

Emma and Akhila R3: A Somber Note.

The
path
to
forgiveness
begins
with
a

Victim.

Duty.

Sin.



“This was not supposed to be an execution.” The man in red tasseled robes solemnly states to the girl with a box on her back. His voice tremors on the edge of tears, hidden behind his deep scarlet veil. “You can still make things right.”

She gives no response.

Emma kneels at the highest point of the tallest ziggurat in the painted city of Li-thi, a metal corset around her chest holds a light wooden box firmly upon her back, her red robes have been torn and tattered. Ahead of her is a vast wailing amalgamation of storm, magic, and soul, dwarfing the mountain range as it slowly approaches. As tall as the sky and as loud as thunder, the dread hurricane Fthuvuu forms a titanic smear of grey-greenish faces over the land. Each city has been abandoned as it meanders across The Viridian Continent, the residents have dispersed to prevent their souls drawing the storm off its course. The ritual of binding is poised to begin, yet her burden is light when compared to the weight of her father’s tone.

“Emma?” He beseeches. “Please do not stay silent, I still love you-”

“-There is nothing that you can say to make me change my mind.” She speaks firm from behind the curtain her veil provides. “I would do it to you too, if I could.” She hears him take up the ceremonial flat-blade and raise it above her back.

“You have killed me, my child.” His hand wavers but the blade is swung. The string on the box is cut and the lid is opened. White balloons burgeon from their cage, glyphed and glowing, forcing her father to fall back to avoid being trapped inside her. The channeling balloons swell until Emma’s body is limply taken up from the balcony. The ropes have been wrapped around her spine, their runes form a perfect siphon towards the near absence of her human soul. It is time for her final breaths to be drawn, as the wind carries her onwards towards Fthuvuu.



The white marvels of magi-technology float out like a hellish dandelion seed, gliding serenely towards the grotesque grey maw, until she is out of sight.



The storm tears at her clothes, snatching the veil and exposing a new golden metallic skull. The gale rips at the last parts of her flesh and skin, deconstructing her limbs with malicious force, sucking the bones from their joints until only the metal torso and head remain. She feels everything. Her involuntary screams are the last leave, taken by the grey, rising in a crescendo until the power implodes on itself.



A bright light was born from the center of the hurricane.

Expanding and glowing akin to a supernova.

With an explosion that made the valley we see today, both the storm and the girl were gone.

Thus started the first rebirth.

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PART 9: Future thoughts.

The security door seals behind Paintman, separating him from the twins before anyone can be further disappointed. The dour detective releases a deep sigh from his chest, clearing the ache from his lungs and reducing his slouched posture. He puts a hand on the nearest wall and plants his face firmly against its surface, the wet **splat** punctuates his brief moment of silence as if a laugh track were playing overhead. It wasn't funny the first time he was taught to do such a thing, and the humiliation has hardly numbed with practice.

"Only one place to go." He unenthusiastically motivates himself as he peels from the light burgundy patterned wall. Ahead of him is a beige carpet that slopes upwards into a wide lengthy hall, a flock of glossy black doors interject on short intervals, and polished personalised tags of ownership gleam in gold over every entryway.

The executive suite is everything he imagined, expensive, tasteful, yet awfully lacking in depth. The quiet composed nature of the branching pathways assumes the aura of something terrified into a state of alert. As if it must still, at any moment, impart the view that its occupants are better than those who come to be briefed. As if it must prove to all visiting companies that T.I.T.A.N. can afford the same potted plant luxuries as their competitors.

Paintman has no time for that corporate pageantry. All of the candelabras and motivational paintings in every world could not stop this place being abandoned.

“Which way from here?” He pauses before a concourse, a rounded room with fine leather chairs and coffee tables. A gold gilded teleporter within its center supports a sign asking **‘Please, one at a time’**; most likely a means for the execs to avoid walking the common halls.

“MARTIN GATES.” Before Paintman can turn his head, a pearlescent machine sporting a translucent glass hectogon for its head addresses him with some nasal familiarity. “YOU LOOK DIFFERENT.”

“I’ve had a workplace accident.” Paintman lies without hesitation, revealing the lack of his nose, lips, and eyelids. It doesn’t excuse for his missing uniform, but the robot does not seem to mind. “Where can I find my boss?”

“MISS FOWLER IS THIRTY-SIX THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-FIVE DAYS, TWO HOURS, AND THREE MINUETS OVERTIME IN HER CURRENT OFF-SITE MEETING. I APOLOGISE FOR THE DELAY. MIGHT I DIRECT YOU TO HER OFFICE, TO WAIT?” Its tripodal wheels whirl restlessly during the report, shifting from one position to the other as if it desires to be somewhere else. Paintman observes that its legs are fitted to dust and vacuum the floor and supposes it isn’t happy to see his paint trail besmirching its work.

“Sure, thanks.” He allows it to lead him towards Miss Fowler’s room. Whilst he follows, he contemplates on its puzzling recognition and searches his mind for a probable cause. The executive-bot is not built for security, yet not entirely without security capabilities, it doesn’t seem to be damaged in any noticeable way either. It’s clearly at fault in mistaking him for Mr Gates, even with his new pilfered ID, however the reason eludes him until he recalls Martin’s bottled location. His suitcase contains the cell of the soul of that vile man in its entirety. The magi-tech of the executive-bot must be scanning for ID *and* soul, both of which it would find on Paintman’s person. With Paintman’s own essence a very **very** small factor to consider, he might be the first and only to fool the terminal’s detection system. Either that or it just takes a stolen ID to pass inspection.

“IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN RETRIVE WHILST YOU WAIT?” The exec-bot asks politely, whilst opening the door to Miss Folwer’s office.

“A coffee, from the visitor’s cafeteria.” Paintman is sure to keep his distance when entering, providing a task that he hopes will afford him time. “What do you do if you find intruders?”

“I WILL ACTIVATE THE MIRAGE ENGINE.” Its voice module refuses to elaborate, and after a pause Paintman accepts the information.

“... Sure.” He nods, figuring it best not to ask further questions that Martain wouldn’t. It departs with a polite ‘GOODBYE’, leaving him without having to use his gun.

Paintman lets out another tired sigh.

The office spans at least thirty meters in length, with an aqua marine swimming pool in its center and a beach themed cocktail bar at the pool’s side. A polished Origa ebony desk sits nearest to the entrance, presiding over the two instalments with an enticing view of an adjoining sauna. As if Miss Fowler were trying to forget the location’s climate, the AC has been set high and even the woman’s portrait portrays her in sunny summer attire. Paintman takes a seat at

the desk, after propping the door open and adjusting the AC, then begins a methodical search for the terminal's deepest secrets. He starts with the computer – digitally locked.

“Of course.”

He searches the under-desk, then the over-desk, then checks on each angle of every drawer for a hint at her desktop key. He's familiar with office stations enough to believe he will find something of importance, even if she's the sort to commit passwords to memory. Some files are too sensitive to store in a system, and from her deskbound portrait Paintman supposes Miss Fowler was out of her depth. She presents as a short chubby upper-class woman with pale sapphire earrings and a penchant for blue dress. She smiles as if she were cold. Hollow awkward eyes hold a fear that the camera will find the absence within her soul. He has sat at this sort of desk for much longer than Miss Fowler, long enough for that fear to disperse from his eyes entirely. “You were transferred.” He theorises. “From somewhere tropical... Very cushy... Hired to be ruthless, but not necessarily for...” Intellect. Behind the small portrait is a written note of her details, it includes with it an odd instruction about where to knock on the back of her desk.

“Ah.” He checks and discovers a hidden compartment. “Now that's interesting...”

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To the record of ‘Greece’, played on the old gramophone, Emma and Fake-Akhila watch at the observation room desk. They tap and nod to the beat, thirteen screens each, deep in their thorough task of searching for their taken friend.

“Lovely song.” Fake-Akhila commends, clicking through angles, his torso separate from Emma's.

“It's so catchy.” She agrees and attempts to ignore Paintman's imprint on the wall.

“Lots of cameras.” He recalls just how easily Paintman could see through them.

“So many screens...” Just like they can see through each other.

“... I hate this.” The moment he speaks his mind, Emma deflates on the desk.

“I am so glad!” She groans. “Give me physical torture any day, how do some people deal with this?”

“They implode?” He offers uncertainly. “Can we talk about it?”

“Yes, please.” She pushes herself up. “First and foremost, I am *not* calling you fake-Akhila. I can't do it, I won't.”

“Thank you. I keep forgetting to use it anyway...” Akhila sighs. “What are we gonna do when we get original Akhila back? What’s going to happen to me? Would we live as a three? Or will I die? Or-?”

