

TRIP

by

Patrick Sullivan

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>USER: USER_NOT_FOUND
>PASS: *****
>Connecting...
>.....
>Welcome back, USER_NOT_FOUND.
>Your last connection was: [10.10.62 - 22:13]. Today is the
11th of October, 2062.
>Message of the Day: "The only people who inveigh against
escape are jailers." ~Neil Gaiman
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The pain in Hettie's temple faded. She opened her eyes and looked up— the Persian-blue sky was clear and cloudless overhead. It was the kind of sky that places with names like "La Cabana" kept for themselves, offered with iced coffee (real coffee, too, not synth swill) and a deep-tissue massage from someone with muscles to envy. Somewhere just out of sight, waves lapped delicately against the waterfront, and white sands enveloped Hettie as she slowly laid back on the shore. They were warm and soft against her back, like sand should be, and for a long moment she savored the sensation. She willed herself to become lost in the sounds and textures, to slip away for a while.

It wasn't, of course, enough.

For all its luxury, the scene was *boring*. Hettie sat up again, and the sand slid off of her, falling back into uniform smoothness below as though she'd never laid down in the first place. A shadow briefly passed over her eyes, and it sat next to her in the sand with a quiet *thump*.

Joker was a thin, gangly man, all arms and legs — though he'd prettied himself up a bit for the beach, his hair fuller than it really was, his figure leaner, his face clear of the spots that had plagued it since puberty. He stared out to sea, tracing spirals in the sand. "You're going to kill yourself with this stuff, you know."

Hettie didn't look at him. She closed her eyes, grasping for something to anchor herself — *come on, focus on the sand. The waves. Smells! Why can't I smell anything?* "You're ruining my trip, Joker."

"That's the point," he said, watching his careful spirals fade away into nothing. They didn't hold for long, like the imprint of Hettie's back. "Where did you even get this one?"

"Does it matter? You're just here to tell me off anyway."

Somewhere in the distance, a seagull wheeled, squawking aloud. Others responded, and before long, a proper flock had materialized overhead. Hettie watched them

struggle against the same breeze that was tickling her skin, raising the hair on the back of her neck.

Joker did not share her immersion in the moment. He shook his head, speaking again, breaking the blessed (if momentary) silence. "You really prefer it like this, huh?"

"Don't you?" Hettie pushed her legs forward, burying her feet in the too-uniform sand, breaking its monotony. A sandcrab scurried as she invaded its privacy. *That's a nice touch*, she thought.

"It's *sick*, what you're doing, Hettie," Joker said. "It's not normal."

"I'm not hurting anybody," she retorted. There was nobody to hurt here - or, at least, there hadn't been until Joker had stuck his nose where it didn't belong. Admittedly, Hettie was beginning to consider punching him. *I wonder if he'd actually feel it?*

He turned to face her. "You're hurting *yourself*," he said with a measure of finality - as though he had any idea what he was talking about! In direct conflict with the firmness of his words, he put a hand to the side of her face almost delicately, and lowered his voice to a soft whisper. "I need you back, Het."

The pain in her temple returned, sharp and throbbing. The Persian-blue sky snapped to dull grey- it took the seagulls with it in its death throes, their cries cutting off abruptly. "Joker, don't you *dare*-"

"It's for your own good." The sand felt cold.

"Joker you're going to *crash the whole fucking*-"

A dull, empty click resonated through Hettie's skull, and the pain faded again.

So, too, did the beach. The world came rushing back, real and material, as Joker yanked Hettie's neurojack from her temple. She winced and sat up, the dysphoria that came with a simdump jolting her awake, and she reflexively put her hand to the side of her head. Her fingers brushed familiar metal where the jack left behind a naked port, brass and hollow. It connected to her nervous system there - a direct feed.

Joker stood over her, holding the still-warm jack in one hand, its cable trailing behind him to a beat-up computer in dusty grey plastic. He wasn't as good-looking as he was in simspace - his hair was thinner and his complexion significantly worse, the digital avatar he used to represent himself far more idealized.

And he did not look happy. "Live in the real world for once," he spat, and let the jack drop - it clattered to the floor, eliciting another wince from Hettie. Hopefully the impact wouldn't damage it.

"You didn't have to do that," she groaned, slurring her words - she'd taken a cocktail of benzo and melatonin before her trip, and most of her body was still refusing to believe it was awake. Her futon tempted her back to oblivion, but a brisk scent snapped her into wakefulness - a styrofoam cup of synth-coffee Joker was holding under her nose. "Drink."

