

THE CONCEPTUALIST

By
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1(G)

I wake up to endless, mindless screaming. This morning the wall of noise seems aggressive, almost savage. Hard to believe such a nauseating aural stream is fuelled by human throats.

I know the attention is because of the concepts, because of their power. Every time a holoflik hits big, the world's gaze slides my way. I understand the screams aren't meant to be frightening, but adrenalin still kicks in, because on a primal level those sounds are horrifying.

“Good morning.”

Maria's voice is warm and thick, like syrup or honey. Best part of all? She makes the screaming outside into nothing more than a background blur, like another layer of noise in an overworked remix.

My eyes focus instantly on her hair. Maria was hired for her strands; red as flame, thick and long. There are pieces of fire living and writhing in the room when she's here.

“What time is it?” Still half-asleep, I roll onto my back. Above me the ceiling hovers ominously, a stark reminder. I close my eyes for a moment but inside my head the midnight memories creep in.

Twisting my neck to the side, I open my eyes and the barely-there glint of the new implant offers a sudden, welcome distraction. Bringing my wrist up to my face, I breathe a long, warm rush of air onto the surface, causing six different time zones to flash red numbers at me, so bright beside the muted blue of my veins.

“Internal trinkets are unnatural.” Maria’s voice drips with disapproval. She sits lightly on the end of my bed, perched like a bird with brilliant plumage.

I stroke the glowing colors until they dim, loving the fact time is burning and sleeping so quietly under there; like the universe is a secret held just inside my skin.

Logan wanders into my room. “Hi Grey, Maria.”

Logan wanders everywhere, as if purpose and direction can’t quite get a grip on his style of maneuver. Today he’s wearing his favorite faded grey outfit, although the term ‘favorite’ is arguable; all he ever wears are faded grey shirts with washed out jeans, and not the laser-faded synth styles worn by mute glam enthusiasts. This is straight up authentic slumwear, circa late second millennium. An online philo once rode a live wordwave for days on a c-gem that pitched Logan’s encasement in perpetual grey as a twisted form of my own vicarious penitence.

He passes over the breakfast tray, staring at my plate as if mesmerized. “Do you want me to dim the lights?”

Sighing, I pull myself up. The sludge perched between us doesn’t appeal. “They’re already low. When did this order go through?”

“A couple of days ago. You were reading a new lifestyle upload, got excited, and this happened.” Logan’s disgust is palpable. Considering most of his daily intake’s poached from my plate, I’m guessing today’s breakfast rates as a solid strikeout.

“The life of a conceptualist is ruled by the phase.” It’s difficult not to grimace while sucking up the sorry excuse for food. The product was on a return-to-earth lifestyle program, but I should have remembered a lot of the earth is made up of mud and dirt, even bones. “Maybe this will grow on me.” I check out a spoonful up close. For a second the slush looks like it might be moving on its own. “Well, hopefully not on me, ‘cause that would be bacterial.”

“What have you done to the screen?” asks Logan.

Maria is staring at the glowing square as if it's possessed.

“Why lime?”

“Suited the moment.”

“Looks great Grey, kind of like a Rothko on crack.” Logan lounges himself across the footstool at the end of my bed. His hair spills into his red eyes, but he doesn't appear to notice. I vaguely recall speculation ocular anomalies heighten resistance to visual impairment. Or was it desensitizes the area? One day I'll look it up.

“Why are you staring at me?”

“You're grumpy. Someone should feed you.” I wave a spoonful of slush before giving up on the meal altogether.

“Feed me? I'm like Maria, I never eat.” He hurries past the faux pas with a brisk, “Spill the data.”

I lie back to look up at the roof before remembering what's there, and close my eyes instead.

“Are you going to explain the new material?”

The gentle prompting from Maria makes me feel better. Deep down she's a true conceptualist fan. I sit up again and smile at her, redheaded Goddess that she is.

“Think unusual,” says Logan, like he does each morning, “not overtly financial.”

Waving a hand calls up a series of screens and I set the information to stream. “Installation piece. Comment on femininity and the visual portrayal of idealized female beauty.”

“Yahaja, right?”

Logan marks it for forwarding. Yahaja is a visual interpreter the world's crazy over, and a regular client. I love what he does with my concepts. Seeds sprout when planted with him.

“In extreme summary, a 3D print of a woman clothed in traditional medical internal imagery as well as images of food taken with said machinery, lit from within while moving in an imaginary breeze. To complement, a cleverly written program

utilizing holographic projections of celebrated beauties, warping the placement of acclaimed features to create unrecognizable versions. Light and shadow mutating to imply motion, in terms of visual feed.”

Logan throws an exasperated look my way.

“Don’t ask me to get technical. I’m the conceptualist, remember?” I can tell he wants to interject, but holds back. “Outside beauty captured in reconstructed pieces of interior impressions. Aligns with the mandate passed last month regarding the 405 Cosmetics Bill. The latest composite bloodline craze on the gene sites. The public backlash against sexualist propaganda post-election.” I’m talking faster and faster, the words almost indecipherable, but I don’t care. Logan records it all anyway as an intro for the file which will be maxed up with more cross-referencing data than you could throw an old-fashioned physical library at. “The recent death of Tizi Steppano and her daughter’s subsequent online rise. The rationing laws for sector 8. The print restrictions for leisure activity products with a sexual 4.0 rating.” A gasping breath resets my mind and body. With a flick of my hand I collapse the visual before the information can pull me in any further.

“Perfect for Yahaja,” nods Logan. “He’ll build on it.”

“Of course.” Unborn options feel like they’re hovering in the air, waiting to be communicated; ignoring them takes effort. “No listed sub-concepts. He can go there himself.”

“And further.” Standing up, Logan gives the food a considered look, but I don’t think he’s ever been that hungry. “I’ll get this filed and let you burn source.”

