, focusing on one particular aspect of it.

Letting out a sigh, she recited, *“So should I, after the tea and cakes and—”*

“Iris!” she heard, recognizing a familiar voice, instantly turning to the living room with frightened eyes; jumping back in fear, she dropped the frame. Upon impact, it split into two parts, large shards of glass breaking off, disassembling the white light of the apartment into a rainbow, as they pirouetted through the air, at their roughened edges.

§ Breakthrough

“Allow me to present to you,” Wilhelm displayed to Alfred, “the prototype of a man-portable and manufacturable ‘trial triple tolerance’ powered railgun.”

They stood in a shooting range next to the rifle fixated to a worn stand, no more than seventy centimeters lengthwise in appearance, remarkably low-profile. The design was distinctively that of an engineering proof-of-concept: not field ready, though it was boastfully showing off its compressed geometry.

“Has it been tested?” Alfred inquired.

Zealous, Wilhelm continued, “Yes! With promising results,” he picked up a tablet with metrics, showing visualizations and graphs, “the device was able to sustain accelerating bullets up to two and a half kilometers a second—beyond that, it snaps. However, it could hypothetically deliver a payload at more than ten kilometers a second, albeit as a suicide weapon.”

Alfred gave it a detailed inspection, weighing what had been said. “It is admirably terrifying,” he concluded.

“Would you like to see its capabilities live?” Wilhelm returned.

Alfred smiled, “That is why I am here.”

Standing behind the multilayer EM-shield-complemented protective window, the rifle was primed to fire at a steel wall with a depth approximating current-gen MBTs’ shielding. Assuring safety on the polygon, the railgun was primed; as it was condensing air with its cryogenic cooling, it was set to fire once at a clamped speed. After the ensuing hypersonic thunderclap, the implosion of which was reverberating in chests through walls, the bullet blazed the air—a portable lightning—leaving a trail of blue plasma and a shimmering-like pathway in the air, with the steel plate compromised: vaporized at the point of impact, shattered

elsewhere; the railgun in-tact, remaining in the same spot, blowing off white smoke to cool itself down.

Stunned by the ghastly scene, Alfred mouthed:

“Raging fire,

Dear infernal gyre.”

Weeks prior, presenting his work to Monte, his close friend and a triple-T research associate, Wilhelm received, “How can you be proud of this?! This is absolutely against everything we stand for; all of our attempts to get along will be shattered!” he stepped up closer, “I beg of you, do not release this—” he pointed to the disassembled railgun, “this—and I am sorry to call it that—mistake which is worse than the advent of nuclear!”

“Two sides to every coin, Monte,” Wilhelm defensively returned.

Monte continued the offense, “Then think of which side will be used! Think of Oppenheimer, do you want to be engulfed in remorse as he once was? This is not just immoral, it is——!” He gave up, groaning in intense frustration.

Wilhelm asserted, walking closer to the disassembled barrel, “Ethics always fall to the backstage when you are *chasing for a breakthrough.*”