The smell was raw and untempered, and Hettie recoiled from it, another groan escaping her throat. Repulsive. Nothing like her sims, where each sense was a symphony, carefully constructed and sweet in the experience.

"*Drink*," Joker insisted, and Hettie begrudgingly wrapped her hands around the rough foam cup. It was too hot, the thin, synthetic flavoring too glaringly obvious, but she drank until her roommate was satisfied. Joker risked a smile. "You back with us?"

"Arguably," Hettie grumbled, setting the cup on the floor beside her futon. "Fuck you, by the way."

Mortimer was upon it in seconds. Hettie absently scratched the grey tabby's ears as he investigated the cup, trying to decide if it was edible.

"It's nice to feel appreciated," Joker said drily. "You know what time it is?"

Christ. Hettie shook her head. She's started the trip around, what, noon? She hazarded a guess. "Two?"

"Try eight. Most sane people *sleep* that long."

"Funny," Hettie said, reluctantly gulping down another mouthful of the watery coffee. "I thought that whole display just now was you demonstrating that I'm *not* sane people." She pushed the cup aside again - disgustingly *real*, barely worth the caffeine it delivered - and slumped back down in her futon. Mortimer nudged her shoulder.

"Oh, no you don't," Joker said sharply, hauling her back up. "Believe it or not, I woke you up for a *reason*, in addition to giving into the charitable goodness of my heart."

Charitable would be leaving me alone for once, Hettie thought ruefully, but she allowed herself to be pulled upright. "And this reason's good enough to warrant crashing a sim I paid two hundred for?"

"Two h-" Joker made a noise like a balloon being deflated. "Hettie, your share of the *rent* is two hundred. Where did you get that money from?"

"'s none of your business." Hettie pinched the bridge of her nose. Another grating aspect of realspace- Joker's voice. All low and high tones, cracking like a teenager's, with no middle ground. Nothing to bind the sound together.

"It's my business if it means I'm not gonna have a place to live." God, that voice. She'd have to talk to the sim author and-

There is no sim author. This is realspace, you moron. Hettie shook her head. *Get it together.* "We'll talk about it later. Your important reason?"

"I'm leaving," Joker said simply, shrugging. "Going to Hong Kong for a couple of days. Figured I should tell you, since you're holding down the fort."

"Hong Kong," Hettie repeated, masking a grimace. She wouldn't be able to sim much with Joker gone - not with housekeeping, and with relying on him to wake her up from...

...well, to wake her up from eight-hour trips. How did I lose that much time doing nothing on a beach?

"...in-law's wedding or something," Joker was saying as Hettie forced herself to listen again. "I'll call, okay?"

"Okay," Hettie breathed. "Yeah."

The first day passed in relative peace, to Hettie's surprise - her ogre of a landlord failed to make his daily appearance to shout and complain in her general direction, which left her comfortably passing the hours with Mortimer and her computer. She itched to dive back into another simtrip, but her machine was busy recompiling the beach sim Joker had crashed.

So her neurojack went unplugged for a day, which - she guiltily admitted to herself - was a rarity. Joker would be pleased with that outcome, no doubt.

There were, of course, other ways to fill her time. Hettie dragged her keyboard into her lap and typed in a familiar address-

[Welcome to SimArchive, your #1 resource for streaming simtrip content and simulated sensory experiences! Please ensure your neurojack is OFF and DISCONNECTED while browsing unmoderated content. You have two (2) new messages.]

The archive. Hettie glanced at the front page, picking through the available offerings. SimArchive had been online for years, now, and the list of uploaded simtrips was getting bigger by the day. The quality varied from upload to upload, of course- by far the laziest were the trippers

who just recorded their own drug-fueled hallucinations. There was no originality there, no craft, only the brain's reactions to whatever substances the trippers put into themselves.

Not Hettie's style at all. She scrolled further down the list. There were sims that promised synesthesia, sims that put her right in the action of her favorite movies, sims for sex of all kinds - she passed over the latter on principle; they tended to be unimaginative at best, meant to occupy "casual" trippers looking for their taboo interests in cyberspace.

One name stuck out from the list. She paused, hovering over the sim she'd been playing when Joker had interrupted her - its nameplate declared it to be [TROPICAL VACATION: TRUE RELAXATION EDITION!!!] Yeah, right. Hettie briefly submitted a review.

[COMMENT QUEUED FOR MODERATION: Amateur trip, not worth the price of admission. User influence only lasts a few seconds after you stop interacting, and there's no olfactory feed. Author should re-record on something that can handle more sensory input.]

