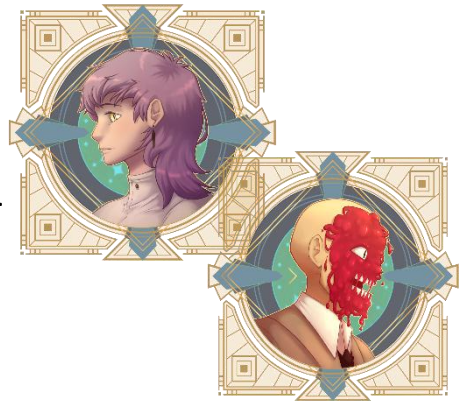


Emma and Akhila R2: Dedication.

Self {
 Authorship
 Centeredness
 Control } Is required to be truly free.



The gleaming point of a blood-glossed needle dips in and out of their field of view, darkening their vision to reappear from a different spot, trailing a green thread in the dim cyan light. The sight is nauseating. If she permitted his neck and face to escape paralysis, Emma would be sure to flinch every time it sunk under his numb storm-colored iris. Akhila insisted on toughing it out, as boys often are wont to do. With an appeal to his wounded pride, he insisted she only spare him the bare necessities for the operation. His thought process is always *'Why should I burden you for a hardship I would expect myself to endure?'* and never *'You're right Emma, it's stupid to reject your help. Especially since you have done so much for me already.'* Of course, his answer to her objection declares: *"This is what I want for myself."* And that plea to autonomous dumb decision-making trumps her last scraps of reason. It is for this conversation that, whilst her torso extends from the side of Akhila's waist, her vision is split between Doe's concentrated face and the needle she works in and out of Akhila's ocular orifice.

"Is it almost done?" Emma complains, as she rests on the operation tables they pushed together. She is unused to her form lying about in public, and she doesn't appreciate being exposed.

"Wait a while." Doe sets the needle to rest before singing, as she observes her workmanship critically. She is, quite predictably, an outstanding hand with her needle and thread; all be it a little too eager to try her skill at the strange magical operation. Looting the terminal's infirmary for supplies has proven to be worth their while, since Doe is now bandaged, and Mr Beans has acquired better stitches.

"How do you do romance?" Doe signs, out of the blue.

"What? Where did that-...? **We don't.** We made a vow." From her off-guarded shock, Emma reminds herself and Akhila of this fact. "A vow that we try very hard not to break, at least once a month."

"Why?" Doe asks, with her endless and unabashed curiosity. Emma blushes.

"Well, for a start, both of us are straight." Echoed frustration, from both parties. "I'll find a guy, and no matter how great he is..." Akhila begs her to not drag herself down. Too late. "We are destined to be together, alone. Then there's the *lying* and the hiding me. We can't help that, but it makes it impossible to get close to someone."

"Then why did you tell me?" Doe interrupts, her eyes blink out the dozen questions that back up behind just one. **"If you don't reveal yourself to his friends."**

"I dunno..." It's a question for Akhila to answer, she grows a mouth for him in the middle of his chest to do so.

“I was tired.” He articulates, but in a high-pitched voice. This was a trick they devised when trying their hand at ventriloquy, they lacked the confidence and the wit to perform more than twice. “There’s a friend who I hold very dear. He’s the closest to a close friend I have, but-” Doe is struggling not to snicker. This is helped by her already mute disposition yet hindered by Emma doing the same. “I wanted him to see the true us, but I didn’t know how to break it to him- Can you stop?”

The laughter at Emma’s end had become overt, whilst Doe displayed reckless confidence in proceeding to stifle herself and sow simultaneously.

“It’s my fault.” Emma takes the fall, with a sincere flow of apology to his soul. Akhila is very aware he’d be laughing too if that wasn’t impossible from the strict restrictions upon his diaphragm. “Continue, please.”

“No more lies clouding a good thing.” He lets the short version sink in. Doe concurrently nods, whilst Emma sighs. He continues. “You seemed accepting to undead. I wanted to start things right.”

The somber mood that sets in is comfortable, in a rare turn for such moods as they come. Honesty is a conversation that strikes a painful tone for the four of them, after the recent and raw revelations of the past hour. Doe’s sown prayer to Katara is completed within the silence, and Akhila sits up to look through his freshly threaded eye.

“This will guide us to seeing fortunate things?” He asks, fingering at the work.

“It will guide you to look where it is best to look.” Doe explains.

“That’s what I asked.” At the moment of his response, the lights over their heads go out. The emergency blue that pervaded their journey thus far is replaced by a bright sterile white shining. The speakers that once had remained silent play out the distorted high voice of Don Mclean, singing his cover of ‘since I don’t have you’, into the infirmary’s empty wards. Eerily, the loud change makes the terminal seem more dead than when the dark was king.

“The power turned back on?” Doe asks skeptically, prompting Mr Beans to check the new whitened halls to affirm the absence of a ghostly trick. As the dog looks through the opened door, a new voice is played just as loud as the song.

“AND GOOD EVENING FINE TRAVELERS AND WAYWARD SOULS. IT’S A DELIGHT TO SEE SO MANY NEW FACES WITHIN *MY TERMINAL*. WE HAVE HAD A DOOZY, ATTEMPTING TO RESTART THE POWER, BUT THIS PLACE IS BACK UP AND RUNNING ON TIME! YOU ARE IN FOR A TREAT, GENTLE AND BRUTISHFOLK. LET ME TELL YOU. MR GATES WILL BE PROVIDING THE ENTERTAINMENT AND TUNES YOU NEED TO KEEP YOURSELVES SAFE. AS YOUR MOST FUN AND ETERNAL JAILER, I AM HERE. ALL. NIGHT.”

Despite this emphatic assurance from the static earsplitting announcement, Akhila, Emma, and Doe feel a precognitive weight sink within their chests.

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PART 5: Canvasing.

Punch's ID jolts the large staff area doors into hissing open, breaking their hundred-year seal and letting the group wonder beyond. Once inside, Doe resumes a debate started by Emma asking a guilty question: "Have you ever acted dishonestly?" It was answered with a fast negative from Doe and then followed by two words from her faithful chaperoning friend.

'Fake. Fetch.'

From there started a rigorous defense, of the practice of pretending to throw a stick for a dog, which has protracted well past the point when it could have and should have been dropped by all parties.

"It's a part of the larger sense of the game." Doe reiterates, with intense gestures.

"It's a game about fetching a stick. It's called fetch. I just see where he's coming from, he doesn't know it's a part of the game." Somewhere along the way, Akhila transitioned from playing dog's advocate to genuinely convincing himself that this was a hill worth dying on. The conversation has taken a life of its own and begun to grate upon Emma and Mr Beans.

"When you sacrifice a piece in a game of checkers, that isn't dishonest! It's just electing to not inform your opponent of the intended outcome, the same as not throwing the stick."

"I don't understand, fetch doesn't have an opponent?"

"That depends on how you play it!" Their struggle eventually brings them to a space that is equally as vast as the terminal's welcoming lobby. Several stories of zigzagging corridors, staircases, signs, posters, and coffee stops, manage to stop the debate in its hot-tempered tracks.

"Wow..." Akhila gasps with clear awe, as they come to a glass railing that overlooks two more floors of the same sight below. The layout is a corporate equivalent of the Grand Canyon, with a central path sundering the different sections in stacks of floors. The ceiling once more appears like an upwards abyss, with lighting that penetrates to its very top. They feel dizzy just taking in the scale. "This has to go into the mountain. There's no way it's all at the peak."

"It's too big." Doe grits her teeth in sharp consternation. Mr Beans sits by her side and whines supportively. **"We should split up."**

"Wait, really?" Akhila grimaces. "I mean-... I know. I know we have to be fast, but last time you were attacked and it almost killed you. S-so when we're apart, I can't protect you. That's bad."

"Akhila..." Emma warns him, as Doe's flat expression becomes an apposite frown fueled by the echo of her mentor. *"She doesn't want to be treated like a child."*

"You're not obligated to protect me, Akhila. This is for the best." Doe signs back resolutely. **"We'll meet here in two hours."**

"But--"

"It doesn't matter if I'm 'safe' if I die because you didn't cover your own ground, does it?" With more of a hint of teenage arrogance, she still makes a good point. **"I'll be fine on my own."**

Though he wants to protest, he holds his tongue. The two end up leaving on different paths.



Once Doe is parted with her loyal friend of four hours, she feels something of a relief that comes out in her sigh. Beans tilts his head. He questions her in his silent knowing way, as she briefly pauses to pet him thoroughly for the support. It takes her time to decipher the origin of that strange feeling, as her quest leads her distractedly onwards down into the main hall.

"It must have been his anxiety." She thinks, as she spies an anxiety inducing poster. There is a wall of these, espousing all manners of work etiquette to be treated as golden rules. Slogans like 'Rumors hurt', 'speak no evil' and 'loose lips sink ships' pepper her eyes, almost as aggressively as the advertisements from the walls before. *"Akhila's anxiety was similar to Cordelia's, but distinct... how?"* She follows her intuition past glowing signs, advertising wellness booths with cute mascots. It becomes apparent that she is leading herself to the low-level 'central security hub', trusting that they will have watchable footage of 'the incident' in their records.

"Selfishness." She stops momentarily at an intersection, to think, with a board of extraneous staff mementos about emails and people's birthdays to survey. Her target destination promises to be left, following a short road with a line of vending machines adorning it. She concludes on the strange source of her feeling of being 'free', before she continues along that trail. *"Akhila was feeling selfish, when he said that he wanted to stay by my side for my safety. He was afraid of me getting harmed... but that was for his own sake. He's still lonely..."* The realisation coincides with what Emma had mentioned before. *"Both of them are."*

It is not long before she can put aside her ruminations, as she comes on a tall lonesome part of the terminal. Deliberately isolated from all other segments within the concourse, a set of glass double doors welcome her to the stark windowless central security hub.