“You are not dying.” Her voice drops severely. “We’ll just be separate, in other bodies, I sw-” The gramophone stalls by her hand. “I meant to bring that up next.”

“What do you mean, ‘other bodies’?”

“You’re going to take this the wrong way. I just wanted to reassure you that, no matter what-”

“Emma.” His voice struggles to remain level. “What do you mean?”

“I can possess people and I’ve known for a really really long time.”

“What the fuck!?”

“I’m sorry! I told you, you wouldn’t-! I didn’t trust what you would do with it!”

“Why?!? That would have changed everything!” His heart picks up ten paces. “If we could possess people like you were possessing me, we could have learned from the best! We could have stolen forbidden knowledge, we could have avoided this and found answers! *Emma!*”

“I know!” She shouts back. “I don’t wanna!”

“What do you mean?!”

“We shouldn’t possess people against their will!” She drives that home. “Unless, for necessity or- I don’t know! I don’t know what I’m saying, I didn’t mean to say anything.” She shakes her head and hides her eyes. “I just want you to live...”

“You lied to me.” Akhila’s empathy fights his anger until both have become steaming wrecks. He goes silent and stews, both of them brooding until their feelings and thoughts start to align. “You’ve been scared about how I act?”

“A bit.” She mumbles. “But I should have told you.”

“I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable.” He shakes his head. “I never thought that I could. I’m sorry...”

“I’m sorry too.” They contort their spines to create a hug, as if bending backwards, branching into each other in a manner that looks unhealthy from every view but their own. “I’d do it for you...”

He nods. “Thank you...”



The music resumes and the twins return to their hunt for Doe. Akhila begins questioning how they might use their new power as Emma tries to respond as best she can.

“How do we enter?” He asks, with his eyes on camera B.

“We’d need a connection, I had to be dead to fuse with your head... it might have helped that my body was made from you too. To extend that to others; I assume a part of us would have to become a part of them? The only problem is- Paintman?”

“Paintman??”

“Paintman.” She points him towards a notification received at the bottom of their monitor. It sports a familiar grimacing face, like an open wound.

FW: Urgent.



Delia Fowler <Summerfun1988@titan.co.orig.>
To Martin Gates.

‘I hope this message finds you well. I’m sending this to inform you that, given that phase 1 of our plan is about to commence, it’s time to seal off the discovery area. The area is to remain locked down and guarded 25/8/366. Only members of Olympus, Gold Team, and Black Level Security IDs are permitted to access the discovery area. And above all else, keep Foreman Ben Waller away from the area. The Board doesn’t want him to even know of the site, let alone be around it. You have your orders. See to it that they’re followed. We’ll be in touch.’

This should help. - P

Below this, a forwarded message contains a collection of snapshots of pages laid out upon someone’s desk. The twins deduce that he’s sending something called ‘Project Affinity Blade’, which looks like a very dense and complex jumble of words. They reply.

What?!



Martain Gates <Angelooftruth28@titan.co.orig.>
To Delia Fowler.

How did you know we were here? – E&A

An understandable response, to which Paintman explains; **“I presumed you’d be searching for Doe. Did you find her?”**

“No.” With self-censure Akhila recalls his task.

“Do you understand what was sent?” Paintman’s response is typically fast.

“We’re more into religious manuscripts.” She can hear his sigh through the screen as she presses send. It takes him a minute to write a succinct yet digestible summary of what he posted.

“By linking an artifact they called ‘The Battery’ to each portal, T.I.T.A.N’s ‘Project Affinity Blade’ was supposed to be siphoning magic from other worlds. That likely caused the main incident. I’d say that our exit lies somewhere in that Discovery zone, if the Battery remains intact.”

“How do we get there?” Just as they hit send a doubt creeps up their spines.

“You’ll need my pass for the teleporter. Do you understand?” Something is wrong.

They glance at each other with shared apprehensions, anxieties in sync, they step backwards and treat the screen like it might self-destruct.

“Are you there?” Paintman asks, not more than thirty seconds later. **FW: “Are you there?”** Less than twenty seconds. Their breathing shallows. His calling sign remains on the wall behind them, less than a foot away from the door, making the use of this email entirely obsolete.

“Why are you telling us this?” They ask, using the voice activated control scheme.

“I won’t be getting to use it myself.” The emails stop.



The present buzz of Miss Fowler’s AC fills the silence as Paintman sits still at his desk. He breathes shallowly, trying his best to curtail the nervous dripping of paint on the woodwork, he stares over the monitor and looks at nothing. The cold nose of an engraved pistol is pressed into the back of his head.

He considers using diploma-

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PART 10: Cain and the Devil.

THWACK!

The detective falls limp on the grey marble floor, eyes still and jaw slack, like a medical skeleton robbed of its core support. The man's joints make unhealthy cracks upon impact, somewhere between a chiropractor and dungeon torturer's audible results. His case skitters over the stone and slips into the pool, where it bubbles and sinks below.

"That wasn't necessary." Cain miserably glares at his Suzerain and hands the gun back to their grasp.

"He's not dead." The tall, blond, and impeccably dressed man dismisses Cain with a handwave and thin tolerant smile. "Now pick him up." Cain has made two grave mistakes in the past forty-eight hours. The first was to lead this exorcism, and the second was to make a deal with Delim Arescotti.

"As you wish..." He had been promised a ludicrous amount of coin, enough to remunerate every victim of this venture and more than enough to pay for the damage and mental toll on his friends. The exact wording of his contract included: *'You, Cain Salvatori, will act as my agent. I shall give you objectives, and I will trust your best discretion in how to pursue them.'* And he had understood that the offer equated to slavery. He suspected the penalty of death for his defiance too, and he accepted the further clause to keep Delim's secrets. He did this because he deserved it, and like any good Devil, Delim had approached him during a mental breakdown. His grave mistake was not punishing himself, but rather assuming the care of a human child would give this exorcist moral bounds.

"You're gettin' mouthy." Kailios Arescotti, the red-headed apprentice, disdains. "I miss when ya kept your complaints to yourself." Delim's thirteen-year-old younger brother is in many ways much *much* worse than his supposed guardian. He is also the most terrifyingly precocious, observant, and sociopathic child that Cain has had the misfortune of meeting.

"Take the legs." A third figure instructs in a rough ancient accent. "This room does not suit me..." Kasimir is the last member of their group. He inhabits a pale tan man, with black thin rimmed glasses and a green Nurolink fit into the side of his skull. Internally, Kazimir is a canid spirit of frozen death. Externally, he is the body Cain once called Simon.

"Turn the AC down." Cain suggests with hostility as he takes Paintman's boots in his hands and lifts. The white wolf of Mt Panthea takes the arms on the other side, and together they struggle towards the door.

"We're about to leave." Kailios counters and snatches the ID card from Paintman's neck. "Hurry."

"Onwards, mush!" Delim encourages, whilst not offering to help himself, he has been having a hard time with small feats of athletic strength since he got shot in the lung by an acquaintance. Cain knows of this wound because it bled upon Delim's suit, that and the fact that he felt the pain as if it were his own.

"Where are we going?" Cain asks and strains.

“We’re going to follow me. Make a paint trail and don’t talk as much. Listen to Kailios.” Delim replies, as it becomes apparent that Kazimir has regained the strength to carry Paintman on his own. Cain becomes silent. Yet, whilst he is a prisoner, he will insist on at least trying to respect those he is made to betray. He stubbornly keeps a hold of Paintman’s legs even as Kazimir tugs with a questioning brow.

“Weak man.” Kazimir scorns him, even as Cain believed he was carrying the body well.

“I know.” Cain scowls and readjusts his hold.

“You did not brave my territory. You flew on dragon to reach my peak.” Kasimir’s frown deepens. A lecture from Mt Panthea’s number one cause of death, over not braving the number one cause of death, sounds about as exhausting as climbing its trail. Cain would rather be eaten alive by bees, and he knows that comparison well.

“For your information,” He speaks carefully. “I already did brave your territory on my way down.”

“I know.” Kazimir nods to his chill skinned vessel. “This should have been you.” He eyes Cain with a dark promising hunger.

“What a shame.” Cain retorts unafraid, for as long as they’re under the brother’s employ neither can hurt the other against Arescotti interest.

“Kazimir.” Delim warns. “Don’t rattle Cain. We’re a team.” The group stops at the metal door to the executive security operations center, it opens by a heavy handle to pure impenetrable darkness within.

Cain’s memory is cast back to the shadows, the reaching tendrils that snatched his wards where they stood, the abrupt screams and the sound of dragging nails, dull thumps of bone against- “What’re you waiting for?” Kailios glares at him, jabbing their eyes to the void’s gaping maw. “Toss him.”

“I couldn’t...” For all he knows this could kill Paintman.