That done, she consulted her messages - two of them, the first from the SimArchive system administrator. It was a global message, sent to everyone on the network.

[Just a reminder, folks: cleaning up illegal content this next week or so. If you've uploaded or streamed trips with non-approved drugs, snuff content, or anything else that goes against our terms of use, you can expect to find your account locked out. Cheers.]

Hettie deleted the message. They sent one like it out every few months - just routine cleanup, wiping the trash off of the archive. The second message, on the other hand, more readily caught her attention. "Expressing Interest," the subject line read, from a user named DreamBroker. She opened it curiously.

[Saw your review of the Space Cruise sim. Ended up deciding not to buy thanks to you - seems like I dodged a bullet, going by some of the other comments.]

She grimaced sympathetically. "Space Cruise" was a simtrip that promised the sensation of zero gravity and life on a space station - a newly-minted astronaut had allegedly been

implanted with a recording chip, but the trip was a proven fake. Hettie had not been pleased to discover she'd been gypped. The message continued:

[If you're still looking for something satisfying, drop me a line. I think you might appreciate what I have to offer.]

That got her attention. Users blatantly advertising their trips was against SimArchive's rules. Either this DreamBroker was foolhardy, or he had something good and was brazen enough to show it off.

Hettie decided to find out for herself, dashing off a reply. She received a message back within seconds.

[1:20:02] The_Escapist: You there?

[1:20:18] DreamBroker: I see you got my message.

[1:21:34] The_Escapist: I did. What're you selling?

[1:22:50] DreamBroker: Experimental recordings. I haven't pushed any of these to the archive yet. Interested?

Hettie leaned back from the monitor, scowling. This could be a scam as easily as it could be something worthwhile - chatbots often trawled the archive, trying to net foolish trippers with copy-pasted advertisements for "experimental" simtrips. This DreamBroker, however, was actually engaging her, his phrasing too exact to be a chatbot. She decided to test the waters.

[1:23:47] The_Escapist: Experimental how?

[1:25:09] DreamBroker: Still fine-tuning things from user feedback. I'm gathering simsense data, and you've proven yourself to be a connoisseur of simsense.

[1:25:23] The_Escapist: Flattering.

[1:25:48] DreamBroker: Should I look elsewhere, then?

[1:27:11] The_Escapist: No, tell me more. This trip's not on the archive?

[1:28:35] The_Escapist: Strictly on physical storage right now. I'd be delivering it to you through an escrow handler.

Hettie raised an eyebrow at that - physical simchips were rare commodities, as most companies didn't produce the blank media since the rise of repositories like SimArchive. Her interest was piqued.

[1:29:00] The_Escapist: Here in Neo-Kyoto, right?

[1:30:39] DreamBroker: Yes. At 3430 Yamato, there's an electronics repair shop. Ask for Megumi - she's a reputable go-between, if you care to consult other chipdealers.

Hettie felt her heartbeat pick up in her chest, thumping with anticipation. Chipdealers. There was a word she had only heard whispered, as though their name alone could scare them off - peddlers of simchips with vintage and hard-to-find trips, almost mythical in the simtripper community. She smiled. DreamBroker *did* have something good, after all.

[1:31:10] The_Escapist: I'm game. When can she have it ready?

[1:32:27] DreamBroker: Tomorrow. Does four hundred credits sound reasonable?

She couldn't afford to haggle down from that. This broker would just find another client, and she'd lose out on the chip - probably one of only a handful of its kind. It would clean Hettie out, but she'd make rent. Barely. *Time for a lot of instant ramen nights.*

[1:34:04] The_Escapist: Done. I'll be there.

Everything about Neo-Kyoto was an assault on the senses: roaring traffic, glaring neon lights, smoke that choked out the stars overhead, and a blend of phonetic Japanese, harshly-accented English, and smooth Cantonese that only served to confuse the ears. The thick, enveloping hood of Hettie's coat blocked most of the chaos out as she turned onto a main thoroughfare, shoulders hunched up about her ears, trying only to focus on her feet in front of her. The dissonant sensations of the hodge-podge city were an affront to her system; the lights were too bright, the sounds rough and unmixed.

Neo-Kyoto was not known as a tourist destination by any means, with its seedy underbelly, raucous nights, and denizens abrasive enough to give New York a run for its money. The first of the three was Hettie's immediate concern - she missed Yamato Street twice before she ducked down the unobtrusive alley, a narrow strip of concrete and steel hidden away in the metropolis.