"MAY I HELP YOU?" A robot, screen faced and metallic, greets her with a simple simulated smile from behind its reception desk. Its build is sturdy, tall, pragmatic, and equipped with limbs that could hide any number of deadly instruments within. It's a security bot. "YOU ARE LOST?"

Doe knows that she took a risk simply approaching the drone without forethought or ID, but there was no alternate point of entry for her to take and no time for her to discover it. In response to the robot's kindly question, she answers. **"I'm where I need to be."**

"MY APOLOGIES. I DO NOT RECOGNISE THE STANDARD FORM OF YOUR SIGN, MY MEMORY-" At this the distinct sound of an error notification beeps over its voice. "-B-BANKS HAVE A ONE HUNDRED YEAR GAP. THERE MUST BE A SL-SL-SLIGHT BUG IN MY SYSTEM. RUNNING DIAGNOSTICS." Its screen becomes blank. As Doe waits, with arms folded, she looks to a yellow sign hung below a security camera. It reads: **'We reserve the right to refuse visitors to detainees.'** Followed by a list of reasons one might be held overnight. That list includes everything from assault to espionage, and conspiracy against 'T.I.T.A.N.' the terminal's founding company. She feels thankful the 'no pets rule' is left off the list. Dead houseplants sit either side of two benches, to keep her company beneath hopefully outdated bounty portraits of interdimensional wanted criminals. One of the two doors that lead into the main hub clicks open, revealing the form of a horned man with wild hair and very odd goggles. He's sporting a trimmed goatee and an officer's uniform, greeting her with an enthusiastic grin whilst the robot continues to boot.

"Oh, hey! I come to fix up my buddy and find another guest! Are you needing some help ma'am?" His accent is hard to place but it sounds native to Threalos. Though his cyan glow is

obscured, his undead nature is betrayed by the security badge dating his portrait one hundred years old. "You look awfully young to be here by yourself."

"I am needing help." Understandably the man has no understanding of signed communication. He tilts his head, puzzled, until Doe repeats herself through a scribbled note on her book. After that he clicks his gloved fingers and nods.

"Oh! Well, come on in. Point me to what ya need, and I'll try and help you as best I can. Are you mute? Deaf? Nah, you can't be deaf, forget I said that. Just follow this way." With a nod she is shown into the main building, changing her view from an office station into a fully functional interdimensional prison. Three floors of thin railings and thick bars protect empty squares, with bug eaten beds and remarkably unclean floors throughout. It's the first area that appears seriously damaged by the march of time, save for the numerous cameras in place. "Don't mind the mess, I'm no janitor. I do try to keep all the equipment up and running, but I hardly need to check what's going on here. You can see for yourself, we don't get many criminals."

Doe doesn't respond, he's walking too fast to have time to see what she'd be writing anyway. He takes her to an open door at the top of three flights of stairs, labeled an 'observation room' but revealed to be much more. On the inside is an infestation of monitors, looming over a stack of records, a gramophone, and a giant microphone. What is left of the observation room, not converted into a radio station, is a fire extinguisher, key storage wall, a well-kept suit of riot armor, and a rack of polished batons above a folding table and set of chairs.

"Here's the nest!" He announces whilst stepping to cue the soundtrack of 'Greece' onto his record player, balanced precariously next to the terminal's announcement microphone. "Stay a while, I'll make an announcement. What are you looking for that you came here to find out?"

"I want see what happened one hundred years ago." Doe takes a seat she unfolds from the side of the wall, navigating over the wires whilst 'Mr Gates' procures a seat of his own.

"What? You're *funny*, but I know that you're being honest." His cloudy goggles briefly take on a cyan sheen. "What's up with that? Wanting to see someone you lost? A guardian maybe? What's your deal with the wide eyes and mistrusting stare?"

Doe doesn't respond but just looks at him head on. Trespassing, she read, is one imprisonable offence that might get her detained. To avoid lying, she'll have to opt not to answer at all. Like a fake throw in a game of fetch, if he chooses to think she's a lost girl she is not obligated to correct his thought.

"Right... well, let's find your folks. You're not gonna find them one hundred years ago, so I'll start with the present. You stay put." He scoots round on his chair and turns on the microphone. "Tourists and travelers in purgatory, may I have your attention. We have a lost traveler at the station, a newcomer. If their guardian would be so kind as to come and collect, I'll see you a speedy ticket to the great beyond. In the meantime, I have one hundred and one reasons why terminal travel is the future! 'Greased Lightning', begins our case with an exaltation for the need. For. Speed." Whilst he is talking, babbling, Doe watches the cameras intently. It seems he has more eyes on the terminal's guest facilities than he does on his own prison system. True to his word, he diverts even more of the monitors from the security hub to begin canvassing every room.

Doe is perplexed by what she has heard and discovered so far, not the least because she can see that his set up is computer-activated; The modern tech would in practice have made the need for a record player obsolete. Mr Beans whines anxiously, nudging her hand with his cold snout and

prompting her to leave whilst the man is still distracted. By the hackles raised, and his serious expression, she can tell his distrust is more than caution. A thick strand of bad luck connects from the door to the one monitor that is set to look outside the observation room, but it is the only way out. Approaching the man from behind, turning her book to one well used phrase, Doe taps on his shoulder lightly to turn him round.

“May I go to the bathroom?”



“You’re overly stressed...” Emma warns in a conciliatory tone. Her will carries him further away from the designated meeting point, whilst Akhila frets over the steep environment. His newly augmented eye watches out for all signs of disturbance, danger, or mal-intent, with a thin veil of pretense at protecting his own wellbeing. There is no secret between them about the nature of his unease. Emma may only wish she could do something about it. *“She’ll be fine... if she isn’t, we’ll know when the sigil stops working.”*

“It would be too late by then.” He replies, as she steers him down any path that he happens to look at first. “I want to go back...”

“I know you do. I’m sorry...” He doesn’t have to ask what she’s sorry for. Although they downplay it or brush it off when convenient, neither pretend like he hasn’t been stunted by her companionship. *“We’ll be back before you know it. All we need is to find a means to escape.”*

“I feel awful. I’ve only known her for-“

*“No. That’s ok. I know that I can’t fulfil your needs, you can’t do that for me either. When we get out of here, we are turning a new leaf on **everything**. I promise. No obscurity. No lies.”*

“No obscurity...”

Having committed herself to a chance-based mode of navigation, she hopes to manipulate Doe’s blessing to be their guide. It has taken them to the highest floor, and the door to a series of lifeless office blocks. They notice a red substance upon the handle, fresh, dripping. The color is like blood, but the consistency is off. Its smell is sour like rot. “Ew.” Akhila recoils and shakes it from his hand, then uses his waterproof sleeve to pull the door open. A thin trail of the stuff leads onwards through the expanse of cubicles. “What is that...”

“Maybe we’ll find out...” The two have faith that the charm would draw their attention to the goop if it were dangerous to be touched, leaving them more curious about the trail than trepidatious as they pursue. The only sound in the office is from a single typist, a ghost, oblivious to her surroundings and best left undisturbed. A mountain of papers overflow from her cubicle, where the goop seems to have trampled over without care for her work. The trail leads onwards into an empty cubicle, with a missing monitor, and then drips to the office door where server rooms are located. The door has been forced, and a light can be seen dimly flashing within. *“Feeling scared?”* Emma teases.

“(Uh, no.)” Akhila responds inaudibly. The atmosphere of the office makes for a sterile and silently hostile display. Only the server room marks any semblance of life. The darkness beyond the

door evokes that raptorial side of the terminal which made up their first impression of its halls. "(No. Never.)"

Stepping inside, their eyes adjust to the bluish glow of a single monitor screen. It sits connected to one of the many server machines, generating a string of white gibberish text without end. The trail drips just beyond the light, into the maze of computer structures.

"Is someone here?" Akhila asks openly, quickly followed by something stepping into the light. "Woah-!" The man's face, glaring at them from out of the dark, is nearly entirely replaced by thick red sludge.

"It's not blood, but you would already know that." His lidless eyes and unguarded teeth are about the only recognizable human features on his skull. His voice comes out in a surprisingly dry rasp for its origin, the edge of the slop quivers, as words arrive without moving his teeth. "Don't come closer." The palms of his hands too share his head's dripping affliction, in one of them he holds a steel suitcase. "The last time we met, there was a woman crying over your head."

"I don't recall." Akhila takes one step back to show respect, the gore on his coat has increased since his skull was shattered. He almost forgot that he's died twice tonight and still looks as if from the grave. "I'm not a ghost or an enemy, I'm just investigating."

"I'm glad you said so. That makes me feel *much* safer." The man's words literally drip with dry cynical sarcasm. "It's a strange feat to still be alive, after taking that injury."

Akhila stumbles upon a range of selective and terrible lies, none of which this figure seems very likely to take. The learned habit of lying conflicts with Akhila's desire to be open again, making him stress and stutter upon the spot. The goo man's head tilts as his hunched posture slips into a cautious readiness, but this time the choice is taken from Akhila's hands.

"It's because I reconstructed him. We're one in the same, from our minds to our souls..." Emma emerges again from his side, surprising even herself at the boldness of her words. "We're undead, in a way. What's the substance on your face?"

"Paint." The tension deflates, if only by a thin margin. "It takes skill and brute power to make a Rebis from a corpse."