Lying back, the roof fills my vision again.

Instead of leaving, he moves around the bed till he’s standing next to my pillow. When I glance at him his face is tilted back, expression blank, gaze intent on the mess above. My eyes track his line of vision all the way back to the ceiling.

“Grey, what is it?”

“The screaming.” I stay focused on the anarchic mess as Logan moves away.

“You’re covered in paint,” he mutters before slipping out the door.

I wait till he’s gone before lifting my fingers. Dry paint is stuck to the skin. How could I not notice? The colors have marked me, transforming my body into nothing more than an extension of the picture on the ceiling.

“Is it on my face as well?”

Maria smiles gently, reaching for the breakfast tray. “You should shower while someone changes the sheets.”

“Illumination Three.” The light flares and I look down to find the bed is a riot of color, slashes of paint breaking up the crumpled grey fabric. Sleep must have won suddenly. I put my hands on my face and feel the clumps streaking down my cheeks. Warrior of ideas maybe? The wild concept makes me smile.

Then I look up at the ceiling and the smile fades. Now the paint feels too heavy, like it’s pulling at my skin.

“Shower,” Maria reminds me.

Crawling from beneath the sheets, I murmur, “Get rid of it.”

The droplets wash away last night’s remnants, both the colors and the tension. Curious to think the same fluid’s simultaneously inside and outside my body right now, like an almost-communion; like I’d flow away too if there weren’t boundaries.

I remember selling the concept of water reaching for water, a woman showering, the darkened inner liquid of her body battering against the boundary keeping it from the cleansing water outside, like two rivers divided by some kind of organic plastic. Alex Everson made a fantastic vidclip from the concept (although the notorious nipple/mountain metaphor was the band’s input).

Transferring to airdry, a body temp breeze cools away the droplets. Making myself stare at the steam-blurred reflection is difficult. All I see are those eyes. Slipping a silk shift over my head helps break the tension. The new hyperlaser teeth cleaner Logan gave me is a great distraction, zipping across my smile like an overzealous pet.

Maria has the bed looking fresh and the whole area set up for source when I re-emerge. A swift upward glance shows the roof to be clean, naked of imagery.

“Are you decent?”

Sometimes just the sound of Damon’s voice tires me. How does he thread swagger into tone? It’s got to be a new mutation. Nice to see the direction evolution’s taking leads straight to hell.

“Haven’t sourced yet,” I reply curtly. Everyone knows early day is dedicated to source. Uncalled-for interaction can throw the mind, send promising seeds of thought streaming off in divergent directions.

Damon sidles two steps into the room. He’s wrapped in a crisp side seam white shirt with well-cut navy pants, the simplicity of the design emphasizing a startling perfection. There’s an element of the obscene about his appearance; a blandly handsome masculinity structured solely for impacting and manipulating the spectator.

His brand of over-charm doesn’t work on me. Damon’s a brilliant primary asset liaison, but as a person, elements are lacking. He says all the right things but the truth is he’s parroting a set of basic guidelines for human behavior. When it comes to real emotions Damon’s imitating the fundamentals.

Turning my back on him, I grab the skin glow and punch up a mirror, airbrushing on a light glint high speed. Dealing with Damon always makes me crave facial makeup, like I need another barrier between us to survive the conversation with my principles intact.

“Before you unleash the rage,” he forestalls in a wary voice, “you have an unexpected guest. They’re processing her downstairs, but she should be here any moment.” The hint of fluster in his voice tells me it’s Iralene.

I sling a couple of slim black chains over my head. They skim knee-length, above the hemline of the shift. The whole ensemble’s drifting and draping yet from a decorative slant the chains say tangle/restrictions/slim restraints. Connotations, connotations, whispers a voice in my head.

“You look wonderful Grey!”

Iralene fills the doorway in a bright violet suit set somehow screaming style, power, and strength without appearing ridiculous. She glides over and plants a light kiss on my cheek. Her signature scent carries an undertone of violets.

“How wonderful to see you Damon.” Voice dripping with supposed sincerity, I notice she doesn’t even bother glancing in his direction. “Refreshments?”

“Fabulous,” he mutters before fading from the room.

We settle in the nearest two chairs. When she wraps her fingers ever so lightly around my own, I take care not to flinch. Iralene’s casual touch is one of the few I allow.

“Aren’t you booked for the Ellipton Conference?”

“Flitted across to see you,” she says with a warm smile.

The thought of Iralene flitting anywhere is almost funny. She might glide, or stride, but flit? Too much intelligence and strength fuels her movements for mere flitting.

“I’m glad you asked Damon to send up a platter. Breakfast was terrible.”

“Experimenting with the menu again?”

“Logan was unimpressed.”

“Hopefully he’ll come up with the food, it’s always a pleasure to see him.”

Her words are devoid of matchmaking intent, which is appreciated. She understands not just that Logan’s important to

me, but how he's important to me. With Iralene, it's like all the complexities are clear.

"Yes, he enjoys your visits. We both do."

Searching the kind eyes set in a flawless frame doesn't offer any clues, but then Iralene's not one for tells. Although half her years, my face is the one indented with the tiny marks of time and worry.

"But you know I wouldn't fly here unscheduled in the middle of a summit unless it was an emergency?"

The smooth complexion doesn't create a youthful impression, I realize. Her gaze is too full. Instead, she seems ageless, like a creature from a half-forgotten fairytale.

"And if it was a matter of government, the visit would be organized accordingly," she continues in a calm voice, "not unannounced, at a time inconvenient to us both." Her grip tightens.

"Need anything? Sorry," Char adds when I jump a little. He offers a small wave of apology from the doorway.

"You're getting quieter by the day." I smile at the man who continues to keep me safe.