At its far end stood NEW CENTURY ELECTRONICS REPAIR, a dilapidated relic of the early 2000's, built with the unimaginative grey tones and straight lines of the time.

One of its sign's neon letters fizzed and sputtered. Hettie chose not to comment on what, exactly, the EW CENTURY was as she pushed her way inside.

The store's interior was equal measures striking and baffling. Devices of all kinds laid out on workbenches in various states of repair, but nobody worked on them - it was as though a macabre display was being made of the computers' and neurojacks' corpses, electronic innards spilled across the tables. Hettie resisted the urge to whistle, impressed.

A lone attendant sat behind the counter, impossible to miss by her colorful Harajuku outfit in the grey-and-grey gloom- DreamBroker's contact.

Megumi's eyes jittered in their sockets as though she were in REM sleep, snapping between seemingly random points in space. Peering closer, Hettie saw that they were not, in fact, real - rather cybernetic replacements, HD video imprinted directly onto her optic nerve. The twitching wasn't a nervous tic; the simdealer was likely looking between a dozen screens and overlays that Hettie couldn't see, coordinating more deals like the one Hettie had just made, reading incoming messages and sending out replies.

The bizarre display carried on despite Hettie's entrance. She experimentally waved a hand in front of the woman's face, then cleared her throat. Megumi's eyes fell still, focusing properly. "Ah, omae. Welcome."

"You're Megumi?" Hettie frowned. The slight, twitchy woman didn't look like someone who would deal simchips - then again, she'd only gotten her sims online before. Hettie had always pictured Hollywood hackers slouched over enormous computer banks, scripting each sim from scratch, even though she knew better - all you needed to record a sim was an implant in your brain stem.

Megumi smacked a piece of bright-blue gum. "Yeah. Dee Bee send you?" She blew a bubble, then popped the gum with a hollow snap, those artificial eyes trained on Hettie the whole while - the LEDs in the irises were slowly cycling through the colors of the rainbow, like strip lighting in a limousine. Hypnotic. *What would seeing through those even be like?* Hettie wondered. *Maybe she has another sim I can-*

The gum popped again, and Hettie coughed, pulling herself back to the moment. An old hard drive buzzed and crackled somewhere in the room. Hettie furrowed her brow. What had Megumi said? "Dee Bee?"

"DB." That stare. Flat, emotionless, silently judging. "DreamBroker?"

DreamBroker - the tripper who'd messaged her. "Yeah." Hettie nodded, digging in her pocket and fishing out a plastic card, offering it to the eccentric girl with a trembling hand. Her payment. "Right, yeah. He said I should give you, uh... that." *Shaky hands. Not good. I need to jack in, and soon.*

Megumi's psychedelic eyes snapped down to the card, then back up to Hettie as she took it, doubtlessly noticing the hand tremors. She sniffed. "You sure I should be selling you this? Chips are louder stuff than that crap you kids stream off SimArchive." It was a token warning at best - simchips certainly were more potent, the files embedded on them raw and uncompressed, but Megumi had Hettie's money in-hand. What happened after wasn't her concern.

'Kids?' She can't be more than a year or two older than me. Hettie left the objection unvoiced and swallowed the lump in her throat. "Just give it to me," she whispered hoarsely. Her hands shook. *STOP that.*

"Whatever." Megumi pushed her long hair aside - like Hettie, she had shaved a bare strip in one side of her head to keep the area around her neurojack clean. While Hettie's was basic brass and plastic, hers was plated in gleaming chrome, and another, thinner port ran along her scalp behind it. She slotted the card through the second port casually, cyber-eyes flicking up to some unseen readout to make sure the payment went through.

It took an uncomfortably long moment. Five seconds, ten... Hettie drew her quivering hands back into her sleeves, looking off at some distant point over Megumi's shoulder until the chip-dealer nodded.

"Your cred's good," Megumi finally said with just a hint of condescending surprise. "All yours." She held out a palm - in it sat a simchip, a piece of plastic and metal no bigger than a matchbook. It would slot perfectly into a matching port in Hettie's computer, which itself had cost her a few trips. Joker didn't know about it yet. "Dee tell you what's on it?"

Hettie took the chip and closed her fist around it. "N-no. Just that it was... experimental."

The Japanese girl cracked a toothy smile, and for some reason, that smile unnerved Hettie more than any horror trip she'd ever run. "Well, you know where to find us if you decide you want more," Megumi said, and she leaned her head on a hand, passing Hettie's card back.