“I’ve told you to do what he said.” Delim allows a sigh to slip through his easy-going mask. **“You have too.”** The voice of the manifestation of Delim’s contract echoes the reinforcement within his head. Cain feels as if a serpent’s tail were constricting upon his heart, squeezing against every beat, reminding him of just how painful a death could be.

“This will not kill him?” Cain tries to affirm more than he asks. The truth is that it doesn’t matter how Delim replies, as he has to believe it without evidence on his side. “This will not kill him.” Cain repeats with a stronger veneer of certainty. The door is locked once the tumble and thud of Paintman’s body falls still.

“One down.” The master of Cain’s hands congratulates, sealing the door with Gate’s security ID in his hand.

At that moment they hear the thud of approaching footsteps, twenty to ten seconds away from becoming a problem. Delim squints with a touch of annoyance, he pockets the ID and brushes his hair in the door’s metal reflection. “You didn’t say they’d be here so fast...” Delim reproves, as Cain’s heart begins to sink.



“D-DELIM!!!” The bespectacled man weakly points and exclaims as the twins careen around the corner, this is not very surprising, given they’ve taken the form of a human cheetah. Their eyes have remained the same and their skin lacks the colour and fur, however their body has mimicked the relevant musculature and shape to produce the speed they required. The four figures before them all look in various states of alarm, with the exclaimer having collapsed before they arrived.

“No-no! It’s ok! We- We were just- W-I’m an exorcist! Cain!” Akhila struggles, as even Cain looks disturbed by their chimerical presentation.

“Ya gonna make Simon barf!!” The red headed child reprimands, and so ‘Simon’ does. Emma regrets that they left so much tissue exposed when transforming.

“A- I am so sorry. We’ll just go back and re-transform ourselves.” Akhila is pressured to do exactly that. His trousers, folded inside a pocket of skin, are donned along with the boots they were forced to carry inside their gut. There is precious little of the furred jacked left to adorn, but that too is equipped over his chest. “Where’s Paintman?” He finally steps from behind the corner, reclothed and looking comparatively better. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare anyone.”

“Then what does your scary form look like?” The child grins.

“Excuse my brother.” The blond handsome man takes a step forwards. He’s dressed elegantly in an impossibly dark cape, tight trousers, and a pair of snakeskin shoes. “The paint trail ends here, we’d just arrived when Simon fainted.”

“Do you have a way to get inside?” Akhila presses, whilst Emma emerges from his waist.

“We’re figuring that out.” He extends his hand. “Delim Arescotti, interworld exorcist. That’s my friend, Simon, from T.I.T.A.N. HQ, this is my apprentice, Kailios, and you’ve met Cain.”

“You’re from Alaia.” Akhila greets.

“Where else?” Delim smiles as if already likes them. “You know of it?” Akhila feels a strange prick on the back of his neck and finds himself being watched by the apprentice.

“Not really, we know the aesthetics and the magic. You all have a lot of magic. I’m Akhila.” Emma nudges beyond his discomfort. “This is my soulmate-.”

“-Not like that.” She takes the hand for herself. “We’ve just got the same soul, so ‘soulmates’. Not soulmates. We’re single.”

“We’re single?” Akhila asks, as she fights to remove his mouth.

“I am single.” She amends. “One very single person in a very single body.” She laughs. “Emma.”

“It’s a pleasure.” Delim responds. There’s a moment of awkwardness where he attempts to release his hand just a second before she’s ready, resulting in the most minor of social mishaps that makes her regret being born.

“In a sense we’re both ‘single’!” Akhila saves face. “But we are still together, as should be obvious.” - *‘What the fuck is going on?’* He questions internally.

‘I don’t know how to flirt! How do we kill ourselves?’ She replies.

“I get it.” Delim retracts his arm to a safe position and rescues the conversation. “Alaia has Rebises too, congratulations on that, Cain has told us good things about you.”

“Cain told us *everything*.” Kailios teases.

‘He better have fucking not!’ Emma glares at Cain as she retreats into Akhila’s side.

“’cept the part where you turn into a cat.” Kailios continues. “That was weird.”

“Yeah. That... was, em...” Akhila struggles to explain himself. “Do we need a card for that door?”

“I figured, but we don’t have a card.” Delim shrugs, with a short exhale.

Akhila retrieves the ID from their ruined pocket and tries it. Unsurprisingly, it fails to gain entry. “Have you tried brute force?”

“With what force?” By the look of his group that now seems like a dumb question. One child, two weak men, and an exorcist who might possibly have a wound.

“Ah. Sorry.” Akhila feels bad for suggesting it. “That was a dumb idea, I just-”

“It’s ‘cause we’re from Alaia, right?”

“Yeah, I thought you would have like a... curse for it, or that green fire-?”

“I have an idea!” A self-astonished delighted voice from the formally silent Simon interjects. “Oh, sorry.” And after a cacophony of ‘no you’re fine’s, he divulges that “I was thinking we could promote your ID in an office? If I could interface with a computer, we’ll see if they have a protocol and-”

“That’s great idea, Simon!” Delim helps him to stand. “Then I think we should find an office, if anyone’s seen one open?”

“We have!” Akhila excitedly remarks. “It was on Paintman’s trail, not too far from here! We can show you!”

“That’s wonderful, I’ll be right behind you.” Delim ushers. “Come on Cain.”

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‘We’re so lucky to find these guys!’ Akhila praises and leads ahead, making the ten-minute journey to Fowler’s Office. *‘I wouldn’t have thought to promote our card.’*

‘Yeah, yeah, same...’ Emma muses, and though it sounds like she’s engaging, her thoughts are on someone else.

'So, what happened to Ron?' Nothing like that escapes him. 'It hasn't been twenty-four hours since-'

'-Gosh, I'm not gonna marry him! I'm just charmed. Delim's nice, he's a carer, and probably wealthy and clearly astute!' Emma rolls their eyes whilst Akhila frowns.

'And he's from Alaia; not the most trustworthy diplomat. He is nice for now, and he brought a kid to an exorcism.' Akhila typically tries pushing his doubt, as she normally does for him, yet this time the discouraging emotion feels different; there's an undercurrent of anxiety just beneath where he thinks.

'I'm not head over heels, what does it matter?' They make their mouth frown in ever so slightly different ways.

'You know... when we're separate. We don't have to stay together if you want to live with somebody else.' It's a difficult thing for him to say, especially as a fake, she had never considered how that would affect things until now.

'I don't want to live with him.' She recalls when they would have wished they could make a relationship work. *'I'm fine like this.'*

'Are you really?' Akhila's anxiety turns to guilt. *'If you did that for me, I would hate this.'*

'It shouldn't feel like a betrayal...'

'I never would have wished 'not to be alone' if I had known.' One half-truth over another. *'I wouldn't ask you to fill that role, ever. You don't exist for me, I don't think?'* They both know that at some point the two would have longed to control each other. Only now that he cares more for her than his own wellbeing would Akhila gladly toss his objections aside. *'We couldn't live on each other's charity... that's not why we work so well.'*

'You're right.' Emma sheds their tears, an act that consistently annoys him for making him seem weak. *'I'm never not going to love you and that wouldn't change if we were one million years apart.'*

'Years?'

'Miles! Fuck, every time!'

'Every consistent time. Why do you do that?' Akhila chuckles.

'It's just how I think of things? I dunno, I get-'

Just as they round the corner, an angelic executive bot appears with a cup of coffee and a scanner that does not identify them. There is a hand that shoves them aside and a gun that fires over their shoulder. "Get down!" A green lance of flame surges into the robot's chest, melting its core, knocking the glass head from its toppled body.

"That was close." Cain pants as he keels over them, looking as if they had almost died. It was his hand that had pushed them out of the gun's way.

"Robots dead." Delim assures. "I learned where their CPUs were in the portal bay, By the way Emma, what is your closest-?" The robot's head blinks to life.

"MIRAGE ENGINE ACTIVATED."

“What-?” Delim chokes on his words as the floor rumbles, the ground opens, a gulf forces the party to choose sides in the hall! The chandeliers grow light metal wings and the paintings begin multiplying. The walls bend and elongate and shrink and implode in a kaleidoscopic display that makes them nauseas, yet nothing is shattered or cracked. The space is unfolded again and again and again, until both sides now find themselves staring up at their counterparts on each end of a yawning chasm. Gravity is inverted across the abyss. New railings sprout up at the edges, and numerous identical pathways extend behind them in every direction.

“Akhila! Emma!” Delim shouts from above or below, in true eldritch fashion both ‘up’ and ‘down’ have no termination in sight, there is only a cyan mist for as far as the abyss extends. “Can you fly down to us??”

“I don’t think so!” They shout as one. “That’s not how gravity is meant to work!”