"And how is the Protector?" teases Iralene.

"Still not answering to tab-trash titles," he informs her, moving to a seat near the entrance. Char's usually either barely inside a room or blending with the curtains of the largest window. Always calm, yet never relaxed.

"Are you going to search me?" There's a slight curve to Iralene's lips and Char's dour expression breaks into a reluctant smile.

"Such a tease." Logan's standing in the doorway with a tray so full of food and beverages I'm surprised he can carry it. Crossing the room, he waves the load in my direction. "Sorry, couldn't find any moving food, Grey."

Ignoring his teasing, I grab a cup of vitawater and a chunk of fruit bread.

“Bread and water? Don’t stress, I forgive you for breakfast.” Offering the selection to Iralene with a mock bow, he passes across the decontaminated cup we keep only for her.

“You’re looking well,” she says. “Gray suits you.”

“Doesn’t it?” he replies with a mild smile, refusing to rise to the bait.

“Yes, wonderful to see you Iralene.” I almost forgot Char was here. He always manages to mute his presence somehow. “Especially unannounced in the middle of a global summit.”

The soft, careful words render the three people in front of me very still. For a moment the unexpected tableau almost qualifies as accidental art, before motion and reality come back into play.

“The lilac works, Capitan.” Leaning down, Logan gives Iralene his customary kiss on the cheek before putting down the tray and grabbing a handful of food. “Later, Grey.” With a nod, he wanders out.

“Truth is Charlie, you’re one of the factors inspiring this visit.” Iralene’s fingers tighten on mine for a moment before letting go. “I have a problem.” Switching her attention to me she adds in a careful, measured tone, “And a favor to ask.” Her eyes fall to my fingers, slowly entwining themselves in layers of slim chain. “It’s about my son.”

“Oh.” The subject is so left of field I’m not quite sure what to say. “You’ve mentioned him before.”

Iralene gives me a long, measured look I don’t quite understand.

“Grey doesn’t access c-dirt material, hard press or information zone,” Char interjects.

She seems lost for words.

“Boy’s everywhere,” he explains. “A grade pulp scandals, constant flow.”

Subtlety is not Char’s forte. “Logan locks the celeb sites off at my request. I’m sure most of the material they post, print, and circulate is trash-fiction, cast list borrowed from the living.”

“Unfortunately the material circulating in regards to my son is often true. He’s been difficult,” she admits, “but then we all follow our own path. It’s just, at present, the situation’s complex.”

“How exactly?”

“Threats.”

“Always are,” points out Char.

“Of course,” concedes Iralene, “but presently a real danger exists.”

Reaching across, she picks up a piece of fruit bread from the tray. I can’t help making a small sound as she places the food in her mouth.

“What do you need?”

Char’s quiet question marks a turning point. In my head I can almost see the pieces realigning.

Iralene chews and swallows before replying. “To limit his activities. Byre needs to be in a monitored, controlled environment, but most of all he needs to believe he’s chosen the situation, the inherent lack of freedom, without any coercion. My son’s studied all the major conceptualists and has been demanding an introduction for months Grey. Frankly, I’ve avoided the scenario. Stalled, if you like.” She hesitates before continuing. “You don’t appreciate disruptions, and disruption is Byre’s foremost talent.”

“Yet you’ve changed your mind.” Char folds his arms.

“He’d be safe here.”

Unsure of what to say, I get the sudden feeling I’m only seeing one side of a mirrored object; merely reflections of other reflections.

“Let’s be clear,” says Char. “Is there a dragon involved?”

The silence holds for a few charged seconds. “Yes.”

“Then it’s impossible.” Char’s voice is gentle, but firm. “You must realize.”

She doesn't bother arguing. Her hands grip the cup so hard her finger turns white, throwing me back to a time when my own skin was that taut, and the answer is clear.

"When will he be here?" The soft words fall into a strange space that seems to be waiting for them.

Iralene stands up slowly. "Three days?"

I nod a short, sharp agreement and close my eyes for a second so she won't see the panic swirling there.

"I'll walk you down." Char's voice sounds distant. His brain must be hyper-processing.

A light touch on my cheek makes me open my eyes again and I meet her gaze without blinking.

"Thank you Grey." Before she walks away, I catch a glimpse of what looks like satisfaction behind the façade.

"See you soon Iralene." It's obvious from my tone I'm not phrasing a request.

Pausing in the doorway, she throws the ghost of a smile my way. "You're right Grey, you will need help. Byre's like that."

"Not Sourcing?"

"Not yet."

Logan crosses the room to stand beside me. I've given up pacing and now the food tray has my undivided attention. He picks up a handful of the tiny leftover pieces, crumbling them between his fingers.

"Shouldn't shred the food right?" I turn to face him. "She ate from the tray."

His eyes widen and he looks hard at the remnants as if expecting them to ignite. "Tell me she at least scanned it first?"

I move to the lime screen, ignoring the source setup, and the agitated motion draws his attention. He's watching me carefully; my face itches from the pressure.

“Helping Iralene is a good idea,” Logan’s voice is soothing, like he’s calming a wild animal, “but your reasoning might not be obvious to Char.”

“Well, he sees things from a different perspective.” An unexpected, slightly jagged laugh slips out. “Angles are diffused. His world is flat. The focus of his reality is fixed, and we’re at the center.” What are my hands doing? Looking down, I find the head of a dragon flower sent up earlier resting against my fingertips. “Lots of time to have a person here.”

“We can always send him off to work with one of the teams downstairs. Or if worse comes to worst, lock him in a cupboard somewhere.”

I smile at the joke, ‘cause that’s how my mouth moves. It’s almost automatic. Weird everyone smiles. My face really is itchy. “He has a dragon.”