"Thanks. I'll..." Hettie trailed off uncertainly - the woman's eyes had resumed their distracted flickering, off in cyberspace again. With a last, muttered "thanks," Hettie turned to go, the chip pressing into her palm with the weight of a cinderblock.

Joker still wasn't back when Hettie returned to the apartment. The hand tremors were getting worse - she could barely get the door scanner to take her thumbprint, only managing a steady scan when she braced all of her hundred-and-two pounds against the device, and then it was another fifteen minutes of fumbling before she could get Megumi's simchip into the computer's tiny, hidden chipport. *[EXTERNAL MEDIA ACCEPTED]*, the monitor declared. It would have rejected a bootleg chip.

Hettie drew in a shuddering breath as anticipation swelled within her chest. The readout sprang to life:

*[IT IS NOW SAFE TO CONNECT YOUR NEUROJACK]
[LOADING SECONDARY ASSETS: 5% LOADED...]*

That was it. The basic canvas of the trip would be there for her to jack into - the "secondary" features would materialize in the trip as they loaded. Hettie watched the screen and kept a count as she wrapped shaking fingers around the plug of her neurojack, backpedaling to her futon. *Six percent, seven percent... Now, DreamBroker, let's see what you have in store for me.*

She steeled herself for the stinging, momentary pain of connection, and jammed the neurojack in.

The first thing that took hold of Hettie was darkness. It wasn't the darkness of sleep, or even of night - It was truly *black*, the only light coming from tiny, pinprick particles in the gloom. Stars?

Hettie reached out, flexing her limbs, finding them encased in formfitting material. Her fingers set the pinpricks of light dancing. *No, not stars.*

A deep, gratifying rush of air filled her ears - her own breath, confined to a rebreather, blissful oxygen filling her lungs despite the containment.

...Underwater, Hettie realized, smiling broadly. *I'm at the bottom of the ocean. Where did he even GET this?*

Exuberant, she let out a whoop that came out as little more than a stream of bubbles through the mouthpiece, muffled and masked by the abyssal waters. It was a *masterful* sim, responding in real-time with every last conceivable detail - the way the saltwater dragged on her diving suit as she swam with abandon, the elastic pull of the material snug against her body. She spun in corkscrews, weightless and directionless, the absolute blackness making *up* no different from *down*. *Beat that, Space Cruise*.

Hettie twirled with glee, feeling days', even weeks' worth of stress melt off of her shoulders. THIS was a trip.

She kept to her count, focusing inward - the "secondary assets" would be loading in soon. *Ninety-four percent, ninety-five...* Her mind raced with possibilities. Marine life? A submarine to go exploring in?

One hundred.

Then, all at once, came the biting cold. Hettie drew in a sharp breath - a rush of static in her rebreather - as a horrible chill seized each of her limbs mid-spin, heedless of the insulation the suit provided. *W-what?*

Of course. The deep ocean. If no light reached here, no heat would, either. It was a REAL cold, too- nothing like the sims that put Hettie in the mountains or even in the Arctic, where she could *experience* the cold without it truly affecting her, sensory signals carefully edited and capped by an engineer's hand.

This was nothing of the sort. Hettie shivered bodily as the primal, deep chill invaded her body. She struggled for an anchor, something to focus on and block out the *simsense*, but what was there in the weightless void? Water and blackness. Nothing solid to center her thoughts on.

She fell back on the basics, eyes squeezed shut, frantic. *It's just a sim. It's not real. It's just a sim. It's not-*

Hettie knew the signs of hypothermia. Dizziness. Violent shivering. The sim was *too* real. Panicking, she tried to mentally reach for the surface, to emerge back into consciousness, but every nerve in her body screamed at her that she was deep underwater, freezing to death. She couldn't feel her fingers.

She did feel, however, the rigid mass her foot connected with in her desperate thrashing. It was large - far moreso than Hettie herself, for the shock of impact traveled back up her leg, pushing her through the water rather than bouncing away.

Then the thing *moved*.

Hettie let out a voiceless scream as the shape coasted gracelessly through the blackness, a mass of scales and sinew dragging along her leg - a shark? No, too sinuous. Her mind raced. *Don't focus on that! Don't get grounded-*

Another forceful shiver bent her double, and she lost her bearings, uncertain of which direction the creature had slinked off in. The loss of feeling was up to her elbows, now. She should have passed out. She *should* have jacked out- but then, Joker was gone. It was just her and the void.