“Try find a way around!” Delim leaves them and curses beneath his breath. “We’ll search our end...”

On their side they hear Simon curse, in a more frightened manner, he’s shivering and has a horrified yet knowing look on his face. He turns to the walls... eyeing them with expectant uncertainty.

“Do you know what this is?” Akhila keeps his tone light, yet Emma’s persecutory suspicion worms its way in. “Can you help?”

Simon nods.



“What the FUCK Delim?!” Byhatzeal, god of treachery and Delim’s boss, disguised as a thirteen-year-old boy turns upon him once the others are out of sight. “What was that?!”

“I-I was conserving mana!” Delim impotently defends himself. “I didn’t think-”

“Yeah, that’s the problem!” The god gesticulates sharply. “Ya had eight syllables to do *some*thin’ and ya didn’t fukin’ think! For hell’s sake ya didn’t even grab them, what is going on?!”

“I don’t know! I-I blanked because I was concentrating on the curse.” Delim lies, with frustration clenched in his fist. “I’m still doing my best.”

“Are ya sure?!” Byhatzeal emphasizes his doubt. “‘Cause, I’m starting to hope you’re not! At least then we’d have something to fix, rather than *this*.” The brisk gesture at Delim appears to hurt him more than the shot to his chest. After making it, Byhatzeal tempers his wrath.

“I’ll get them back.” Delim assures. After the silence settles, he draws himself straight. The determination that Delim shows is relieving although unnerving in where it’s from. ‘Growing empathy’ and ‘Familial love’. Vulnerabilities that sprout where they might cause Delim harm, sapping the motivation that spite and hate used to fuel. Delim no longer executes every soul

that he should, and that dangerous trend has already cost him a lung. What is worse is Byhatzeal cannot think of a way to stop this, you cannot force someone to live as you want, without them resenting and suffering every second of it.

“Well, you’ll have to.” Byhatzeal looks at the void, and it’s almost as if the terminal taunts him back. “We gotta catch them before they find Paintman or Kazimir goes rouge.”

“That can be done.” Delim nods. His hand brushes upon the edge of his cape’s collar whilst uttering a few magic syllables. A strip of fabric falls on the ground, and then another, and then another, until the garb has become a tattered pelerine and Delim is flanked by six dark shapes. The writhing obscurities form into crude shadow-born hounds, sporting that darkened fur like a reverse scene from ‘One Hundred and One Dalmatians’. “Find Emma and Kazimir.” He instructs and they take off running.

Delim looks next at Cain, who has happened to witness this whole exchange.

“A word, please.” He asks, and Cain senses it’s not a command. The god of treachery lets them be private, as they walk to the void’s edge.

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PART 11: The Mirage Engine.

Paintman was not expecting to be alive if he ever woke up again. If this is his hell, then the afterlife is exactly as dark as he had supposed. “Where am I?” He asks the void and receives no authoritative response, it is therefore unlikely that this is what waits for him after death.

“Wonderful...” He derides and discovers one arm has been dislocated. His soul is still present and bound to an aching complaining body, his head throbs and his elbows are raw and bruised. Paintman shivers and finds that his suitcase has disappeared. “This better still be the terminal!”

A bright set of stark cyan eyes snap into focus within the clouded void, spotlights on him, freezing him where he stands. In a moment of rushing imploding force, the pervading shadow retreats to a singular supernatural point, revealing a fully functioning central security room with walls full of switching screens. He is trapped by a steel door and surrounded by three chairs on wheels. This room is populated by himself and one significant other...

“You’re eager to stay.” The entity remarks, for once unobscured by the terminal’s native darkness. It takes the form of an umber skinned working man, with an austere expression and two deeply intelligent dark brown eyes. He glares at Paintman with more intensity than his former glow, a human, a ghost. “Why?”

“I’ve got a job to do.” He must be powerful if Paintman can see and hear him. Paintman wonders if every kidnapping victim was taken here and interrogated. “But you already knew that.”

“You’re acting differently from the others; you mark symbols where they are liable to be seen, and you spread them as if you are on a quota. I can ascertain that you are not here for Cain’s sake, and I’d hazard a guess you are not here for your own either. I will not ask you again, *why are you here?*”

“You’re making a lot of a-” Before Paintman can form the rest of his smart deflection, the darkness returns with exploding force from the entity. Blinding him. Something arrests him, taking him off his feet with a dozen constraints that he cannot see. “Hey-!” They bind his chest, crushing his ribs, squeezing his limbs excruciatingly tight- “I work for the entity ‘Mr Big’! I was capturing ghosts for the company!” Paintman coughs. “but there aren’t any ‘ghosts’ here to catch.” He is dropped and the dark promptly rescinds.

“Is that all?” The entity asks sternly. Finding the detective’s lack of face harder to read than contractual small print.

“Unless you count networking, then yes, ‘that is all’.” Paintman slouches and glares.

“My name is Ben Waller,” The entity introduces himself. “foreman to the Bifrost and caretaker of those condemned. This terminal’s ‘god’.” He punctuates ‘god’ with some heavy despal. “Make yourself comfortable, Paintman. You are here under detention.”

“For what?” Ben Waller ignores him and turns to the screens. Like a shot to the heart Paintman feels a bolt pistol strike his plans. “I’m stuck ‘here’? What rule did I break? When did I break it??” He catches sight of some areas he has yet to visit, and spots Doe in a maintenance shaft. “She’s enjoying her freedom. You’re gonna stop me from leaving?”

To test this, Paintman begins rattling the door’s handle with a frustrated yet vigorous persistence. It doesn’t budge but he continues, minute after minute, until Ben rests a hand upon his temple. “Do not test my patience...” He breaks only five minutes in. “You are here because I do not trust you inside or outside of the terminal, or by yourself. I can restrain you.” First mission accomplished.

“Fine. Fine.” Paintman releases the handle and puts his hands up. “But I’ve got questions I’d rather not be ignored.”

“I’m sure you do.” Waller responds wryly. He watches his captive take a chair in his peripherals. Paintman sits on it, spins on it, adjusts himself, tests the lean back, and then pedantically interferes with the height. “You may begin.” Waller prompts.

“In a minute...” The chair adjusts and is readjusted like a stalling elevator ride. As Paintman fiddles, he deftly attaches a brick of paint to the underside of his shoe. “You set us against each other as a test. Why?”

“Because I’m not Martin Gates. I suppose it’s the best explanation, now you can see that I haven’t hurt anyone. I cannot release these souls myself.”

‘They’ve souls like memory foam that cannot be erased, like they don’t abide by the laws of the living or dead.’ Akhila’s account of attempting to exorcise Punch comes to Paintman’s mind. “Then I’ll assume that you can’t get to the discovery site.”

“Perhaps.” Waller’s interest is ever so slightly peaked.

“And that’s why you’ve erred on the side of caution, you can’t risk bad actors getting their hands on it.”

“As would be sensible.” He affirms again.

“You don’t know what’s in the discovery site either, unless-”

“I looked on the cameras when you found the papers.” Waller saves the hypothesis. “And you are right, I asked you to uncover the details because I am limited by my state.”

“You can’t go where you aren’t permitted.” Paintman recalls the email forbidding Waller from even knowing about the site.

Waller shakes his head. “If a door is unlocked, sometimes I can. Though for places I was expressly forbidden; no, I cannot.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” In a bond magicky curse sort of way. “Then you alluded that only one of us could leave to sort the selfless from the rest. People who disadvantage themselves by helping others can be trusted, whilst scaring folk gets the job done fast.”

“I don’t normally motivate by fear, but I’ve spent a century attempting other methods.” Waller checks on those building the portal frames. “It’s not for me that I’m doing this... Not entirely anyway.”

“I see.” Paintman admits he enjoys this conversation. It’s nice to converse with another practically minded man. “What about them then?”

He nods his attention towards the duo who knocked him out. On a screen in the center right the blond is commanding dogs. “They have done wrong,” Waller admits. “But Delim shows restraint, and mercy.” His response has an underlying frustration in it.

“I see.” Paintman’s lower tone betrays what he really thinks. He presumes to have access to the security, navigating the camera’s track of the pair. He notes down at their actions, their feats, and their sins, whilst attempting to piece together why they are here. “My company tried thrice to branch out to Alaia... Nobody who’s got magic ain’t tied to a spirit or god.”

“Your point being?” Waller remains impassive.

“Are you as powerful as an Alaian god?” He zooms in on an artifact barely visible in the child’s bag. “They’re made outa pure mana...”

“I haven’t tested it... but if they’re trapped, I could have a chance.”

“Why are you different from the other ghosts?”

“You would find it strange.” A smile cracks on the stoney surface of Waller’s face. “I love my job, and I love the terminal that I built. The bond magic responded to that, and this power reflects how I feel.”