The word hits Logan like a blow. I start tapping my top lip, noticing how light diffuses. Are shadows sharp everywhere? And what happens when your shadow blurs? Do you blur somewhere on the inside too? “Is there a religion of shadows Logan?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, she helped me, which was good, it’s like a spiral. There’s a pattern Logan, but it’s inside the flower.”

“Of course. I’m going to go now.”

As he crosses the room, I explain, “We all hate cut flowers, but you know it’s because they’re life and death fused through interference. Birth forced to face death for the dubious pleasure of transient beauty. And it’s all visual, it’s all-”

Logan turns in the doorway. “You need to source Grey,” he reminds me.

The words come almost as a surprise. “You’re right.” I can’t help crushing the petals caressing my fingers, just so I can watch the corpse of the flower flutter jaggedly toward the floor. “I really do.”

2(B)

*“The music is wired blood flowing pumping feeling it’s all flowing
can’t you hear the tunes inside the dreams it’s all moving go go go
flying by freedom in the sounds freedom in the moments between
words between tunes between elements of sound I’m pumping there
the words fought he’s still screaming tunes fading I can’t hear the
dreaming soft openings smooth so soon all too tuneful say it full-*

“What are you reading?”

Ignoring his voice, I focus on the laser bright words skimming
under the skin.

*It’s too fast too full I fell are you inside here I hear you there’s
something here it’s getting higher beat bits bits bits too free let the
words happen keep it bursting I’m bending there’s something here full
full full formulated pains see me here keep it breathing-*

A quick glance. He’s making his way across the room, weaving
through the prone forms with that oddly aggressive grace.

*Some sudden feelings leap I’ve leapt it’s all forming there’s a
freedom here I’ve forgotten the words can’t you keep me breathing
and dreaming all without sleeping it’s a generous day a free flowing
moment keep going keep happening let the words come screaming
brilliant loops of sound and strength it’s all in the spirit baby it’s all
there-*

I change hands, flexing the other fist so the words glow here
instead, cutting the approaching silhouette from my line of
vision.

*Harsher all strong it’s pounding there are breaks keep moving
don’t let the words fall I’m in love with the dream fairytales flow here
I can’t help translating fresh fall and fly on keep letting new things*

*happen I've seen the bright moments I love the shape of screams
you're dreaming it's for tomorrow I think I wish you weren't but who
is too sure? Oh we're falling now but it's with rhythm can't love the
forms too suddenly beautiful full of full on forget it all help me keenly I
hear your comfortable animosity I love the dreaming who says it's all
here too strong let it brood he's inside the moment leaking the music
and stopping-*"

With a sigh, I roll onto my back and look up at him. "What are you doing here?"

"Could ask you the same question."

A quick breath on the skin of my palm is picked up by the receptors and the bright text pattern fades. He scans the room before looking back at me pointedly.

"Fine."

Getting up, I head for another room down the corridor, grabbing a shirt along the way, glad to have slept in C-jeans. Stepping over sleeping bodies and ducking under friends floating on grav waves, I pull the shirt on, smoothing open ends together under restless fingers till heat and motion force the substance to fuse.

Stepping through the slim doorway, I mutter, "Isn't the prodigal son supposed to make his own way home?"

He doesn't answer, closing the door behind us.

Already a slow burn's starting. I think about finding food, or a portal to laze in. The chance to feel human before crashing through the kickass hoops lined up for me.

He prowls the small room with his quiet, lethal tread. "Party last night?"

"Didn't you read the brief?" My body feels tight from too much impulse before burning down, telltale ants crawling under the skin from an overload of feed. "Party every night."

He fixes his disconcerting gaze on my face. "Every night?"

“Yeah, well.” I stop, ‘cause hey, not my keeper. He’s standing a solid distance across the room, next to a small wooden table. Guess today’s all about space. Good to know.

“What were you reading?”

The question takes me by surprise. “The latest reactive text from Vi Miaski.”

Pulling a chair from under the table, he sits down. “Poetry to music?”

“The music flows over him while he writes. Consciously enough to shape words and semi-clear thoughts, but not consciously enough to worry about grammar, context, or complex structure.”

“Like Antona.”

“She only works with vocal-free music, whereas Miaski uses market music; short, sharp tracks with lyrics designed for mass consumption. And while he comprehends the words being sung, he also makes sure they don’t repeat in the language erupting from him, which counts as conscious interference.” He’s like a blank canvas. I can’t help myself, even with a mind bordering on stale, and a mouth that’s too dry. “Similar to a controlled flow of sub-conscious text. He’s letting himself hear the language, but he’s only pulling context and emotion.” I make myself stop talking. This kind of input could become addictive.

“Do you like it?”

“I do. There’s something else in the words.”

“Like what?”

“Why don’t you ask him? Miaski’s asleep on the floor somewhere.” Shifting so my back’s leaning against the wall takes pressure off tired muscles. “What time is it anyway?”

“Depends where you are in the world. Do you have any idea where in the world you are?”

The lack of exteriors isn’t helping line up a location. “Does it matter?” I pocket for pickups. All out. “Are we done?”

Instead of answering, he places a piece of paper on the table, and I lean a little more heavily into the wall.

“A handwritten note. I’m touched.”

He shakes his head. “I’ll never understand the way you communicate.”

“Oh, you seem to understand okay.” My eyes slide back to the paper.

“Then,” he says in an unexpectedly wry tone, “I’ll never understand the way you choose to communicate.”

The observation pulls a rueful smile. “So say all of us,” I murmur, keeping wild eyes on the message, not the messenger.

Without another word he gets up and exits the room, leaving the door open. I wait till he’s gone before crossing to the table.

My skin signature sets off text coding, the sentence quickly fading. Soon the paper shrinks away to nothingness.

“Alone?”