"Thank you. But I didn't make- Uh..." She stumbles upon the exact wording, a sad truth, as Akhila exhales his tension's hold.

"Emma brought me to life." He fills in for her. "But the cause of our binding goes further than that, I'm sure. My name is Akhila. Do you shake hands?"

"I do." The man steps from the dark entirely and extends a red slippery palm. Normally, when Akhila breaks the ice, the handshake is the least awkward part of that process. The 'paint' leaves an impression on his hand after a firm grip. "And you?" He turns to the girl.

"I... Do....." Emma desperately wanted to say 'not', but the words catch on the hook of utilitarianism. Her hand is marked by the stain and politely shaken on letting go. "What are you doing in here?"

"Searching. Getting stuck. Thinking about paper trails, and odd behaviors." He crouches himself down by the monitor in a manner that speaks of old middle-aged pains. "My name is Paintman. Are you able to speak with these ghosts?"

"We can." The two notice his brown overcoat, black belt, and white shirt. Everything of the man is reminiscent of a classical private eye's attire, except for the 'paint stains' and the shiny metal case. "What about you?"

"Not my specific area... Not these ghosts. If you're inclined to help, I need the ghost in that office to access files from the incident. You can't do it by force..." He grumbles and wipes his coat. "These servers only decrypt files that are being requested."

"Oh? Sure. Yeah, we can do that." Akhila affirms, not unused to one putting him to work on the spot. "That would help us to get back to Doe."

"Sure." Emma responds carefully. She feels the high of a new acquaintanceship being formed, coupled with Akhila's joy at not starting a conversation deceptively. Yet, they have already been burned once before when they offered help. "And you'll share the date with us?"

"That seems only fair." Paintman nods with a drip.

"TOURISTS AND TRAVELERS IN PURGATORY, MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION. WE HAVE A LOST TRAVELER AT THE STATION, A NEWCOMER. IF THEIR GUARDIAN WOULD BE SO KIND AS TO COME AND COLLECT, I'LL SEE YOU A SPEEDY TICKET TO THE GREAT BEYOND. IN THE MEANTIME, I HAVE ONE HUNDRED AND ONE REASONS WHY TERMINAL TRAVEL IS THE FUTURE! 'GREASED LIGHTNING', BEGINS OUR CASE WITH AN EXALTATION FOR THE NEED. FOR. SPEED"

"That man is a serial killer by the way." The detective shakes his head. "Cold case."



"Blood." Mr Beans warns as soon as they're a hall away from Gates' radio show. That is certainly a reason for her to be on edge, but she's unlikely to have this opportunity to snoop again.

"Most prisons smell of blood." She responds. **"Even old prisons."**

"Fresh blood."

Doe tries not to show a wavering of resolve. Yes, there are probably safer places to check and yes there are worse fates than dying gradually from unraveling. She just has to access a terminal or a filing cabinet before she leaves.

"Death." The Grim draws her attention to a door marked as a janitorial closet, he needn't explain himself for the smell beyond it. Doe hesitates between curiosity and haste, before the faintest sound of a man's struggles win her over to trying the handle. It's not locked.

The sight is revolting. Not gory, but sanitarily diabolical to bear witness to. The walls and floors are all caked in dried matter, refuse of decomposition and past atrocities lay uncleaned and solidified, festering over the course of gods know how many years since their deposit. Face down in the mess is a man she has interacted with once, Cain. His purple and gold suit is besmirched by filth, and his formerly stunning hair lays unpinned and in disarray. His hands and legs have been bound tight enough to risk lack of circulation, a bruise blotches on one side of his eye. His mouth has been sealed with more bindings than should be necessary. His eyes widen as Beans and Doe step into room, and she employs her scissors to start cutting away at the gags. He is bound with a chain, so she resolves to leave that for after the easy part is done.

“You have to get out of here!” That’s the first thing he pleases. “I’ll slow you down! Nobody else should be harmed on my—” The door electronically closes and the lights shut off. There is silence in the dark, until Martin’s footsteps are heard outside.

“Little girl? Now, I know that looks bad, but I would have told you about it if you had asked.”

They hold their breath, ardently hoping against fact that he’s only pretending to know they’re there.

“It sounds like I’ve found someone who might know you... I think the three of us ought to have a discussion.”

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PART 6: Execution.

Carole Gettchin is in a foul mood. Not only has she been working overtime for six hours and twenty-eight minutes, but someone has logged into her account over thirty-six thousand five hundred and twenty-five times. They even changed the calendar to one hundred years in the future, to try and cover their tracks. Such an inconvenience has required a ton of paperwork to explain, although the imposter has already done the bulk of it, she is hours behind her usual pace.

“Ahem.” Something she doesn’t need is an interruption. The impatient bedraggled face of Mr Punch frowns distastefully from her cubicle entrance, whilst clearing his throat. “I want you to make a catalogue of the first Sunday of the terminal’s opening, all the guests and the items of interest are to be printed. It’s for a property dispute.”

She can immediately sense something is off about his demeanor. To start with, he’s wearing a woolly jumper and jeans. Secondly, he appears to have lost a pound of weight since she last saw him. The way he carries himself is markedly different too; he no longer gives off an aura of self-assured confidence. With all of these pieces put together, she can surmise:

“Are you about to go on a date, Mr Punch? Good for you. What’s the dispute in question, I’ll get you there on time.” She pulls back the dates of her mismanaged files until an account of the first week of opening is displayed before her.

“It’s um... Yes. Ah- There’s a boy... claiming to have lost a very specific watch. I’ll need a catalogue of all watches and a catalogue of all boys to make sure he and it are the right ones.”

“Naturally. You can’t be too careful in being certain the right property goes to the right person. I’ll have that sent to the lost and found in under an hour. Good luck.”

“Oh, and, uh- that date. Don’t worry about it, it’s... it’s not for another two hours, so take your time.”

As he shuffles away, her brow arches. On her life, she would never imagine those words coming out of his mouth. 'Take your time'. Now that she thinks about it, who would he be dating when he's on parole? If it wasn't for the ID labelling him as the real 'Bartimus Punch', Carole would have half a mind to report an imposter to the central security hub.



"Handy trick." The begrudging voice of their new acquaintance greets, as they return to the server rooms in disguise. The squat body of Punch cautiously melts and rearranges, until the shape of Akhila is remade in their winter clothes.

"It's a lot easier copying a picture in front of a reflection, compared to remembering how exactly your body looks and feels." Akhila replies, as he presumes to look over the man's shoulder at the now legible decrypted information.

"I wouldn't know such troubles." Paintman spares them a faceless glare before returning to navigating the private records. "Your eyebrows are different."

"Shit, they are?" Akhila touches his forehead as Emma grows from his side.

"I readjusted them after we lost our face." She explains. "The first reconstruction was hasty."

"Sounds violent." Paintman remarks.

"It was." Akhila calms down and sets back to observing Paintman's work. "But Doe was in danger, so we had to act fast."

"Doe?"

"The friend that I have to go back for. I'm kind of actually in a hurry to do that, so... if we could find out some information that could be valuable as soon as possible?"

"If you want something done right, you don't rush it. This system is disorganized." A thick blotch of paint drips from his chin next to the keyboard. "Either that, or it's been tampered with... or both."

"I... see... You're good at using a computer." Akhila becomes pseudo mesmerized by how deftly the man navigates between opened windows. He feels lazy from just catching a glimpse at how these systems could be optimally used. "Is there something that I can do to help?"

"Do you any insights on the terminal?" Paintman suggests as he brings up a stored record of recent employee complaints.

"I'm not really a thinking guy... We only began searching for clues about an hour before we split. What's that?" Akhila's eye is drawn to a series of complaints in the chatlogs of a holographic therapeutic AI named 'Trinket'. Paintman scans over a few and mutters to himself about idiots and privacy policy.

"That's a lead." 'Employee wellness booths' were apparently built to encourage the least guarded workers to confess their complaints about the system. These private confessions were then archived and acted on if they met a certain threshold of concern. "It seems there were different calibration codes issued for the portals, on the day of the incident. The staff that complained have been flagged to HR."

“So, it *was* an inside job...” Emma cautiously nods to herself, whilst Paintman chases an origin for the code’s orders.

“It doesn’t sound like a malfunction.” Akhila agrees, with a vague feeling of shared enlightenment dawning upon them both.

“It’s proof of neither. It only means there was something different about the portals, and that the difference *potentially* has its origin with T.I.T.A.N.” Paintman rebuts, making the two feel admonished for merely forming their conclusion. “Corporate incompetence is always more likely than self-sabotage. This server doesn’t have the inciting message from the higherups...”

“You talk confidently about corporations.” Emma yawns, feeling chastened. She watches Paintman switch screens to look over a list of people with high security clearance. On that list is a name they all recognize from the intercoms. “Why did you become a private eye?”

“I was good at it, the job was lucrative, and there was plenty of work. That’s how most people should choose their professions.” He says little about passion, with a hint of resentment hidden under his tone. “I once investigated you...”

Paintman turns his unblinking gaze towards Akhila. His eyes seem capable of laying them bare, using only a single reflective glance. Every minor guilt in their conduct over eight years comes back to them, with a new tier of scrutiny and anxiety about the consequences and observation. The two freeze like deer contemplating the headlights, until Emma swallows and asks:

“What exactly were you investigating?”

“The patient fist’.” He responds flatly. “The gladiator that suffered what should have been seven lethal wounds over his four-year career. You haven’t changed... Though, I never met you in person.”

“Why would you investigate that?” Akhila chuckles uneasily, feeling more than a tinge of regret over Emma showing herself. Paintman’s tone manages to sound even more dry and unamused in response.