“... Huh” Paintman goes quiet, staring at Waller as if waiting for something to give. “Well... fancy that.” He shuts up for a good minute and begins to plot his revenge.

“You’ll have one shot.” Waller advises without needing to look at Paintman’s screen. “I will stop your attempt if I can... and if I cannot, they most likely will.”



SMASH.

Another robotic figure is destroyed, sporting the appearance of Emma's hooded father. Akhila regrows his fist from a boney spear, as they stand amidst four deceased magi-tech creations. Simon cowers nearby unscathed, as 'The Minotaurs' don't attack T.I.T.A.N. employees.

"I don't understand it..." Akhila asks out loud, hoping that Simon can shed a light on the odd appearances. "They're either me or- or I don't know what!"

"They must be glitching." Emma hastily posits and tenses herself for another encounter. Sure enough, from the floor this time, Akhila's face starts to form before Emma stomps on it.

Four other holes in the terminal's interior mark the delayed ambush as it happened. It seems that the further they try to move the more the maze reconfigures to stop them. Each turning now triggers a battle, no paths have led to the real executive suite, and they are mentally drained from repeatedly facing their fears. Simon has stayed close as a backpack for the fights, not leaving their sides even as he is free from attack. They feel him as if he were dead, when he brushes their skin, colder than Doe like the man were a stumbling shivering refrigerator.

"They're old models I suppose." Simon's teeth lightly chatter as he responds. "T.I.T.A.N. didn't perfect them until well after the incident. I didn't know they were making Mirage Engines this early."

It is a genius idea in terms of tactical defense. Simon explained that it sprouts from the logic that those who breach an executive suite will be competent to surpass normal defensive measures. The Mirage Engine attempts to delay an intruder as much as possible whilst allowing the executives to flee or hide. It does this by unfolding a pocket dimension within the terminal's center point; something that had to be built into the suite during its foundational steps.

"What are they getting wrong?" Akhila catches his breath, waiting for another robot that fails to appear.

"You two must have differing fears, they'll be getting mixed signals." Simon answers. "The Minotaurs are a form of psychological warfare, they use bond magic against your senses."

"And we share our senses..."

"I hate them." Emma spits. She has been destroying the representations of Akhila, whilst Akhila does the same for the hooded men. Neither have addressed whose fear is whose, even as they suspect the answers to both. "How many are there?"

"In theory, infinite." Simon divulges.

"I can't kill that many..." Akhila stops, though his body is fine, he sits down so his soulmate can sprawl from the jacket's tear.

"We need to think of a better way of exploring this." Emma frets and stares listlessly at the roof. "Why isn't Doe's charm helping??"

"I wondered... maybe we're out of luck." He hopes, and dreads that he might be wrong. The alternative option is almost unthinkable to him. "I need to rest..."

So, he goes quiet.

When they were younger, Emma would tell him stories to soothe his mind. She would assure him that they were invincible, and that nothing could phase him so long as they had each other. He would be comforted and feel safe, but now he is worried about someone who isn't her. Now, she can only make-believe at a future she cannot know.

"Delim will find us soon." She assures him. "The Alaians know tons of magic, like pathfinding charms, remembrance curses, and tracking spells. Then we can find Paintman, and make him find Doe... and get out of here together." Akhila nods, but his heart doesn't bite. He stares silently, contemplating, until Simon interrupts.

"I'm sorry, I'm not very helpful." The man shuffles and sits down. "I was hoping the engine would show me a path forwards."

"You're an employee." Emma objects.

"I'm expendable." Simon replies. "I guess I'm not allowed to know how to escape."

Emma sighs loudly and doesn't bother to question why. Instead, she looks Simon once over and wonders. "How did you get here?"

"It's a long story..." He warns.

"I've got time." Her soulmate encourages.

"Well... ok. I came here early." He begins. "I'm a manager for T.I.T.A.N. that deals with contractors and the like. I'm not an exorcist. I came to investigate Cain, due to his subcontracting, and I've been trapped here for six days so I am told."

"So you are told?" Emma grins.

"I've been fading in and out of consciousness..." He nervously chuckles. "I don't know why, ever since I climbed the mountain, I think I'm suffering some sort of cold..."

"How did you survive here for six days?" Akhila gives more attention.

"I lived on granola bars and old sodas, mostly, from ruptured vending machines."

"Lucky!" Akhila comments unhelpfully.

"I guess? Anyway, some ghosts were violent, so I spent most of my time between scavenging hiding. Suddenly I find Kailios, and then Delim, Miranda, and... here I am. Not a survivalist's bone in my body... relying on you... It feels awful to feel happy about it."

"Why? It's fortunate." He counters.

"But it isn't for you. Can you imagine? I'm rejoicing in your being trapped. I need you just to live. It is a wretched state."

"I never thought of myself as being wretched." Akhila speaks before thinking about what he said. Simon stops cold, looking mortified, suddenly terrified that he has blundered their protection.

“I-I mean, I didn’t think- I... know- you’ve had-“

“I’ve felt nothing but gratitude for eight years.” Akhila mutters and looks at her. “I’ve been indebted to you, every day.”

“I saved his life.” Emma clarifies. “It’s not warranted, but... We understand how you feel.”

“I’m so sorry.” As Simon gives his apology, the twins offer for him to hug. Simon takes it. “I didn’t think you would understand... it was meant to be rhetorical, I’m such an idiot.”

“You’re alright.” Akhila consoles, and at the same time they wonder if he can feel them all. “You’re so cold.”

“I’m just terrified...” Simon whimpers and dawns on them an idea.

“You said the Minotaurs form connections through our awareness, right?” They pull apart.

“I did.” Simon composes himself. “Why?”

“What if they had nothing to form connections with? What if we removed our senses?”

“So, they wouldn’t know how to attack?” Simon considers it. “That’s smart... they can’t choose a form without that calculation, but-”

“You’re immune, so you could guide us!” Akhila tries for a hopeful smile. “Right?”



Simon is unsure how to respond.

After everything he admitted, it almost feels like a betrayal to take the role of protector. As if, if he accepted, some part of his story would be proven false by the entrusted responsibility. He’s always been a coward, yet at the same time...

“I’ll do my best.” He has a heart. Simon watches as they erase their senses one by one, waiting until he is trusted to shoulder their life on his. “I’ll get us out of here, if I can.” He promises, and for a moment the warmth in his chest forgets it was frozen over.



Verdant flames in a tunnel of vitrified wood and stone proceed where a dim corridor used to stand. Byhatzeal pants heavily, his eyes are small and they smolder like green embers. What remains of the robot is indistinguishable from the rest of their path, as if meteor had torn through the engine’s walls. Delim dares not to ask what a god is afraid of, nor why that livid expression remains stuck on his mentor’s face.

“We are not moving.” Byhatzeal states through gritted teeth. “Until you do you think how to avoid these things.”

Delim had seen Miranda, the lady he sealed away in a fate worse than death for the crime of discovering who he is. The terror of seeing her outside of that dark space, before he had thought how to apologise, is all that he needs to agree with Byhatzeal’s sentiment. They cannot proceed as they are now.

“We have the dogs.” Delim posits. “They’re not affected, they don’t have fears. When one comes back, I’ll make it guide us.”

“Good” Byhatzeal snaps his fingers at Cain. “Make a blindfold an’ a leash.”

It so happens that Cain has nothing of use on him but his clothes. He reluctantly begins to destroy the only good suit he has, as the duo recuperate from their personal scares. Delim rests flat against the wall. Byhatzeal stands with a clenched fist and a dead eyed stare. It is likely the most human that Cain has seen either of them, outside of their conversation by the void.

“We look ridiculous.” Byhatzeal mutters, once the blindfold is fitted about his head.

“We’ve looked worse.” Delim tries to cheer him up.

“This better be worth it, for your sake.” The god growls and refers to the prize they intend on claiming. It was Delim who had supposed that they ought to come here. It will be his fault if the Battery is a dud.

“It has to be.” Delim mutters beneath his breath. “If it isn’t...”

Then Byhatzeal doesn’t get to control this world. Then his ruthlessness will have been for nothing...

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A double tap on their arm signals Akhila to retract the skin that had grown over his features. It peels away like a plastic film, painless and clean, yet the sight of it makes Simon feel on the verge of throwing up. The first thing they can see is an office, a swimming pool, and Paintman’s case shining upon the water’s bed. They know this room. Miss Delia Fowler’s door remains open, and the paint trail is still visible.

“We’re back!” Akhila laughs. “Thank you!”

“I’m sorry it took so long.” Simon looks thoroughly exhausted as he takes a seat at the bar. The twins fetch him a cup of water and play the tender behind it, one of the few professions they’ve never actually done.