Draping herself sleepily in the doorway, Lais deliberately blurs, the lack of definition an invitation.

Hands falling to my side, I think about drowning in that work of art. “Why? Are you going to keep me company?”

She crosses the room in a series of slow and sultry steps, holographic settings flickering between her three favorite personas; busty blond in silver sex trash wear, sultry brunette in candy fling fashions, and violet-haired wraith in tight black vamp suit.

I feel myself getting harder with each flicker. A little more lost in ideas. She stops mere inches away, careful, as always, not to touch. Not yet. This close the electric currents are a soft stimulation that almost burns.

“How about an echo of your mystery man?”

A swarthy guy smiles, and the apparition throws me for a second.

“My, my,” she mocks. “Morose, aren’t we?”

“More likely a little bored,” I counter. “The company.”

She draws back. Her eyes are cold, even through layers of illusion.

“How about original Lais?” I suggest lazily. “Consider the novelty.”

“Not an option.”

“Disappointing.” I want her to change, back to anything... else.

“Are you even here?” She flickers between personas faster than bare vision can follow. Only her eyes remain the same, I notice. Cold.

“You’re all like dominos,” I murmur, pulling her body to mine before jamming us back against the wall, chasing a different kind of heat. The blond strands frame her face again.

“Is this for me, the ghost girl, or him?”

“Careful Lais,” I whisper. “You know I can make you switch it off.”

A hint of wariness enters her eyes. She shifts a little, the tickle of electro-stimulation finishing the hard-on. Her next words are stale and oh so predictable.

“Tell me what you want,” she breathes, ripping open the front of my shirt with one clean pull. “I’ll be anything you want.”

Nearly falling, it takes my tired mind a split second to deal with the derailing. Across the room Jarred sits up almost on cue, metallic pupils glinting starkly in the dim light.

“Heard you were somewhere on the left side.” He slides out of input phase and the gaming vision folds back from each iris, returning his eyes to their standard blue.

“Grav levels?” I wade across the room, my breath on the security panel of the secured cupboard almost a sigh. Grabbing some clean threads, I turn around to face the latest issue on a long list.

“Any second, info freak. Conceptual kick?”

“Scape sounds.” My head’s cracking from fast flights, too many thoughts, and a serious lack of sleep.

“Where?” He gets up off the floor, pausing for balance. “Glacier? Volcano? Or will it filter through later?”

“Don’t remember.”

Wired tight, it’s easy to see he’s been hooked in for a while. I head for the sonic, moving faster now the gravity’s balancing.

“Trying to make this scene play a little smoother?” His mild tone is laced with a whisper of tension he can’t quite subdue.

“Are you holding?”

“What are you wanting?”

“Some nutrients, maybe a low adrenaline. Alert, but not-”

“Not so she can tell you needed a helping hand?” He throws a few slips across. “It’s kind of clear from the clothes you picked. They’re a little muted.” Moving to his setup he slides into the chair. “Besides, you’ve got that look you always get before you’re reeled in. Hail the conquered hero. Jaz is back, by the way.”

I pause mid-step at the soft sentence. “Why?”

“Lives here, doesn’t she?”

The words are gently mocking, but I’m not in the mood for games. “And?” Leaning against the wall, I slide one slip under my tongue, another under the nail. “Is she here?”

A quick scan of the premises doesn’t read anything. He kicks the system on and streaming visuals fill the air. From what I can decipher, he’s lining up status reviews for pre-submersion.

“Jaz was here this morning, but she’s out now.” The clipped sentence say a lot, but not enough.

“She’s meant to be on a high velocity tour for at least three more rotations.”

“Well, things change.”

“Not a scaled tour. It takes a lot to get out of that kind of contract.”

“Yes, it does.” Suddenly my features float across a dozen different holoscreens, alongside another face. “Source the transience, hey?” Haunting eyes hover at face level, over and over again.

I try to control my reaction because that’s one thing he’s always monitoring. “It’s not what you think,” is all I have, even if it’s the truth. I’m too tired to come up with a lie shaded in enough facts.

“You know what I’m thinking?” An ironic twist of his mouth almost becomes a smile. “Interesting how the pattern’s unfolding. Odd, actually.” He spins to face me, expression unreadable. “But I’m just a rich gamer who doesn’t like to think too much, especially in dangerous directions.” The images disappear.

“Probably best,” I manage.

“But Jaz panicked. Because for her, there really is only the surface.”

“It’s her beauty,” I feel compelled to point out. “If you don’t see the depths, you can’t see the shadows.”

“She panicked because?” he persists.

I sigh. “Because she thinks she understands me.”

“A little,” he agrees. “But she has no idea, does she?”

The flood of visuals light up again, back to flowing unintelligible graphics, droning gamer stats, and analytic streams of code. Haloed by the information, he spins, attention now split between the complication in the room and the neural seduction of the game.

“Let me guess; she was worried she wouldn’t get to read me, but Legal had to be in person.”

And since I’m here...” He leaves the rest unsaid.

“She’ll get a clear contract. Or at the very least, a delay.” It’s the best I can offer, because it’s all I can offer, and we both know it.

“You’re going to be late.” He turns his head to meet my eyes. The tone tries for mellow, but the look is cold.

“Glacier,” I point out distractedly. “It was a glacier.”

Locked in that gaze, it’s almost like her pain is here in the room. My heart feels seared by it.

“Can’t believe I thought the whole emotive connection you two transmit was a kick.” I shrug, trying to shake off the wild, uncontrolled feed.

A lazy grin spreads across his face. “It’s all hers?”

Too much already, I can’t help thinking. I need a break.

“So do I.”

He scores a dirty look for the illegal read. “Got to clean up.”

Not that he offers to join me, but I slam the door anyway. Fucking telepaths.