“I’m not here to judge. I was asked to assess how you were cheating. My client wanted to know you would never lose.”

“No, wait, sorry. No. I wasn’t cheating. I don’t- I don’t *cheat*.” Akhila stutters, with such a mix of confusion and guilt that even Emma cannot tell if he’s telling a lie. “Because that’s not exactly, like- I don’t have a way to put it that doesn’t sound-”

“You brought two people into the ring.” Paintman responds with a hint of enjoyment behind his rebuke. “There are competitions where that would be allowed, and you chose to enter as an unmodified human.”

“Why are you bringing this up?” Emma raises her voice. It’s the first time she has uttered what might be meant as a threat to another living being. The two feel their hearts beating as one. Akhila’s stress bleeds into her own, over their livelihood that stands in threat. Their adrenaline spikes as they hold his stare. Paintman stands up.

“I was just making conversation.” He lies through his teeth. “There’s nothing more to find. You should report to your friend.”

“Were you going to blackmail us?” Akhila’s heart rate has hardly decreased.

“Nothing of the sort.”

“Good. That would have been a bad idea.” Akhila doesn’t sound confident in his threat, until he thinks of the consequence of that information getting out. It could be used to sue him or end his career. It would change how Ron thought of him. Worse still, the damages would detract from the funds to research his sister’s origin. That is something he mustn’t let be delayed.

“I apologise for making you upset.” Paintman closes the monitor and picks up his steel suitcase. They only now see the case has an imprint of his red face on its side. Akhila stands up and stares the man down. He refuses Emma’s entreatment to walk away and actively considers the unspeakable. Paintman recognises the look, though he sees Emma’s hesitation.

“Your friend, Doe. Can she handle herself?” Paintman asks, as he temperately holds Akhila’s gaze. The out-of-pocket question disrupts the temperature of her fleshmate’s temper from a high eighty to zero Celsius in a flash. Not only does he not know what potential threat Paintman may pose, but the question makes him self-conscious of how Doe would perceive his contemplation. Suddenly he feels monstrous.

“What does Doe have to do with you?”

“It occurred to me that Doe could be the ‘lost traveler’ in the company of Martin Gates. There must be a small handful of new arrivals with access to this part of the terminal right now.” He shows a similar security pass to their own from his coat pocket. “It’s just a thought.”

The connections and possibilities race in Akhila’s mind. Fears of Doe’s safety spread faster and hotter than Emma can calm them, sprouting desires for Akhila to act that supersede any delays to that end. She knows the fear driven dedication well. She is dumbfounded that this detective could sense and play on that so astutely.

“That is a good point...” Akhila admits breathlessly, and Emma agrees with him. If it might stop him from killing Paintman over his fruitless quest, then she is glad to participate in the manipulation. “Thank you.”

“For your safety’s sake, allow me to accompany you.” Paintman opens his steel case to reveal an assortment of strange yet mundane looking items, and derringer guns. “I have a means of detaining spirits, even if exorcisms are unattainable.” He extends his dripping hand, like a melted devil, when no less than thirty seconds ago Akhila would rather have punched a hole in him.

Her fleshmate takes it and shakes it, his dark mood is assuaged.

“I’m sorry for being rash, that’s not usually like me... I’ll make it up to you.” Akhila promises, as Emma is overcome with another feeling of trepidation. “Let’s be friends.”



“Comfortable?” Martin leers from his spinning chair. They’re back in the office, the folding table has moved to the very center of the room, bloodstained, between Doe and the door. Her left hand is cuffed to a newly gagged Cain, and Mr Beans has a rope leashing him to her neck. The room is brightly lit by the monitor screens at their backs, so that the warden may do his job and interrogate them simultaneously. Gates’ goggles illuminate his face with a bright cyan light, such that every pore

is made visible to be scrutinised. A six chambered gun is slid to the table's center, as his left hand holds a more modern and automatic gun level with Cain's chest.

"Take off his gag." Doe is asked. With her free hand she obeys, never letting the man out of her vision entirely. Once it is removed, Cain takes a deep breath.

"Please. *Please*, do not do something you can't undo. This girl has been caught in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and she would never give *anyone* any reason to-" As Cain begs, the revolver is pushed forwards towards him. A bullet sits fresh in the chamber. "I-I don't want this, thank you but I really don't fancy using a-"

"Please, pick up the gun." Martin asks Cain coolly. "I'm not going to skin you. I'm not going to toss you into the halls and beat you or shoot to kill. This is an interrogation technique, sanctioned by Terminal policy. You're both *fine*. For now." He next turns to Doe. "What's your name?"

Doe attempts to appear calm beneath the drum of her heart. The world of luck weaves around her like a spider's web, every moment and each decision brings her back to the path of a final fate. She looks at her book, confiscated on the side by her scissors and other meagre possessions. The ghost calmly retrieves it for her, whilst keeping his gun trained on the two. Mr Beans dares not attack whilst Doe's life is upon the end of his trigger, and Gates seems acutely aware of this as he navigates the room. He returns to her all that Doe needs to communicate. She points at her name, and the horned man calmly nods.

"Nice name."

"Sir, Mr Gates. I'm sorry *again* for attempting to escape, a-and for snooping around under a false pretense. We have gotten off on the wrong foot, I *think*. I am actually working for the same company as you."

"Pick up the gun." Gates repeats. Cain's golden eyes flit between the gun, Doe, and the killer. Predicting what is about to occur, his hand trembles as he takes the gun into his fragile grip. "Funny story about that revolver, I couldn't find it for days until three hours ago. Ain't that lucky?" Of course it's the gun Punch used, the watch must have returned it. "How does that feel?"

"I don't like it."

"That's very honest of you. Thank you for sharing, Cain." Gates bites his lip, grinning gleefully between the two. "When I was recruited for this job, I'd been caught trying to flee the planet using this terminal. I think it was portal nine, or six, where they cuffed me and took me away. I wasn't convicted, you see, but I *had* killed twenty-eight people over thirty years. They took me for questioning, and I of course told them everything. I even offered to tell my reasons before they turned me in."

Doe's heartrate spikes. Mr Beans whines and rests his head on her lap, for little support. Cain's face, once nervously composed, has become as still and as an alabaster bust.

"I said to them 'I am a moral agent, with divinely inspired craftsmanship skills. I have invented a way to uncover any lie.'" He taps at his goggles. "'**Bond magic** is a substance created when people form a connection of *any* sort. These goggles pick up on guilt, and through them I hold the world to account.' I told them that I was the only one able to use my device, since it is specially attuned to my soul. I demonstrated that any typical person creates a tiny spike of guilt when they lie and then confessed, I had hunted and killed the most **devious liars** across all of Thraelos. My interrogator then got a call." He shrugs, clearly proud of himself. "Next thing I know, I'm being taken into a manager's

office and offered a once in a lifetime opportunity. Could you imagine? They told me transparently, they've been hiring criminals from their privately owned prisons. I was a special case, 'cause I hadn't been prosecuted yet, but since I was going there anyway... they gave me the job of warden in this living purgatory. Four days later, and suddenly I can't leave the place, then the terminal starts getting real quiet. Do you know what that's about?"

"The incident?" Cain offers before Doe can write. Martin's gun trains on him.

"You see, that's what they all say! Every new arrival that finds their way back here, they talk about a massacre that I *can't remember*. They're not lying, I see that, but they are *wrong*. I'm alive. I know that 'cause there were no casualties that day." He looks again between Doe and Cain, gaging how readily they believe what he has said. "You two are funny opposites, aren't you? His body is a shiny beacon of guilt, and you don't have a glint." Doe can attest to that being true, even without magic lenses to bring her proof. "Your dog has more guilt than you. I would typically never want to lay a hand on your head, but... you could be one of those folk who don't spark any bond magic at all. Then I could have a problem."

"You said something, back before I-" Cain starts, but is intercepted by Gates raising his voice.

"Unfortunately, Mr Salvatori, I don't think you'll be leaving these walls any time soon. I reckon you'll die tonight." The tone of the room changes dramatically with the cadence of Cain's breath. "I'll be asking you both questions and making you spin that barrel for every lie. That way you're incentivized to not waste my time, and you're given a five in six chance at having a second shot."

"Why do we have to shoot?" Doe asks with handwriting unbecoming of her normal style. For breaking a mirror, any spin by her hand would result in certain death. The threads of luck that attach to her from that gun confirm as much.

"Because I said so." The ghost answers back, with casual indifference. "I think it instills self-accountability, for when you go to the liar's afterlife."

"But-" Cain begins.

"Let's begin, shall we? We'll play until one of you lose, if you can't pull the trigger I'll do it for you. Why are you here today, Cain?"

"I was tasked by your employer to rid this terminal of ghosts." The young psychic attempts to level his voice. "I hired these people to help, after the task proved-... After I realised there was a presence too powerful for me to exercise alone." Cain swallows, sweat crawls from his hair dripping over the back of his seat. "I didn't tell anyone about the danger I had seen. I needed the job, and- I..." Guilty tears run as his voice chokes up. Doe feels a spike in her heart, watching the shame and the fear overflow from his once radiant eyes. He can't answer this question honestly without feeling intense guilt all the same. "I really am telling you the truth... I just... I'm ashamed. I'm so... sorry... Please, don't make me use the gun."

"Mrs Doe?" The gun turns on her, as she hurriedly scribbles her own response.

"I came on behalf of my mentor. I wanted to prove I could exercise this place and claim the prize Cain was offering. She does not know I am here, though I never said that I would not go. Cain is telling the truth, to my knowledge."

"You sweet summer child." The gun turned back on Cain. "Have a go."

“Pardon?”