“Don’t apologise.” Akhila distributes his glass. “You saved us.”

“It wasn’t a problem, really.” Simon blushes. “No robots showed up.”

“Nothing happened?” Akhila looks for the stronger stuff and mixes two spirits in a glass. He doesn’t realise they are the same brand, until Emma reveals the similarity.

“I didn’t even pass out.” Simion declines the shot. “It was easy to think once the Minotaurs stopped appearing, I quickly discovered that the Engine doors can’t be interfaced by my link.” He taps on the side of his head. “The fake hallways stood out from the real ones and here we are, eventually.”

“That’s so smart.” Akhila grins at him, feeling light in his heart. “Do you need a rest?”

‘I thought you were straight.’ Emma teases but he ignores her.

“A few minutes.” As Simon thanks them and focuses on his drink, the twins make their way from the bar to the pool. Akhila stares at the case in the water, before taking his jacket off and diving in. The twins resurface with Paintman’s property in their arms after swimming to its level.

“That’s surprisingly cold!” He gets out. “Can you swim?”

“I don’t like to.” Simon stifles a grin, as Akhila searches to find a towel. “Coming out is uncomfortable.” The sauna contains what Akhila seeks, and after looting it, they open the case as Emma’s arms buff them.

“I guess it has to be waterproof if your hands leak paint...” A gun, papers, and project affinity blade, dry as bone. “I’m going to work on that upgrade thing.” He gives a heads up to Simon and sits down at the desk. Burying the dread that a corporate interface raises in him. “(Can’t be that hard...)”

They try to navigate the system on their own for five minutes, just attempting to log in. Simon’s eyes draw to them, and after a couple more attempts his bar stool is pushed out.

“Could I try that?” Their friend intervenes. “I’m good at interfacing...” He leans behind them and uses his neural implant to blitz through the navigation tasks. “What’s the name on the card?”

“Bartimus Punch. Janitor.” Akhila admits defeat. They find the name on a larger list of ‘staff on parole’. “That’s him.”

“I forgot that we used to hire from our prisons...” Simon starts updating the security details. “Maybe that’s why the ghosts are crazy.”

“Not all prisoners are crazy.” Emma objects.

“Oh, I’m sorry- I meant-”

“I’m just messing with you, thanks for helping out.” Emma chuckles, and a rare comfortable silence starts settling in. “Do you like sports, Simon?”

“I’m more into magic games and illusion talent shows.” Simon replies. “It’s my hobby.”

“Do you do illusions?” They soon find an illusory rabbit racing over their heads carrying a carrot, it is caught in a trap and then bursts into smoke.

“That’s so cool.” Akhila grins.

“It’s very basic...” Simon modestly blushes again.

“Is that how you became friends with Cain? Magic?”

“Oh gods no! That’s a complicated story... I hated his guts only hours ago.”

“He’s a very hateable man.” Emma sagely agrees. “But what changed?”

“Nothing outwardly.” Simon smiles. A few more links and he gets through the promotion protocol, then begins the recalibration of the terminal’s staff system. “He saved my life. You can’t hate someone who saves your life.”

“That why we like Paintman.” Akhila grins at the middle manager’s reflection in the monitor. “You ever met him?”

“Only once.” The promotion completes. “Wait-”



Simon has never met Paintman in his life. So why does he remember the man’s scent-?



A descending chop breaks the back of their chair in half. The twins are saved as they see it coming, and dive from it just in time to avoid the impact. Rolling and standing up, they look back in shock as the chair is flung at them with a force that shatters it. “What the fuck!?” The man lances a jab with intent to kill, Emma severs their throat in advance whilst Akhila performs a low roundhouse kick that knocks Simon to the side. “Stop!” He backs to the bar, horrified.

Their friend’s hair has turned white as permafrost, not just on his head but in every visible strand down to his lashes. Muscles they didn’t know he had strain as he picks himself up. He adopts a low predatory stance, a mix between human and beast, snarling with cold impassivity as he speaks to them in a harsh alien accent.

“I have never hunted prey as unique as you. I bet you will taste terrible when we’ve finished this.” He picks up the discarded steel suitcase and hefts it as a suitable bludgeon. “You do not get to ask questions, there is no intersect where our goals align, I might as well have told Simon why he’d become a host.” With that, he charges at them, leaving no time to dispute or question him. They’re put on the defensive as soon as he hurls the suitcase at their face, Akhila’s forearm absorbs the impact, but that opens his midsection to being grappled. As ‘Simon’ kicks into a claw handed lunge, Emma emerges from their back to prevent the tackle from grounding them. She pushes back on the floor as the man grapples their midriff, giving Akhila time to grab hold of the suitcase and bring it hard upon ‘Simon’s’ head. ‘Simon’ attempts a bite, but they’ve already calcified their abbs. The thud is enough to drop his grip, so they can jump to the bar’s counter.

“What did you do-?!?” Their assailant is back on his feet, with a showing of acrobatics unheard of outside of demonic possession. As Akhila attempts to speak, ‘Simon’ punches into the wood and forces them to step back. “At least tell us your name!”

“My ‘name’ is Kasimir, a spirit of Mt Panthea’s deathly cold.” Not the wind, nor the snow, but the fact of the deadly temperature itself. A lot harder to conceptualise than the temperature’s cause. “Are you going to come down?” Kasimir asks and acquires a bottle from the bar’s counter, he darkly smirks as frost runs up the inside.

“Why give up the high ground?” Akhila tenses and Emma focuses, whilst Kasimir passes the bottle to his other hand.

“’Tis more fun? By the way...” His fingers dig into the wood, arched like claws, with a force that tears off his skin. “If I perish, Simon dies. That’s the price of a victory for you.” The spirit splinters the rest of the countertop as he charges towards their feet.

Emma and Akhila have three options of reaction, well in advance of his assault, keeping in mind what the bottle may or may not be used to do. They could position themselves behind the bar, or on the side of the pool, or they could remain here and fight with a counterplay. Emma elects for the third option, turning their foot into an elongated hardened spike and stabbing for the center of his chest. Kasimir is forced to slide onto his knees and swings at their standing foot with the bottle. Akhila deflects this by blocking with Paintman’s case, following the attack with a pivot and stabbing down at Kas while he’s vulnerable. Their bone cracks on the stone’s flooring as Kasimir is forced to roll into the pool.

“PAH-” Kasimir spits, keeping his head above the water. “Does nobody care about Simon?!” He laughs whilst eying them manically, swimming back to test if they will follow.

“We care about surviving, you care about surviving. At the end of things, I love Emma more than him.” Akhila responds bluntly and stays put. “You can stop fighting at any time. I’m not coming to you.” They can see the ground by the pool is now littered with flecks of ice, they are not jumping down on that side. The beast takes a gulp of water, and swims to the pool’s edge. Swallowing, he climbs back on his feet and produces a short stave of ice from his lips. Emma hardens their foot to become a lance once again, as he breaks the stave into two.

“You are saying that you would let me go?” Kasimir quirks an eyebrow, amused.

“You’re losing the fight.” Akhila part taunts, part observes. “We would probably tie you up to protect the others.”

“How confident.” Kasimir jumps to the other side of the bar and kicks vertically off the lower shelf, with enough force to smash it. The first stave is thrown at their eye, quite predictably blocked with a calcified wrist. This obscures their sight of the second, which severs the fingers on Paintman’s case. Their defense slips before they can grab it, leaving them at the mercy of Kasimir’s sudden height. Drinks fall and smash in his wake. His descension becomes a tackle that knocks the three of them to the inner bar.

They land on broken glass, the mixed drinks catch their fall. The three wrestle with grabs, kicks, and imperfect strikes. Kasimir bites into Akhila’s hand, freezing the limb till the flesh is brittle enough to shatter. A shower of red and black busts and Akhila yells in pain. They attempt to skewer him with a spike from their chest, but Kasimir leaps back and attacks immediately. He lands a bite on their left leg and shatters it just as fast. Alarm bells ring through their remaining flesh. He rolls to avoid their right leg, an impromptu scythe, and makes a distance between them. He stands and swallows what blood he took, grinning, his visage is covered by dripping fragments of frozen flesh. Pale grey. Inhuman. They can’t regrow the frostbitten limbs as their connections refuse to move.

“You still think you’re winning?” The spirit taunts. Their body has rearranged so much that it’s hard to properly breathe in this position. The chest spike is brittle, their leg scythe cannot protect their head, and the narrow spacing behind the bar makes it impossible for them to turn around. Kasimir walks until he is standing above their head, well aware their last arm is the only feature he needs to worry about. He squats down with his hands on his knees. “Everyone underestimates nature before it turns on them. It is easy to forget how susceptible you are to the cold, when you have central heating and woolly jackets.”