“You seem comfortable.” She offers a made-to-order smile from the doorway. Usually someone’s hovering in her wake, but today there’s an empty space. “Are you hungry?”

“No.” The light from the nearest window threatens the edge of a headache. Flexing, I try not to wash out.

“Clothes look clean at least, I’ll give you that.” She crosses the room, grabbing my face with lightning speed. “Relatively clean on the inside too.”

“Monitoring?” I concentrate on not flinching. “Scan technology’s progressed. No contact required.”

Letting go, she surprises me with a sudden, hard smile. “I know.”

Already messing with my mind. I look down at the floor and wonder about the millions of sensors working away underneath the skin of the building, before glancing up to meet the cold, calculating gaze head on.

“Conference over?” Taking my legs off the arm of the chair, I stretch long, trying to ease a little of the tension without pacing.

“Brief sitting.” She settles herself in the seat opposite, violet fabrics blending beautifully with the décor. “Overall the agenda was somewhat limited.”

I bet it was. “Anything worth noting?”

“Anything discussed at Ellipton is of relevance.” Her stare makes me feel like a black mark on the spotless interior.

“Of course.” Specificity, the golden rule. “Corner Conflict?”

“As it stands, the Third Axis can’t offer further recompense. Putting an end to the fighting is going to be distinctly difficult, given the current attitudes in the region.”

She should change that trademark shade to blood red. “The Sahala Situation is in a state of temporary flux,” she continues, her tone deceptively mild.

My mind’s too burnt for this. Backwards or forwards, it’s all motion.

“Your opinion?” She arches a brow.

Every word is a doorway. “Maybe I am hungry.”

“Thought you might be.” Standing in a single neat motion, she crosses the room. “At some point.”

A small partition in the wall slides open. Lifting out a tiny platter, she carries it over. Beside my chair, a stand rises from the floor, and for some reason the silent, fluid motion disturbs me. She places the serving down and I pick up a piece, surreptitiously scanning the solid before slipping it on my tongue.

“Do you think that’s necessary?”

I shrug. “New creation?”

“Schevens’ work.” She picks up a taste for herself before sitting again. “Unusual for you to be so cautious. The installations stretched under your skin must be infinite.”

“Implants are the forte of the young,” I quote flippantly, pairing the words with a dazzling smile. The test food has a sharp, stinging afterbite that almost hurts.

“Not as young as you were. Time brings memorable adventures. And unmentionable moments, of course.”

She places the substance she’s holding in her mouth. I can’t help wondering what the air outside the window tastes like.

“Not a filter on the planet could lock out your online presence at this point. You’ve mastered the reckless living quotient.” A hint of a smile twists her lips. “But then, you’ve practiced incessantly.”

Picking up and scanning another piece of manufactured taste proves surprising, the lurid cube moving in my hand, then on my tongue.

“You could be the first high profiler to overload on conceptual living. Does that strike you as memorable?”

I wait until the food stops moving, till the fight is gone, before swallowing the bittersweet product. “How does it stand?”

“We’re behind schedule.”

“Guess it took echo a while to track me.” I throw the sentence carelessly into the air. We both know I was out of range for a reason.

“An unmonitored moment? What an innocent thought.” She leans back. “Were you ever that naïve?”

“Do you think the online plants were successful? I hear they’re a touch heavy-handed.”

A frown flickers. “Perhaps the merest whisper of manipulation could be sighted, and only by those somewhat linked.” Her voice takes on a mocking edge. “Trouble with the twins?”

My control finally slips. “Oh mother, if you don’t mention my aberrant habits, I won’t mention yours.”

Silence falls, and lingers. Her clear, ruthless gaze fixes on my face with renewed intensity. “You played that trump card a little early.”

She’s right. The glint of interest in those eyes is almost dangerous. Standing, I walk aimlessly toward a grey wall and take my time turning around. “What was her reaction?”

“I’m unclear on what she’s expecting. Logan keeps certain inputs limited.”

“Yes, Logan. Of course.” A puzzle for later. Right now, violet, damaged eyes and a haunted face skim along the edge of my thoughts. Soon I’ll be able to feel her flesh. In fact, I’ll have to. “When you touched me, you transmitted.”

She smoothes the front of her skirt. “Naturally. What did you expect?”

I take a few steps to the nearest window and drum my fingers across it. Interestingly, the anger isn’t surging like it used to. “How long?”

“Seventeen hours.”

“Not very generous.”

“Plenty of time,” she counters.

My hand slides across the surface a little too easily. Why would the panes be oiled? “You know, in some circles, drugging your offspring is considered borderline passé.”

She tilts her head, unruffled. “Merely a sophisticated form of motivation.”

“What would strike me down? Neural failure? Viral horror?” I spin my fingers in a lazy, slow circle. No heat from the outside world manages to seep through the material.

“It’s of no consequence. The design, however, is extremely sophisticated.” The hint of worry lacing the last word almost makes me smile.

“Never fear Iralene, I’ll be around for your next election. Just out of curiosity, is there more than one antidote?”

“No, only physical contact.”

Letting my hand fall I turn to face her and lean back, imagining how warm the sunlight would be if it could penetrate the barrier. “Skin to skin with your precious information princess? Easy.”

She laughs, startling me. “Grey isn’t easy, in any way. An obsessive interest in conceptualists, yet completely unprepared for the reality.”

“Which reality would that be?” Polite intellectualism seems the safest conversation route. “And whose construct?”

“Quoting Luttgard’s Commandments For The Conceptual? How quaint.”

“I know how to handle this.”

“Yes.” She stands up and takes a few steps in my direction. “I believe you really do think you know how to handle this.”

The scent of violets and something infinitely sharper fills the air. Over her shoulder the entrance looms, a solid, dark space.

“I’ve been looking after myself for a long time. You should have a little faith.”