“Spin the barrel and the pull the trigger. You *know* that somewhere, inside that heart, there is a lie of which you are deeply guilty of.” The bittersweet condescending smile on the ghost’s face makes Doe want to flip the table. Cain shudders his breath and spins the barrel.

“Please.” Cain sobs. The chamber locks into place as the psychic shuts his eyes and begins to cry. The gun rises to Cain’s head and Doe places her palm in his. One eye opens enough to squint at her with despair, yet she smiles as best as she can. Does nods. Relief floods him as he remembers she sees the threads to show every worst case of bad luck. “Oh gods!” He pulls the trigger and flinches. The gun harmlessly clicks on his temple. The chance at another minute of life surely feels euphoric.

“Ah, such a feeling... Gods, if only I ever lied. Doe. Take the gun.” Martin nods at her. “Have you ever been deceptive?”

“It’s possible.” Doe grips her pen so tight it might burst. She tells nothing but the truth at any given time, and she genuinely believes this. She should be safe. **“Though I can’t remember the first fourteen years of my life. I might have lied then. I have not lied since.”**

“I see... Well, that would conveniently make finding anything out very difficult, wouldn’t it? I would have to ask something... Something *very* specific, like... ‘what were you doing when I found you?’”

“I was...” Doe hesitates, the thin threads on her sleeves urge her to slow her pen. Something about a directly honest response is about to get her killed. **“I was talking to the robot.”**

“Were you lost?” His voice loses a scoop of its merry charm to the sinister goal that lies beneath. It becomes clear to her now that this ghost does not care for the truth. He’s just itching for a way to control and execute. “Don’t make me get a timer. Write your response.”

Her sigils scream at her not to write the next two letters upon the page.

“No.”

“How strange... Oh well. Spin the chamber.”

“Why-” Doe croaks her words as real panic sets in, the book is yanked from her grip leaving a trail of ink as she tries to grab it back.

“You either lied to me when we met, or you were lying just now. So, for my sake of sanity, have a spin! Give it a go! You think you can outsmart *me*?”

By taking away her one means of communication, Martin ends the conversation and forces her hand. Doe confirms this was the only option for her. He believes that she genuinely lied. He can’t fathom that he misled himself, nor that her opting to not correct him was not deception. This is how she dies.

“It’s only a one in six chance.” Cain tries to offer support. A sweet and cowardly man, with a good heart. She switches hands to make sure that the bullet doesn’t hit him on its exit.

“Go on...” Martin cocks his head.

Doe looks at Mr Beans, knowing the barrel’s outcome before the revolver clicks into place. Within her mind she attempts to concoct any sort of solution to avoid her fate. She thinks about Beans attacking though she knows it would only end with the same outcome. She refuses to cry. Doe

shuts her eyes, unwillingly thinking about every choice she has made up to this awful moment. She knows nothing she could have done better. No act that she would have changed. She has no regrets... save for two singular thoughts, buried by arrogance and exhumed by despair. She should have listened to Cordelia. She should have called her 'mentor' m-

"ME." Mr Beans barks, startling Doe's eyes to open. A tear trails down her cheek as her faithful mastiff beseeches her with his resolute silence. A bubble of rage against fate forms in her throat, a protest against him and against even the thought of relief in trading their lives.

"A volunteer?" A slow thoughtful grin pastes over Gates' face. "I like that. It's noble. Strong! Do it."

"(no...)" Doe whimpers inaudibly. She finds that she cannot see, from the misery his request evokes, she cannot bring herself to point the gun at her best friend. She would rather die than take a detour that kills her twice.

"Doe." Beans asks with as measured a tone as a dog can manage. His duty is still to protect her. If only to buy a minute more of her life, the Grim pleads that she listens to him.



Cold air resistance siphons the paint to the back of Paintman's skull, falling upon the blurring tiles below. Akhila glides through the central hall upon bat like leathery wings, as Paintman rides on his back and Emma talks to them from below. If Paintman had thought their flesh shaping capacities could extend to the kind of control displayed, he would have waited until they were lower down to suggest that their friend could be in danger. The only reason he feels moderately safe is because he cannot be easily dropped. Doves of robots that now awake to an unknown purpose move beneath them like ants.

"How did that happen?" Emma asks. Their body is numb to the pain of the transformation, but not incapable of feeling the slimy substance from Paintman's palms. "To your face and hands. What did you do?"

"How do you know I was not born this way?" Paintman responds sarcastically and grudgingly. "No one presumes that..."

"Were you born with paint for a face?" She asks, feeling sorry and more intrigued than before.

"No. It happened on a job. How were you joined?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out." Akhila weighs in to the conversation. "That's what our quest is for. I can't let it be interrupted..."

"How long?" Paintman regards the back of Akhila's head, as he starts to confirm his suspicion of what transpired in the server room.

"Too long... It's taken everything we have, though I could not be ungrateful for the journey."

"Then you came here for money."

"What? What makes you say that?"

“If you expected to find answers, it wouldn’t matter what I threatened. Unless you cared that much about your reputation.” Which would be a surprise, coming from a shapeshifter with two personalities.

“Heh... No. You’re right.” Akhila responds with an affirmative. “Money is very important in any researching endeavor, especially when you’re trying to find a singular magic effect.”

“I have contacts in that area of expertise, they would be expensive, if you’re willing to-”

“One thousand times, *yes!* Any help that we haven’t tried already!” They slow their flight at a bend, catching a view of the central security hub now that the terminal is truly coming alive. Paintman allows himself some slip of pride at his networking skills.

“How did you know Martin Gates was a serial killer?” Emma takes over before they rush violently into anything unprepared. She trusts Paintman about as far as their previous companion could throw him.

“I was catching a copycat killer. He disappeared before being questioned, but as far as serial murders go it was fairly safe to say he had something to do with it. Every known victim encountered him near their time of death. Nine reports of encounters said he was ‘testing their honesty’ and the sites of killings connected with that.”

“How so?” Emma asks, feeling unnerved.

“Blood messages written on walls, about being a god of purgatory. Somewhere that liars go, till their truths have been brought out. Nonsense and ego. Insanity. Nothing unique or interesting-”

“Emma!” Akhila reminds her to retract, as he undergoes their ill practiced dive through the double doors. Paintman ejects himself, landing on his feet before glass and steel shatters against his coat! They roll onto their knees, rapidly metamorphosing to give Akhila use of his arms.

“HALT, YOU HAVE BROKEN-” The robotic receptionist protests.

Without losing momentum, Akhila plucks a thick strand of his hair and hardens it into a Bo Shuriken. The weapon arcs over the desk and cracks into the robot’s screen, a malfunctioning beep of protest dies out as Akhila gets to his feet.

“*How did you do that?!?*” Emma exclaims, with barely enough time for Akhila to process himself before Paintman grabs their attention.

“THAT’S NOT ITS CPU!”

He tackles them to the ground just in time to avoid the first volley destroying most of Akhila’s chest! He’s correct. The machine’s ‘head’ has been all but destroyed, but its arms have transformed into automatic guns. In turn Emma hardens the front of their skin to absorb the impacts of the following barrage. Paintman lays flat behind them, their body acts as his only cover against the poor consequences of their actions.

“Can you move?” Irrate, he takes up his suitcase in one hand and contemplates his options.

“Not without opening you to fire.” Emma responds, with a mouth and ear formed on Akhila’s spine.

“Then don’t.” Grumbling, Paintman removes a slip of canvas from his case. “I can fix this.”

“How?” Emma queries, as he hurls his case in the direction of the reception desk. Paintman does not respond. He is busy counting the time between throwing and hearing his case land, listening for a sound that betrays the case being shot off course or hitting an obstacle prematurely. He hears it thud in a timely manner. It’s barely audible over the assault, but he is certain the case is behind the robot.

“It better have landed the right way up...” He mutters, exasperated, as his face presses onto and into the tiled floor. His head and arms emerge from the facial imprint he left on his suitcase, the right way up, after traveling the non-distance his paint enables him to cross. He’s now behind the robot, without it knowing he’s there.

Whilst the rest of his body remains behind cover, he brings the symbol upon the strip of canvas to meet his eyes. Staring deeply into its eight-pronged center, the detective makes an impromptu call to his boss.

Akhila is blinded by the calcified film. His body can only feel itself getting chipped away and hear rattling shots volley into his hardened chest. Yet, in spite of these limitations, he’s aware of the psychic outlet of immense energy exploding from behind the reception desk. A presence of unfathomable force is briefly allowed a window into the physical world; creating the effect of a kinetic and spiritual repulsion that almost knocks the soul out of his form.

Emma is momentarily repelled by a force that is antithetical to her. Disorientating traces of a forgotten being begin absorbing all forms of bond magic in the room, attempting to infiltrate every mental outlet it can find. By the time she can force her way back in the seat of Akhila’s mind, the traces of what Paintman summoned have begun broadcasting nonsensical images to their brain! A serpent’s eye, brain surgery, a ewe staring at them from atop a hill. “AKHILA!” Emma forces herself to do something she very rarely has had to do: she edits Akhila’s memories to expel the remnants of the presence’s influence.

Paintman tumbles out of his small sized portal and ends the cosmic interference. Seconds afterwards, their body loses its protective coat and regenerates. Akhila starts to survey the damage. The room looks as if a small hurricane blew through it, with the robot short circuiting from the damage. Their torso clothing is shredded, whilst Paintman stands up without a scratch.

“I didn’t have time to warn you...” The detective retrieves his case, without sounding too bothered about the negative aftereffects. “That symbol is a tool, good at repelling ghosts and anything else that gets close to its activation. You should disable the bot, permanently, before it tries to hold us to account.”