Doe’s eye, the green charm of conductive luck, catches sight of a bottle of absinthe within their reach. Akhila’s hair comes alive like a nest of snakes, binding around Kasimir’s legs, hardening and constricting like razor wire. He yells as they grab and smash the bottle into his face, rolling towards Paintman’s case and detaching their hair to escape. Kasimir falls back and supports himself by the counter. “You have tricks!” He admits, as they scramble frantically to open the clasps. “Papers won’t help you here.” So, they retrieve a gun.

- B A N G -

The derringer’s bullet crosses the air between Kasimir and Akhila, hitting the Nurolink, starting a shock of sparks that ignite the absinthe on Kasimir’s face. He howls as loud as Mt Panthea’s storms, an agonized inhuman screech, clawing and failing to tear off his skin from bone. He desperately tries to fall over the counter, towards the pool, but the twins grab at his leg and prevent him from reaching salvation. Through bloodied eyes the two watch the horrific sight of his charring face, screaming like an animal, before the spirit itself claws from the burning mouth.

“*Hot!*” A wolf with near blinding white fur ejects on the heated floor, panting, sweating, almost unable to move in the polar opposite of his natural environment. He tries to crawl but fails inches away from the water.

Simon collapses on the counter, his body limp, fire dying, eyes unseeing, his glasses part melted onto his face.

Simon is dead.



The unavoidable smell of liquor and burning flesh accompanies the sound of settling glass. Akhila stares blankly at the scene, panting, thinking of nothing whilst assessing everything. Emma tries to stand. Their flesh has not thawed to rejoin their body. She reaches a quivering hand, leveraging against the broken bar to pull them away from Simon’s foot. With great effort they rise and observe the fallout. Kasimir is dying. The bar is destroyed. Simon is... They look away. The rest of the room is so peaceful. They focus on that, until the sound of a panting dog draws their attention to the door. Sat in the hall, where they had not noticed before, is a hound darker than deepest night. It watches them unintelligently and they stare back at it with a feeling like a palm squeezing their heart. Delim enters next. His gun is drawn yet it stays by his side. A blindfold is raised over his brow, and they don’t see the polite cheer that he used to wear for them. He looks distant.

“This is unfortunate.” Delim makes comment with a glance at the scene. “If we hadn’t have gotten separated, then... I’m sorry.” Kailios enters behind him, with a reluctant Cain in tow. Their hope shatters as soon as they see the dread in his golden eyes.

“(Please.)” Emma’s voice comes out breathless. “(Please. Don’t...)”

“We need two IDs.” Delim apologises. “The teleporter takes one at a time, and we can’t have anyone following us.” He raises his gun and they calcify their skull. They brace for combat, yet nothing comes.

“I don’t know how to kill you.” Delim admits. “We don’t know how you work... but I do know how humans love, and somebody else knows how deceptions can impact that.”

As Akhila questions the words, an alarm bursts inside Emma’s soul. **“NO-!”**

“What is your closest secret?”

A curse of remembrance takes its hold.

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PART 12: Selflessness.

“Emma?” Akhila sits up. The creak of his old bedroom door alerts him against the sound of the dread hurricane outside. His eyes are swollen from poorly suppressed tears, and his red nightgown is rough and creased. She carries a lantern in her unconcealed hand, shedding a light across the orange duvet they used to share. The room is as she remembers it, coral colors painfully the same as before she was taken away, down to the half of it that was meant for her. The state of him is as she had hoped; bedraggled, distraught, scared, unlike the brave face he put on this afternoon.

“Father told me you did not evacuate as he asked.” She closes the door on them. “You wanted to be with me for the ritual.”

“Emma!” She comes to his side, and they kneel before each other on the bed. The lantern is rested precariously, and his eyes shed as he takes in the weight of the preparations. The absence of hair on her scalp is traced with his palm, freshly shaven where the skin will be replaced tomorrow. “Your hair...” He mutters in grief. A tear drops from her eye as she hugs him tight. He sobs into her and feels an abatement of loss, as for a final night she is still alive and not a corpse with a box on her back.

“Nobody else stayed for me.” Emma whispers. Her former friends have all treated her like a stranger, for the two weeks she’s been back in Li-thi. They’re scared she could accidentally siphon their souls, where Akhila has been the only person to touch her without fear.

“If I could, I would stay longer.” His voice cracks a response. “I’ll find you in my next life, and the next, and the next, forever. I promise.”

"I know." She squeezes in reassurance. "I know you would do that for me."

"It's not fair." His frustration is palpable. "We only had eight years, and you were gone. I didn't think there would be a real disaster..."

"I know." If she had never been prepared as a human battery they could have died together like this. "I've wasted my life." Akhila gasps and pulls back from her, staring wide eyed in abhorrence.

"That's not true!"

She down casts her eyes to avoid the devastation on his face. "It is..." She whimpers and wipes the sleeve of her nightgown across her eyes. "I don't care about Li-thi. It isn't worth it to me anymore..."

"Don't say that." He pleas. "I'm still something worth it. Aren't I? It's not a waste if you're going to save my life."

She sobs louder and hugs him a second time, burying her head in his shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about..." He strokes her back tenderly, trying to swallow his own pain to help with hers. As she embraces him, Emma pinches an impossibly engraved string from her sleeve, taken from the channeling balloons.

"Yes, I do." The hug tightens.

"Em-...?" Akhila feels it, but by its nature he cannot react. It happens too fast for anything but bewilderment and shock to occur before his soul is transferred to within her body. His tears continue to fall, and his breaths come out ragged. His arms remains locked about her, and she has not the strength nor the heartlessness to shake him free. Without a spirit, without a mind, he is nothing but warm flesh.

"You'll forgive me?" Emma attempts to justify herself to the functioning corpse. "I don't know why I didn't ask..." But she does know.

If she acknowledged that, she would have to live with it.



Emma fell to the earth after Fthuvuu was siphoned into her, dying on impact, imbedding herself in the soil as human shrapnel. Her body became mush as the metal rusted, but her soul survived in the weeds that grew from its dregs; Foxgloves, Carnations, and Dandelions mostly. Billions of souls were absorbed, enough for her to persist without understanding how to die - as was predicted. Her fate was supposed to be borne by her alone, yet Akhila's soul kept her company in its dormant form. She waited, and waited, and forgot how to pay attention to time as decades passed without new human settlements. This persisted until she was disturbed, by a couple who chose her field to farm upon. The trees made their home, they grew wheat that kept them fed. Akhila's soul was transferred to Miss Argo's womb, after conception, when Mr Argo brewed her pot of dandelion tea.

Akhila had promised that in his next life he would find her. She would not impose upon him again.



Paintman turns off the audio on the camera. His hand squeezes itself into a fist. He has taken to standing at his station, finding it impossible to recline as the conflict plays out. “Why don’t you do something?” He asks Waller, who observes impassively from his chair.

“Even if I could, I would not.” Waller responds honestly. “They have locked the door. Things will have to play out as they come.”

Paintman scoffs and watches onwards in silence. The slight thinning of paint under his eyes becomes such that it overflows. He stands, struggling. He has witnessed the destruction of something that a part of him, even now, would still kill to experience; genuine love and trust. Destroyed as impartially as an eggshell upon the pavement.

‘It doesn’t matter to me.’ He half lies to himself, it mattered to them.

A puddle of paint has formed under him, from an hour of sitting and standing in one place. A perfect circle traced by his boot from his chair’s spin. *‘One shot...’* Paintman muses and briefly glances at the screen behind his jailer. “Who’s that one?”

There isn’t anyone to be seen, but he needs only a second to make it work. The puddle becomes a portal and Paintman falls.



‘What have I done?’ Cain internally laments as the twins collapse by the pool, their calcified skin cracks and crumbles upon the impact. The souls spiral behind their eyes, withdrawing deeper away from each other, leaving behind the stupor of a pilotless lifeless vessel. “I tried to help...” Cain falls to his knees and bows his head. “I tried...”



“I’m going to look for a vessel. For Kasimir.” Delim grimly informs Byhatzeal, who looks confused in return. The man strides away before they can raise him the obvious solution, exiting to the sauna to seek somewhere to hide.

‘What can I do...’ Byhatzeal wonders and stares at his back, mulling over the frustration of his apprentice’s draining resolve. The question he has been asking since Delim started to show this weakness remains a thorn in his side that he cannot pry. *‘How can I cut it out...?’* His head turns to Cain. Cain who was here when the weakness began. Cain who remains folded in contrition. Byhatzeal deigns to approach and procure the ID from Akhila’s neck, snapping the

band to get Cain's attention. "You think that posturing achieves something? You wanna make Delim hurt in any way you can?"