“I’m beginning to realize that.”

Trying not to think about what she just conceded, I lift myself off the transparent surface and head for the doorway with quick, impatient steps.

“You don’t understand Byre. It’s your future that’s in motion.”

Ignoring the whispered words, I take care not to touch her in passing. Sidestepping in more ways than one, I mutter, “Seventeen hours and counting,” before crossing the threshold.

3(G)

"We cannot go forward. History is overwhelming us..."

Tabula Diaries, 183:88.

Entora cuts a mesmerizing figure, her sleek white gown and long white hair combining to create an angelic impression. The sensual energy, however, is anything but innocent. "I hope your session was productive. Did you discover any gems?"

Sourcing this morning was supposed to help me let go of the fragments making me pace inside myself, but it only added slivers to the chaos. "Today was beautiful, but almost dark. Aspects underneath are—" Self-preservation stops me just before the chasm ahead; I've almost breached the conversational brink. Pasting on a small smile, I wait for her response. We both know a comment like that could cause an international incident if leaked, especially after popular filters nourish it.

"Forgotten already," she says. "Do you have a beautiful idea for me?" She twirls a lock of white blonde hair between slender fingers.

The air of nonchalance is astounding. If feigned, it's an impeccable performance, right down to the relaxed heart rate. If sincere, the implications are myriad, and equally impressive.

The distinction between Entora's persona and her personality is beyond my power of perception. A real person, constantly reconstructing every element of self; I could never create a concept so magnificent.

"You'll like today's material." A short commencement code tapped into the panel on the arm of my chair lets Logan know he can begin transferring data.

“Ancient Egypt. A sense of decadence. Stark lines. Blue and gold. Egypt and the stars, since you’re fusing in a little astrology.”

Hardly any of her consciousness is committed to processing verbal so I keep the concept core succinct. My spoken 'itches' are downright eccentric, but I find it stabilizing to strip reams of analysis, coding, symbol connotations, cross-referenced cultural statistics, pattern comprehension and predictive studies down to a few simple words.

Entora makes a noise like a gasp and a sigh tangled together. Her eyes are dilating oddly, two separate fluctuations.

“Slinks. Streaks. Snakes. Shooting stars. Tip toward more independent impact. Ethereal but strong. A little magical. Partial tribute to 19th century interpretation of Egyptology. Seasonal bleed in slant of reinterpreted mysticism.”

“Fascinating.” Expression languid, the fingers of her left hand twitch, the only visible sign she’s accessing information from an outsource. The primary concept is seeping through her mind, blossoming options simultaneously adapted and discarded, synapses broadcast to a nearby memory receptor.

Despite her Old World pretensions, Entora never shies from utilizing the tightest technology. Even from a raw perspective, the dimensions of her holographic transmission border on hyperreal, and for the first time I wonder if she’s that beautiful in the flesh.

The information transmission winds down, becoming a less consuming stream allowing for conversation.

“Logan's data transfer is as flawless as ever,” notes Entora. “His team's coordinated constructs of flow are enviable. My assistants admire his organization.” She gives a low-throated laugh. “Of course, they admire more than that.”

“Logan is extraordinary,” I whisper, the drop in volume creating enough innuendo to inspire a raised brow.

“Personally or professionally?”

I give a well practiced, if not perfected, blank look. “Professionally, of course.”

“Of course.” One corner of her mouth quirks. “Please go on.”

“Seven divergent options are included for lead diffusion labels, all adapted to complement the core thematics, leveled to socio-structures and dominant psychographics, as per standard seasonal requests.”

She nods politely, letting me know her firm commitment to the concept. But then, I’ve never gone wrong with Entora. I find and reflect what catches and holds her fanbase, which happens to include a diverse slice of prime audience quotients across a number of nations.

More importantly, my concepts are safe with her. Solid follow-through, development, personalization/adaption, production, marketing; each sub-step scrupulously well managed.

Entora rules the portion of modern culture that’s captured her interest. In her own way, she’s as ruthlessly ambitious as Iralene, just with a sweeter wrapping, and a sexier smile.

“A pleasure, as always,” she says.

The short phrase marks an end to the fiscal side of our exchange. Since etiquette deems my team responsible for terminating the connection, the still open link translates as 'casual interaction welcome'.

I have a sneaking suspicion who’s behind these almost regular time 'glitches'. Logan's force-feeding me doses of socialization like some kind of mental vitamin.

“Did you hear of my new lover?”

Entora's voracious appetite for the well marketed never fades. Her publicized lovers are always beautiful, powerful, or both, approaching the peak of popularity in their particular field of focus. A dalliance with Entora remains the final key to universal success across conceptual nations. I doubt it’s a coincidence political and corporate decisions that may negatively impact her

holdings somewhere down the line have a habit of evaporating into the bureaucratic ether.

“Who is it?”

She offers a wide, sensual smile. “Jeckman.”

“The holo actor?”

“For now. He’s expressed an interest in government.” She crosses her legs slowly. The whisper of moving fabric is amplified in transmission, the way a shiver might sound to the mind. “Very tasty, but I don't like to kiss and tell.”

Entora’s a sexual enigma, in that her ex-lovers never talk. Well, they always talk, but the offhand comments beautifully leaked only increase her mystique. In today's hypersaturated info scene infers an intimidating level of control.

Logan says Entora never takes a lover without holding unpublished truths on them, a secret or suggestion they'd prefer kept under wraps. Chilling, yes, but since Entora's style of manipulation is so seductively enthralling, I don't suppose any of them mind.

“The Level Press are more interested in comments on Sahala these days. Intriguing man.”

I take care not to react, letting the silence speak for itself.

“What do you say to the queries of the information vultures?”