Despite his reassuring indifferent tone, Paintman’s posture and voice betray the toll that his stunt clearly took on him. Emma can only imagine the mental price of being the host of such a ravenous terror... It’s no wonder the man seems emotionally dead.



“It seems like I’m gonna have to keep the peace.” Martin informs her, holding his hand up. The rattle of gunfire sounds off on the lower floor, making flashes behind her on the screen. “Give me the gun. Your time is up.”

Doe hesitates to deliver the revolver into Gates' hands. She has still refused to pull the trigger on Mr Beans, despite her Grim's stalwart insistence on his sacrifice. Her frostbitten fingers are not even fully capable of applying the force needed anymore.

"I won't shoot you, don't worry." He assures, as she delivers the gun cautiously, keeping eye contact. "Lucky you, there are no rules over euthanizing a pet." Just as he aims the revolver, Doe pulls the singular string attached by Katara's will!

BANG

Of the fates connected towards herself, none that involve holding the gun lead to anything but an early death. **Yet**, of the fates that connect to Martin, a single misfire on his end could result in a fire extinguisher exploding billows of white chemical into his face!

Cain yelps, as Doe grabs for her book and kicks over the table into the ghost's startled silhouette! Mr Beans yanks on a power cord, severing its connection to near a dozen monitor screens, whilst Martin yells out and fires into the mist! Cain is the first one through the door, making certain by way of their handcuffed connection that Doe and Beans are through when he slams it and makes a run for the exit!

"COME BACK!" Martin's voice cries. His door swings too late to see which direction the two escaped by. "CAN'T ANYONE HAVE A CONVERSATION?!"

Their dash brings them down a flight of steps, just as two sets of feet are ascending. Cain pulls them into a cell before the sounds from the bottom floor make it to their level. They lay flat against the wall, watching anxiously round the corner.

"DOE?!" That's Akhila's voice! Cain confirms it with a rejoicing grin, informing Doe of the serendipity!

"*How do you expect her to respond?*" Emma questions her fleshmate incredulously, as they reach the second floor and see Doe and Cain running in their direction.

"Out! Out! He'll be shutting this place-" Before Cain can continue warning the group, an announcement begins declaring a lock down of the hub. "No!" He rushes back down the stairs with the rest, hardly registering the surprised presence of Paintman amongst the rest.

Paintman was not expecting Akhila's friend to be in the peril he described. His fairly well-crafted plan for taking the ghost's high security ID is thus frustratingly scuttled by the motivation that set it to action! He can only hope to convince them of taking revenge for whatever distressing situation has occurred to the girl, and their psychic employer, after they manage to retreat.

Down the stairs, to the reception, Cain shouts out- "WAIT!" As if words alone could prevent the metal shutters from closing where the double doors used to stand.

A solid casing around the building, designed to hold extra dimensional fugitives, now ensures that no one is getting out. "Please... gods..." Their boss uselessly bangs his fist on the exit, his body trembling from the stress.

To make matters worse, or maybe even to spite him, the power fails and leaves them without their sight.

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PART 7: Dark and Light.

CLANG.

“OW!” From Akhila’s voice.

“What was that?” Paintman feigns exasperated interest.

“He tried to punch through the wall.” Emma responds, prompting Cain to learn she has revealed herself to each member of the group.

“Did it work?” Cain follows this up with the smallest glimmer of hope.

“Do you see any cyan light?” Paintman simultaneously tramples Cain’s hope and raises an important issue. Elsewhere in the terminal, when the power was down, there has been an ever-present source of emergency lighting from the blue torches and cyan aurora above their heads. This hub has none of that. The torches appear to have been disabled, and the aurora once strong is dispersed to flickers like distant stars. Emma blames Paintman’s explosion for the aurora’s absence, but he rectifies this by flicking his lighter and bringing them sight.

Doe has been weaving a trip wire against the eastern door with her free hand, whilst the others were failing to find a way out. Her vision of fortunes provides a general layout of the room, based upon what could conceivably cause the most accidents. Tripping hazards namely populate the floor, where stubbed toes are the domain of the two viable entry points. Yet now that light is provided, she does look a bit silly crouching and weaving invisible strings.

“The next question-”

“Can someone get me a hairpin, to free our hands?” Cain interrupts Paintman apologetically. He is still attached to Doe as she now stands to be seen clearly in the lighter’s flame. Akhila offers a sliver of bone to him, of which Cain reluctantly takes to pick the lock. “Thank you. It’s a relief to see you both well.”

“I would bet, after you almost killed us.” Emma responds to him with a voice like ice.

“I’m so sorry.” The comprehension that Akhila is alive finally hits Cain like a sucker punch. His guilt at being the main cause of this mess collides with internal relief at not having Akhila’s death on his hands. “I am committed to making amends. I promise.”

“You’ve done enough.” Spoken by Akhila with forgiveness and spat by Emma with scorn. Cain takes a step back from the wounds both versions leave in his chest.

Doe claps her hands to get everyone’s attention back on her, just as Paintman was about to stage an interruption between the other two. The rope that once was around her neck is dropped, and her scarf is again hiding her scars. **“Gates is going to come after us, we need a plan and maybe introductions.”** Akhila translates for her.

“Good suggestion.” Paintman then looks promptly looks back at the one link between everyone here. Cain accepts.

“You know me. This is Doe, apprentice-”

“Daughter.” Doe interrupts him.

“Of course. This is Doe, apprentice and daughter of Cordelia Hawthorn. She’s a practitioner of Katara’s magic and has a stalwartly determined will, am I correct?” Doe nods, and so Cain continues. “That is Akhila, and Emma, they are fierce protectors. I hired them to be my bodyguards.” Paintman makes a short grunt of assent to their use in that regard. “Finally, Paintman and Mr Beans. Both duty bound and diligent, though I know little of either. Paintman knows how to fortify camps against spirits.”

“How good is this prison for setting traps, and how dangerous is the ghost?” Paintman asks, holding closer to Doe.

“Traps would be easy.” Doe responds. **“Setting them in the dark is harder. He has stun batons, a gun, and body armor.”**

“He’s going to hunt us.” Cain speaks out abruptly. His fear is shelved, save for the trembles, for the necessity of a cooler head. “When he caught me, he told me that’s what he does to those who run. He hunts people in the dark and he uses his goggles to see by their guilt.”

“He won’t **be seeing me.**” Doe and Paintman assure simultaneously, for entirely different reasons.

“He’ll see you from outer space.” Emma jibes Cain’s way. “So, you two are invisible?”

“Affirmative. Though I struggle to see or hear spirits beyond their traces... I’ll see his goggles if they glow.” Paintman opens his case with a motion so fast that it hardly flickered the flame. He takes out a wine bottle with cage-like supports, a derringer, and a glass of invisible ink. The objects are littered next to the shattered robot’s corpse, requiring a lot more explanation than mere presentation.

“That’s because of your summon. Isn’t it?” Emma asks. “You don’t have a way of connecting with ghosts... or with anyone.”

“You don’t need a connection to put a ghost out of commission.” Paintman responds and ignores her later comment. He draws attention to the objects laid out with a dripping flourish of his wrist. “I have two plans. I doubt any of us will be eager to follow either.”



Elsewhere it is possible that the terminal has returned to its wonted endarkened state, breathing out cyan light as extensions of itself over the other exorcists seeking to leave their

entrapment. Here it is worse. Here the terminal holds its breath, in the pitch black of the prison's second story cells. Paintman and Doe wait together behind a bed in anticipatory silence. Cain and Akhila wait in another cell at the end of the catwalk. They wait to hear Martin's approach, to begin the ambush to save their lives.

The plan is simple, with one major step that might go wrong. Cain will make himself known and draw Martin towards the end of the catwalk. Akhila and Emma are stood by to protect him if Martin decides execution to be preferable to recapture. When the ghost walks by Paintman's cell, Doe will lasso him and Paintman will disarm his gun. They work together to break his goggles and leave him blind, weaken him, then entrap him within the wine bottle mechanism. The only flaw is if Martin decides not to bother with Cain, or if he thinks to kill on sight.

The wait is excruciating. Each sound makes them jump. Occasionally they could swear that the ghost is close, or that his footsteps are directly above them. Cain shivers and focuses tries to focus upon his breath, whilst Emma holds herself back from expressing loathing. Akhila wants to reach out to his boss's shoulder, but he cannot trust Emma to not say the wrong thing.

Cain surprises them both when he speaks softly beneath his breath. "(I know you don't like me, Emma. I've known it before the terminal.)"

Akhila hesitates, thinking to respond kindly to their boss who is often chipper in tone, before Cain continues to whisper in the dark.

"(If I don't survive this, I want you to know that I truly just wanted to help. I wanted to help *someone*, by being honest... for once. I am sorry for what I caused. I did not know-)" An electric baton ignites at the end of their catwalk, banging off of the railing and commanding them to be silent.

Like vermin, Paintman and Doe shrink back as the horned silhouette passes them by. His goggles shine like small flares, illuminating his arms, and his weapons but not much more beyond. The stun baton provides better illumination, but only crackles when feeling force. Doe stays behind Paintman, with Mr Beans in her arms. The hug she bestows on her friend is as grateful as it is necessary to make herself small behind the bed.

"(I spy, with my little eye...)" Martin mutters to himself in passing and then raises his voice. "I've never lost a game of hide and seek, as the seeker. Morally though, I confess that I lost it many times before seeing the flaw of my ways."

Doe looks up, as she feels a draft on the top of her neck. The chilling eyes of the entity stare back at her from an impossibly dark corner of the cell.