"I am trying to show my respect..." Cain mutters and glares. "It's not about you. This is the least I can do." *Lies.*

"Oh, I know it's the *least*. Ya could have stopped this by telling Akhila months ago, or three hours ago, such a shame ya were too scared to say it."

"It wasn't mine to say." Cain shakes his head. "Emma told me in *confidence*, and I told her to tell him."

"There's always an excuse, always a reason for absolution with people like you," Byhatzeal spits. "'I couldn't tell Akhila now', 'I couldn't know what was *really* in the Terminal', '*I don't have a choice* to betray them.'" Cain winces. "You didn't tell Akhila because Emma scared you, an' you stuck with us 'cause you value your life over theirs. *I* see who you are, and I know what you're grateful for."

"That's not true!" Cain rebukes him incredulously. "I am trying to help. I can't die without paying them back and who are you to speak so confidently? Why do you see the worst in me and ignore my good motivations?"

"There are no good motivations!" Byhatzeal's scoffs. "Not from you, not Simon, not anyone. You're avoiding your guilt or scrounging for satisfaction. I see every self-serving thought that you have, every micro betrayal, *every* lie. That's all there is to anyone." Even Delim...

"Is that what you really think?" Cain asks with his pity palpable, staring him down as if he's insane. Byhatzeal strikes him for it. Cain crumples, blood pooling beneath the skin of his cheek, gasping.

"Ya think that I'm wrong?" Byhatzeal pulls him up by the hair. "You look down on me 'cause you *know so much better*'? Like I'm a damaged kid?!" Cain doesn't need to respond and he doesn't let him. "I've got a test for ya. Save his life!" Byhatzeal drags him to Kasimir. "Give him a home! Tell me ta throw ya to him!" Cain resists, struggling back as the wolf snarls and glares. "But you won't, because that *doesn't please you*. Where's all your empathy when it's not in your-"

"Kailios!" Delim interjects, almost too late, returning with an empty drinks cooler and a terrified expression. "What the hell are you doing?!"

"I was finding a vessel." Byhatzeal states coldly. "Because you couldn't dare."

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"Will this will save Akhila and Doe?" The ghost boy asks and receives no response. Paintman can hardly see him, let alone hear what he has to say. He trusted that Fly would read the 'distress message' upon his coat and that that would procure him the watch he needs. Thus

it transpired and so he imported his office desk, Punch's computer, and Punch's ID to keep by his side.

"Here goes nothin'..." One shot and he starts a voice call with Delia Fowler.

"Paintman?!" He's answered by Delim, who knows that it's him from the changed picture. "Why are you-?"

"-Within a second, you're gonna notice your prize is gone. Before you ask, it is safe with me."

"How did you take that?" Delim's voice thins.

"I know a friend of a friend. If you played nice, I might have told you about him."

"Then I am sorry we didn't play nice." Delim responds curtly. "What do you want?"

"Maybe I want to bargain, maybe I want to gloat. I don't got much time to choose." He hears their door rattling, knowing their flame will fail to melt it. "Mr Waller made the executive rooms reinforced, better than the engine, without a bot or an ID you can't open that door till I say so."

"Then tell us your angle and we'll meet it!" A note of frustration hits Delim's voice. "Kailios is just a child, he doesn't cope in locked rooms!"

"Well, ain't that considerate of a child..." Paintman chuckles and finishes his preparation. "You know the problem with locking me in an observation room?"

"What's the problem?" Delim goes quiet.

"I'm an investigator." He sends their prize back. "I notice things."



Byhatzeal feels the returning card and looks down at it for a moment.

The strange symbol of an eye, drawn in paint, meets his gaze.



T H P - B O O M

The terminal tremors. A psychic pulse ripples outwards on Paintman's face, splattering red on the floor as he kneels patiently in the Lost and Found's isles. That's the sound of a job well done.

A coalescing of shadows begins to dim the dulled overhead lights, scaring away Fly to run back to the area's front desk. The entity's eyes glower at Paintman, like a tidal wave threatening a rock. Paintman has no opinion on what will happen to him, for he has failed in his primary task.

"I guess you were wrong." Paintman speaks first, without raising his eyes off the floor. "They didn't stop me."

"They didn't see you coming." Waller does not sound amused. "Are you happy with what you did?"

"What sort of question is that?" Paintman scowls. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I can't care." Paintman stresses and glares at Waller. "Just tell me if they're alive and imprison me already."

"You want to..." Waller considers and then raises his head as if understanding. "The twins are alive, Cain protected them. They are safe." Paintman nods thoughtfully then begins to chuckle. He laughs tragically as the darkness rescinds about him. "I'm not going to imprison you. Why do you ask?" Waller presses. "What do you find funny?"

"It's nothing... I just counted..." The steps, the time waiting. "I could have made it to the teleporter by now."

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Cain gasps to the pool's surface, spluttering chlorine and treading water, his shoulder screams from the weight of the twin's vessel as he searches for a spot to land. His legs strain as he swims in the dim light, finding an undamaged ledge as he pushes their body onto the stone. He clambers up after them, dragging himself on his stomach until he's catching his breath by their side. "Urgh." The pool saved him from feeling the brunt of the blast, he is glad he could drag his friends into safety before it hit.

'Sorry...' Despite this he feels awful. He thinks he'll be feeling this way for a very long time, past the moment he makes it up to them or they get revenge.

The soulmates remain unconscious and Cain begins to look for a means to help them, starting with something to rest their head. It takes him two slow attempts to regain the balance to sit on his knees, spying the blast's aftermath by a single light through the broken door. All that was once recognizable has been reduced to thick splinters and hardened shards, the god child and frost spirit are nowhere to be seen. Only a crater remains of Kailios and a stain of ice for the wolf. He spots a cushion from Miss Fowler's chair by the door and approaches it after nursing his nausea away. His head feels like a nest of bees shaken and put on edge, disorientated and buzzing as he stoops to acquire the pad.

A cough pulls Cain's attention towards a deeper dent in the wall. Delim is fallen, immobile, his head hangs but his eyes stare at Cain purposefully. "I c... cuh..." The breath doesn't quite get out, and Cain looks at him with mixed emotion. The thing about 'Mr Big' is that it consumes people's connections, the contract that linked them is gone.

"Are you ok?" Thoughts of smothering him are ejected as soon as they arise. "I-I mean, are you going to die?" He gets a glare that could carry weight if the man's leg was not twisted backwards. "You look really bad..." He puts down the cushion almost guiltily. "I-I'm not going to hurt you, I wasn't thinking about-"

"(Lung.)" Delim wheezes. The patch stopping his lung from collapsing is knocked loose. Cain tries to fix it securely in place as Delim coughs harshly. "Think... I made a mistake..."

"You shouldn't talk." Cain shakes his head. "I'll get you some help."

"Tell Miranda..." Delim's loosened teeth grit as Cain helps him to sit up. "Tell Miranda, I did-" The words are drowned out as blood is ejected from his mouth.

"You should rest." Cain tears off Delim's sleeves for a bandage. "Your body is-"

"I liked her." Delim's rasp quivers. "F-Find. Her."

"I promise." Cain finds it unusually hard to speak, as Delim opens his hand to a tiny deal sealing flame. "If you don't harm anyone for any selfish and non-defensive reason, and if you stop hurting people."

"Cain." Delim looks tired at him. "You'll find her."

"Y... Yes." Cain admits. "But if we don't make this deal, the twins will kill you. I can't save your life if our lives are not tied."

"Damn gunshot..." Delim grimaces. "Why did he have to do that." If he hadn't been shot, Cain would never have known how the deal bound them. Cain supposes that's something to be thankful for. "You won't budge on the pact?"

"I can't let you hurt others or use me again."

"Till I'm dead?"

"For one hundred years." Cain amends. "Necromancers can get around that sort of clause easily." That brings out a chuckle from Delim.

"Worth a try..." His eye glimmers with something Cain takes to be anticipation.



Love, in this moment, does not bring with it happy memories. He and Emma float over their vessel, watching the room in silence, evicted by Mr Big and awaiting their slow return. They're turned away from each other, as if they are not linked by the soul. Emma stares down at Cain, and Akhila watches Simon.

"What happens now?" He asks, but for the first time he's speaking to himself.

The want to progress is immobilized by a lack of motivation. The want to exist can find nothing to exist for, that isn't too bitter or too confused beyond an approach. He thinks about Delim but shies away from the recent memory. He thinks of Doe yet finds only a painful warmth.

Akhila thinks of himself and realises that there is nothing there to find.

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Fin.

Many thanks to my friends: CeleritasCurlyBracket and Mocksky, for helping with edits whilst in a call.

~~This was a tough one, but I promise the tone will be lighter next time!~~