And whatever was lurking in it. Hopefully it had lost interest in her. If the cold was this real, she didn't even want to imagine what-

A current of water pushed her lazily upward like a leaf on the wind. Hettie fought through the fresh rush of icy cold that surged through her suit with it, pulling herself into a ball, trying to conserve heat...

...and in the process, brought her head down face-to-face with the source of the current. An inky, unblinking eye silently hung in front of her, as wide across as the span of Hettie's outstretched arms. Another scream escaped her lips, silent, and she thrashed fearfully, trying to push herself back.

Her numb hand sunk into the gelatinous mass, and the creature screamed back: a deep, resonant note that sang through the water all around its massive body, so forcefully that Hettie felt the vibration in her ribs.

I'm dead.

Retaliation. The eye disappeared into the gloom as the creature twisted about, and a sharp, tight pressure made itself known through the numbness in Hettie's arm, teeth piercing both suit and flesh alike. There was a terrible *ripping*, and sickly warmth overpowered the cold for a fleeting moment.

Hettie bucked and squirmed, knocking the severed limb away, white-hot pain flashing up her arm. There was a sense of *nothingness* there, awful and empty. Her vision clouded.

The same piercing pressure pushed down on her chest-

The world came rushing back, and Hettie's screams finally found a voice, the dissonant sound never more welcome to her ears as it rang off of the plaster walls. She bolted upright, winning a shocked jump from the room's

sole other occupant: a woman in sanitized, pastel-blue scrubs, her eyes going wide at Hettie's display.

It dawned on Hettie, somewhere in the back of her mind, she was not in her apartment.

The nurse ducked out of the room, quick on her feet. "She's awake," Hettie heard a voice say - then another spoke in reply, too distant to make out. She strained, still groggy, and pushed aside her coarse blankets - with an arm that was no longer detached from her body, prickling phantom pains coursing through it as her nervous system readjusted. It wasn't a dysphoric sensation, this time - rather, a euphoric one, her body delighted to discover its various pieces in place.

Hettie let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. *Not dead. Not real.*

The nurse re-entered with another figure: thin-haired, dressed for a wedding in Hong Kong, face wrought with concern. Joker pushed his way forward and pulled Hettie into a tight hug.

She coughed weakly. "What--"

"I shouldn't have left," he said. "I should have known you'd- *damn it*, Hettie--"

"Known *what*?"

The nurse cleared her throat politely from her end of the room, and Joker broke off the hug. The woman spoke. "You've been asleep, miss. For several days."

Hettie's breath caught. Days. "How many?"

Joker gave her a measured look. "Hettie..."

"How many," she repeated, her gaze remaining on the nurse.

The woman didn't meet her eyes. "...Four. We've had you on an IV drip to replace the nutrients you've lost."

Four days. Hettie sat back, floored. How much of that time had she been plugged in? She reached up with a hand she still wasn't quite sure was hers, feeling at her neurojack.

The wandering hand found sutures. Her touch stung the raw, recently-stitched skin, and she recoiled. Realization dawned. "...You *sewed up my neurojack*."

"Mr. Joker gave us permission as your next of kin," the nurse said hesitantly. "...with respect, miss, you are a danger to yourself."

"Joker--"

The gangly man held up empty palms. "You were almost dead when I found you, okay? Strung out on some trip for who knows how long. There, but for the grace of God go I, I'd prefer you *not to be dead*."

As nurses do, the woman at the foot of the bed seemed to have a sense for when conversations were getting personal, and excused herself. Hettie's protests died in her throat. He was right. She *knew* he was right. Her mind raced back to SimArchive and the simchip - DreamBroker had pushed it on her while the administrator was cleaning up illegal content. Better to foist a physical simchip off on some junky, avoid using the archive altogether...

A snuff trip. That was what she'd just been on, and it had nearly cost her life in realspace.

She fell back to her bed, groaning.

"Hettie?"

"I'm... I'm okay. I'll be okay. I think." DreamBroker. She had to find him. "Can I borrow your phone? I should... let people know I'm alright."

Joker raised an eyebrow, but acquiesced, digging the handheld device out of his pocket. He passed it to Hettie, turning for the door. "I'll be right outside if you need me." He stopped at the threshold, resting a hand on the doorframe. "Just try to relax, would you? Try to... zone out for a while. You're good at that."

Hettie laid back reluctantly. The pillow wasn't soft enough. "...Yeah. I think I can do that."

[New message to: DreamBroker

I need another one.]