"I think it's dishonest, if you are seeking someone, and don't announce that you see them when you do." Martin continues. "You're allowing them to believe the lie that they're still safe. If I could see you, I should say so." At this point he stops. "Otherwise, I am lying to you Cain. Lying by omission. Would you come to the light, or risk losing an arm on the chance that you might call my bluff?"

Cain steps from behind the wall. In Martin's vision he seems like a phoenix of guilt, eternally on fire with that bright cyan glow.

"Good choice. You'll be miles ahead when you cross to your next life."

With Gates distracted, Paintman raises his gun and reaches back to let Doe know he's-

His hand brushes the air. He reaches back further and realises that Doe has disappeared alongside her Grim. There is no trace. There was no sound. He is alone in his cell, waiting in hesitation as the odds crash like a tower all around him. His best restraint on the ghost is gone. The sapping of strength is now negligible. His advantage has more than halved, but what scares him the most is not the sudden and unforeseen complication. What scares him most is the knowledge that this is still his best shot. He will proceed.

Paintman steps out of his cover behind the ghost. He puts his gun to the back of their transparent head and shoots clean through an eye of the goggle!

BANG

“AH-!”

Martin fires his gun wildly as he spins around, leaving Akhila to yank Cain away from a stray bullet’s destructive path. Paintman ducks a swing of the baton and focuses on the shadow of where that gun ought to be. He grabs a sleeve and shoves it aside, before two bullets rip into the side of his trenchcoat! Martin aims for a hit at his ribs, but Paintman rams his shoulder into the ghost’s chest knocking him off balance! He wrestles Martin’s arm to the railing and brings his palm heavily down on his wrist, the gun drops to the bottom floor loudly.

“You snake!” With gritted teeth, Martin swings his baton towards Paintman’s head. Paintman falls into a backwards roll, but his older bones clash painfully against the metal of the catwalk! He survives only for the inexperience of his attacker, scrambling to evade the next downwards strike as electric arcs briefly illuminate both the men in combat. “You shot me in the head!” With each swing Gates gets a better read on Paintman’s whereabouts, keeping them on the backfoot as he walks vengefully forwards like a half-blinded juggernaut. “Don’t you have shame!?” Paintman wishes he knew the layout of the prison, so that he might accurately count his steps to where the catwalk becomes a staircase! It turns out that he needn’t bother to count, as the ghost’s boot connects with his hip and kicks him down half the flight.

When Paintman lands his leg sprains and his head thwacks against the railing. The lights turn themselves back on at the most inopportune time, partially blinding him with no eyelids to squint. His body is revealed to his attacker, in a bloodied pathetic heap, whereas he can’t even see Martin’s outline clearly. His head complains of a concussion, whilst he reaches into his pocket and finds a brick of paint waiting for him.

“Haha... I see you now. You’re smaller in the light.” Martin taunts. If only Paintman could hear more of the ghost’s words, he might give him a smart response. “Where are your friends?”

It’s no gun and no hand grenade, but as circumstances go his bad luck has finally taken a turn. As he quick draws the brick, hurling it at Gates’ last remaining goggle, the pathway to complete victory makes itself certain once again.



SMACK

As the brick hits, someone shoves Martin from behind! He feels the air rushing past his face as he tumbles and yells, he thrashes his baton wildly with the paint blinding his eyes and steps ringing against his armor. His body slams into the rails where his victim once lay, his head ringing and

ears catching the sounds of absconding footsteps. He tears at his goggle strap, and attempts to sit up, catching his horns on the railing whilst shouting out in frustration! Gates gains his sight at the expense of his vice-finding vision and sees two fresh paint trails leading both up and down the steps. He curses but quickly surmises that his foe took the stairway down. The man will be after his fallen gun.

The fact that he wasn't further attacked whilst laid prone suggests to Martin that he still has the upper hand. Although he knows it is four against one, his adversaries must lack the capacity to finish him off. Their plan must be to stage a distraction and breach his office to let the shutters up. "Nobody is getting out of here unless I allow!" They do not know that he shut down his monitor before the hunt.

"This is pathetic!" Martin calls out whilst descending the steps with speed. If they find the gun before he does, he might not survive a second shot through the- How did he survive? Blessing from... Blessing from fortitude? He finds the faceless man stooping to pick up the gun from the floor. Martin turns his thoughts off to the impossibility of his survival and throws his baton at the back of their head. "Halt!" As they turn around, the baton connects with a solid electrified hit. Martin whoops for joy, watching the painted man's head crack back!

Still wary of ambush, he crosses the distance and triumphantly grabs the man by the back of their overcoat. He reclaims his baton as he lifts them away from his semi-automatic. Turning them around, he administers a shock to their groin. Normal men would be knocked out cold or screaming from that, but the faceless man only groans and attempts to sluggishly resist. Martin lifts the man higher and chokes him against a cell. Now that he truly sees the dripping ugliness of the man's visage, he can't help but feel disgusted by them.

"Ow..." They grumble.

"You *shot me* in the head..." Martin pants. "Why didn't you announce yourself?!" Before the man can respond he hits them hard across the face. Despite this they're still conscious and frustratingly defiant. "Why didn't you trust me to fight you fairly? I would have said yes!" He raises them up against the bars and begins strangling them, paint splutters and drips from their skull, marking his gloves like he has blood on his hands. "People like you... use the dark to do everything! You need deception just to survive! Look at where that gets you when the lights are on! I've been hurt so many times, but by my creed I am your *god*! This is *my* domain."

His captive audience weakly raises their hand and puts it around Martin's neck. The painted man lacks the strength or the breath to squeeze meaningfully, making Martin ease up his grip. "You're done." Martin's voice lowers. "I will make this a purgatory that you will never escape. Until you can see the error of your ways, or until you die."

Just as his breath gets back under control, the speakers snap on with a monotone grudging voice. "One hundred and five years ago, on December the nineteenth, Martin Kenneth Gates was pulled over by police for speeding. He failed to disclose the unlicensed firearm in his vehicle, and he lied when he said he was 'only out for a drive'."

"What is- Hey- HEY! STOP THAT!" The ghost's remaining eye turns to the camera in panic. "How would you know- STOP SPEAKING!"

"In truth, Martin was on his way to a Sharleen Brathwait's house, where he intended to make her play Russian roulette until death. By his own standards, Martin Gates has deceived all his victims by not disclosing his intentions to kill."

“Make it stop!” Martin looks back at the now chuckling man in his hands. “I’ll kill you! STOP LAUGHING, I HAVE YOUR THROAT!” The ghost’s voice cracks as he readies the charge on his baton.

“The coward Gates allowed twenty plus people to believe they were safe, because he knew nobody would be getting killed if they saw him coming. He’s a prisoner, unlike the people he tries to capture. He’s trapped by his desire to be in control, in a world that already forgot about him.”

“Liar...” The painted man croaks mockingly, in a smug and jovially defiant tone. This causes a fear driven rage to choke up into Martin’s throat.

The ghost jams his baton deep under the man’s ribs, pushing it in like he wants to penetrate their skin, waiting for them to plead or scream- anything but grin condescendingly. “You can’t even admit you’re dead, Gates.” The goo melts off his victim’s face, eyes boiling beneath Martin’s handheld electric chair. His anger begins flowing back into fear, as the efforts expose a bland fully featured human face, oddly sunken within its skull, not showing a single hint of submission.

“You can’t even admit you’re scared.” The hand groping about Martin’s neck suddenly calcifies into a brace, locking his head in place as Martin chokes out a sorry terrified war cry. An image inked onto the man’s face is burned into focus, made visible by its reaction with the electric heat. Martin stares at it... An eight-pronged eye looks back at him, with a bottomless blank gaze.

“You don’t know how fucked you are.” Martin understands too late that he has been played. The man here is not the same one he kicked down those stairs.



That is the last thought he ever had.

The magic-psychic equivalent of splitting the atom is uniquely formed from where Martin once stood. Paintman had surmised the effect would be greater when used on these ghosts. An explosion of energy echoes mightily through the lower floors, rattling the bars and shattering the lenses of cameras.

The injured detective limps from the observation room and down the steps, to survey the aftermath, followed cautiously by a shaken Cain. When he arrives at site of the vast explosion, he opens his caged bottle and captures the disassembled essence of Martin’s purest form. Akhila’s body lays limp and charred by the wall, the sign made from invisible ink is spent but his good overcoat is intact. He takes the liberty of retrieving his clothes, and the security ID from Gates’ shattered armor.

His mission remains on track. The spirit of Gates, despite being ‘destroyed’ is already assembling itself in the bottle. It will certainly have a rude awakening in its purgatory.

“What did you do?” Cain looks concerned over the still breathing but unconscious Akhila. He knows, by the way they function. that such a state should be quickly rectified. Despite this, Akhila sleeps on.

“What I had to do. Don’t worry too much.” Paintman shrugs off his contractor’s concern and responds no further to Cain’s accusatory questions. As he heads back to unlock the security hub’s doors, he feels nothing but the ache of his bruises and the toll on his spirit this day has taken. There is no relief from his burden and no hope rekindled. There is only dull pride and uncaring determination in his steps, as he follows his joyless path to the end.

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PART 8: Severance.

“I never expected to speak to you like this.” Emma communicates without a mouth, without a brain, and without a body. Two souls float, connected by astral thread to Akhila’s form, one is herself and one is Akhila.

“You never thought we would die?” Before he can stop himself, the words fly out and are comprehended. The hurt of his reminder hits especially hard with their new awareness of these forms. There is a visualisation for the two. Emma looks like herself as she recalls it, and Akhila looks like himself without the feminine parts blended in. Despite this, neither can help but acknowledge the feeling of what he is. “I’m sorry...”

“I hate this.”

“Don’t be hard on yourself.” He shakes his head and attempts to smile, looking at his arm with its perfect likeness. “You made me so well-”

“Please don’t.” With no eyes to cry, Emma’s grief instead echoes throughout the spiritual realm. “I’m pathetic...” She sobs. “This is perverse.”

He knows not how to comfort her or refute what they’re both thinking: His soul is Emma. He is her; split off and molded so he would never know the difference. Though he has been changed near identically to match Akhila, he cannot deny that the meta-substance is *her*. More than a brain, and more than repurposed flesh that belonged to him, Akhila is truly gone. He’s a replacement.

“*What does that mean for my quest?*” He thinks to himself in a somber tone. “*I- He...? We spent our lives looking for how to give thanks... now it’s only her- me- us left...*” He emanates sorrow, feeling awful and strange, beginning to mourn a death he perceives as his own. He still thinks as Akhila... he suffers and grieves like Akhila...

“How can I not be me?” He asks Emma with a hopeless gaze. “How can I see myself as anything other than who you made? Even when I know it’s not true?”

It worked for so long, having this creation go blissfully unaware, Emma had almost forgotten what she had done. She is unable to do more than stare at him now, in a silent consuming guilt. She can hardly bring herself to apologise or to share anything that would make her creation feel worse than he already feels. “*If it wasn’t enough to accidentally kill who you love most. Now you’ve made his replacement to suffer the same grief as you.*” Her internal loathing is given voice. “*You were a coward in his life, and you’re a coward in his death.*”

“Do you think he went to the heaven you came from?” His words break her heart and his smile shatters it.

“*What do I say to that???*” She yells within, furious at herself for being unable to tell him the truth. Even a crafted version of him would be too much. The attempt at hope from his saddened eyes would be too fatal for her if it died. Her mood sinks to a new ring of despair... yet it finds a small way to persist within. She clings to the dawning concept, like a buoy, promising to have every regret accounted for.

“We will find him.” She tells Akhila, watching his expression lift, and with it her hope painfully resurrects. “We’ll find him and we’ll get him back.” Her soulmate hugs her so tightly that their essence nearly recombines.

“I’m sure he knows we’ll be there as soon as possible...” He speaks, as they both feel it is time to return to their body.

“I’m such a terrible friend.”

“But we love each other...” He gives not a rebuttal or an admonishment... but an assurance that everything will be alright.



They awake as one, minus the overcoat, suffering the remnants of a psychic message playing to a brain with no soul. Visions of a thick clouded hurricane with vague elongated faces- Is violently purged from their brain at a speed which gives it a minor seizure.

“AKHILA!” Cain, standing by, quickly puts his friend into the recovery position and starts taking his robe off to cushion their head. Whilst Emma goes scorched earth on the eldritch entity’s mental effect, Akhila’s awareness of himself starts to blossom despite the maintenance on his mind. He probes at Emma to make her aware of his awareness and manages to startle her for the first time in the eight years they have been together. It takes Emma a while to comprehend what she is experiencing, until she recognises it is the exact same way she would contact him. Now the moment when he instinctually transformed his hair makes more sense; Akhila Argo is Emma now. He cannot help but inhabit this body as thoroughly as herself.

“What was that?” Akhila asks aloud, after their brain is wiped of invasive commands. Cain responds, thinking they talk to him.

“You’ve had a seizure, I can’t even suppose at what knocked you out, I thought your situation was beyond that. Are you ok??”

“Where is Doe...?” Akhila asks, as he feels the control of his body slowly return. Like re-forgetting to manually breath, it takes a while to come out of his Emma-like self-awareness and fit into the pilot seat of his flesh.

“Paintman told me she disappeared before he attacked.” Cain answers despairingly. “I think...”

“Did the entity get her?” Akhila fills in the blanks as his mind travels to the stitch. He touches his eye to be certain...

Cain nods but transitions to shaking his head. "I don't know... There is a possibility, but we didn't see... It's still my fault. Are you ok?" He reiterates the more important question.

"I'll be better." Akhila says assuredly, aware that the psychic's talent will have inferred many troubles already. "Doe is alive... Not only that, but she isn't suffering anything that would break her concentration... Her prayer is active."

Cain narrows his brow; he can tell that Akhila believes with certainty what they say. "You mean it..." He marvels, more to himself. The report ushers a serendipitous dawning upon his heart, which would make it leap were it not for the uncertainty of the situation. "So... there's a chance that the rest are ok as well." He repeats to himself. "If the entity took her, there is a chance..." He may not be responsible for the deaths of dozens...

"Where's Paintman now?" Emma asks from Akhila's side. "He didn't leave already, did he?"

"I wouldn't know." Cain is called from his thoughts to provide attention. "I stayed by your side when you didn't wake up." The underlying show of apology and sincerity in his voice hits Emma with more force than the shock baton. More than mere wishful words thrown away in the dark, and more than an easy invitation or letter checking up on their situation. Cain's actions show a truth that Akhila had known long before they came to the terminal.

"You... actually care..." Emma wonders with an astonished tone of regret. Cain purses his lips and looks aside, not one to take pride in vindication. "You really have tried... and I wanted to hurt you."

"Excuse me?" That gets a reaction, as Akhila cringes to his feet.

"That was a lie- no- kind of- not serious harm. I'm so sorry." Akhila amends dusting himself off and spying a paint trail that leads out to the door. "I never felt for a second that you were taking advantage of us."

"Oh, good." Cain laughs, unsettled yet doing his best job of pretending to take things lightly. The two catch a brief glimpse of the real Cain under his mask, stressed despite the good news. He cares about everyone, like Akhila cares for her, the man is the moral equivalent of atlas when holding himself responsible. "Thank you for saving my life." He smiles.

"Not at all." Akhila expresses with Emma's full support. "I'm going to chase down Paintman, but I'll be back. Would you like to come with us?"

"No, thank you, I'll stay. I wanted to look for clues before all the unpleasantness, and... I have more to do. Go ahead. I'll be fine as I am."



By all means, his plan had worked perfectly in the face of outstanding bad luck. 'If we can't restrain him, we'll need him to view this properly.' Their conversation echoes. Doe's objection had been to the necessity of Akhila getting tased. Paintman had insisted upon it. 'If you waved a sign in front of me whilst we fought to the death, I would not stop and stare at it. It has to emerge in a way that captures his interest. The baton will let him see it well.' Switching with Paintman and getting caught was the key to ensuring that. After the goggles were out of commission, there was meant to be no way to tell that the switch had been made. Only they didn't expect the lights to turn on. If it

wasn't for the quick brick of paint, and Cain pushing Gates down the stairs, the backup plan to defeat him would have failed.

'I don't have a plan three. So, if you fail in your task, you will know that I died disappointed in you.'

"*He was like a cranky task master...*" Emma muses as they catch up with the man, just as he's opening the advanced security door. All of that effort to progress further inside the terminal. Pistons and thick metal plates shift, with black letters reminding regular staff that they are not meant to go beyond this point. The private eye registers their arrival, without turning around. He hesitates with one foot in the open entrance, waiting for their next move.

"Your secret is safe. I suppose I could have given a better warning, about Mr Big." He admits in an even-tempered voice. It would be easy for him to step beyond the door, and have it shut before they could catch him, the ID belonging to Martin Gates remains in his hand for that use.

"You're inhuman." Emma responds. "I've never met someone so passively cold... I'm surprised that you're waiting."

"Life is surprising." Paintman retorts and turns his head. "How do you feel?" He asks out of real curiosity, in reference to his boss's effects.

"Different..." Akhila responds with some uncertainty. It's not the answer that Paintman was after, and so he turns to leave them behind. "But mostly good." Akhila finishes and stops Paintman's steps once again. "It was horrible, and violent, but we wouldn't have come to an understanding without that moment out of our shell. The aftereffects were wiped from our brain, so... You couldn't have intended that, but we owe you for it."

"That's useful..." Their loose ally shakes his head, paint dotting the floor. It doesn't sound like he means 'useful to him' and they cannot tell if he's disappointed or contented with what they said. "If we had begun on a better start, things could have turned out different."

"Wait- hey!" Akhila startles with a hint of anger, as the man turns.

"I told Cain what I found on the cameras." Paintman clarifies as if reassuring an annoying child. "The security system is open, and those robots have free passage through these doors... You can use them to find your friend, I'm sure."

"Don't go yet! I need to know what you know, about finding our origin, and--"

"I'm going to proceed *alone*. For now. If I need you, I'll leave a calling card at this door." He steps through and looks back at them one final time, the same deadened expression conveys nothing but cold indifference to their plight. "We'll be in touch. If you get out." Without another word, the inscrutable man activates the locking mechanisms and leaves them out on the other side.

Akhila is lost for words. "After all of that..."

"*I think we're better this side of the door.*" Emma fills in the gaps where they stand, attempting to build a fragmented picture of the living man more dead than the terminal's ghosts. What keeps returning to her is his manipulation, of which he used just as easily as he spoke. At some point he must have felt normal emotions, connections, desires, and hopes, enough to recognise and exploit them in other people. She wonders how long he has lost that part of him... She wonders if he could get it back, or if that's why he only focuses on his task.

Something else darkly resonates with her about his resolute commitment. His dedication mirrors not only Akhila's quest, but her own.

Akhila chuckles. "Oh, sister... I'm so so sorry." He commiserates, before she can even register how she feels. Then she gets it. That first thought, an ever-present drive to proceed, squat in the back of her mind like a spear waiting to stab if she slows down. Fear forged in love and gratitude. She has only ever felt it inside of him... until now.

Fin.

Thank you to Izzy, and Gunho_guy for helping me do some edits!