Enough already. “Sahala is the conceptual property of another nation. I'm not in the position to comment on a conceptualist's actions, or interactions, with their own government.” The sentiment rolls easily off my tongue. I wonder if I believe it.

An awkward silence falls. “These appointments are a profound honor,” Entora says, aware she’s crossed a line. “I know you only communicate closure with a select group of concept clientele. Your time is precious, and much appreciated. After all, rumor has it you transfer almost a thousand concepts a day, yes?”

“Before breakfast. Then I fly to the moon with a thought. I also breathe flames, hence communication through the wires. Much safer.”

She laughs. “I love my relationship with my conceptualist. Of course, I’d explore a closer one.”

The conversation always closes with a lighthearted attempt at seduction. It’s practically tradition, but today I’m rewriting the script. When it comes to controlling information, first confirmation’s as important as initial distribution.

“A visitor’s coming to stay.”

“How rare. Anyone interesting?”

“Byre.”

She just stares at me, momentarily speechless. I’m guessing her security team slammed down the blocks on emotive transmissions when that shock hit.

“Iralene’s son?”

I nod.

“Byre? With you?”

Another nod.

“Is he staying in your building Grey?”

I nod again, feeling like a puppet on a string.

“Phenomenal.” After a pause she picks up a piece of hair and twirls it languidly, but this time I know the casualness of the action’s entirely simulated. “Tell me, are you craving excitement?”

“I’ve never met him.”

She frowns. “You don’t read celeb-lines, do you?”

“No, but I doubt I’ll notice he’s around. It’s a short-term intrusion.” The casual dismissal doesn’t seem to reassure her. “Iralene implied he thrives on constant stimulation and there’s not much here to hold his interest.”

“So innocent.”

“Innocent? With my life?” The words come out sharper than intended.

“No, not innocent when it comes to pain,” she agrees, “but innocent, perhaps, in the face of complex pleasures.” Tilting her head to the side, she gives me a long, considered look. “Grey, please remember you can contact me any time if you need to talk to someone who isn’t Logan. I’m sure you’ll be fine, but sometimes only another woman can hear all the thoughts haunting the words.”

The offer catches me unaware. I’m notorious for protecting my privacy and clients are well versed in that fact. Any overtures of friendship are usually met with vague blankness at best.

“Thank you,” I manage to say before the holographic transmission times out, leaving the communication room bare around me.

“What the hell are you doing?”

I try to make words, but it’s too soon. Disjointed phrases fight through each other, the shapes of the sentences almost visible.

“Grey?” He kneels down next to me. “Do you know my name?”

“Salright.” Things are clearing, settling into place inside and out.

He sits back on his heels. “First the signals started peaking, then the energy patterns wavered.” Getting up, he moves to grab a drink from the side table. “Thought it was a malfunction, since you sourced this morning.” He thrusts the glass in my face. “Drink.”

I take a sip and try to ignore the taste of the tabs he’s surreptitiously slipped in the water.

“Am fine.” Already the room’s lurching back into focus, colors realigning themselves.

“What the hell were you thinking?” He thumps down on the footstool at the end of my bed.

His face borders on fragmented. All those textures. “Needed to.”

“You agreed.”

Even this far gone, I can see the pain in his gaze, and the worry. “Did agree. Get it.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes. Slowly my thoughts clear.

“Don’t worry. Isn’t regular again.” Moving away from the source set-up, I take a few creaky steps around the room, forcing stiff muscles to work again. “It’s all off.”

“What do you mean?”

I stretch my arms over my head till the blood flows and the tabs kick in enough for longer sentences. “This morning when sourcing, roaming wider, letting all the information flow, over me, through me, which is when I sensed it happening. Things are... off, Logan.” Trying to transform source material into simple text is always a strain. “The information flow, it’s almost mutating? The threads I’ve been seeing lately, they’re warping in curious directions. Trends, energy, feed, it’s all on the border, set to fluctuate. Something’s waiting to happen.”

“When?” He leans forward. “When is it happening, Grey?”

“Don’t know. Just makes me feel strange. That’s why the extra sourcing. Need to know when.”

“Not to mention how, why and where,” adds a voice from the doorway.

“Levels had you running?”

Seeing I’m conscious and upright, Char doesn’t bother crossing the threshold. “Twice in one day. Bound to set off alarms.”

“Sorry, didn’t think.” The admission makes me uneasy.

“You have to let us know Grey.” Char keeps the volume low, which I appreciate. “My bones are getting too old for racing around.”

The ridiculousness of that statement inspires a smile despite the shooting pains in my head.

“Am okay.” I walk a little unsteadily to the bed, easing myself down nice and slow. “Nothing major.”

“Medic?”

“No, need some time.”

Char leaves as silently as he arrived. Lying back, I close my eyes, forcing them open again when Logan starts talking.

“I’ve been thinking we can put Byre in the third wing. At least you’ll have the illusion of distance.” Pacing over to the window, he looks out at the sky, giving me a little more time to compose myself. “Have to admit, I’m a bit curious about him. He’s definitely an intrepid presence online.”

“Entora?” My mouth’s curiously dry.

Logan smiles up at the sky. “Never hooked up with Entora, as far as I can tell. No text on the wires for it. He’s almost out of her league, if you can believe it. There’s no discernible rhyme, reason or pattern to his choices. The guy’s sampled from every cultural niche.” Logan laughs, startling me. “To him the elite of the conceptual nations are his very own tasting plate.”

I sit up, feeling steadier. The tabs are hitting hard. Logan must have panicked; I’m almost too pepped up now. “Found someone in there.”

“Potential?”

“Can’t verify.”

“Direction?”

“Not yet.”

“You flagged the trail?”

“Are you kidding?” Sure, I oversourced, but there’s no way I’d miss a mark.

“Sorry.” He rubs a hand across his face. “I’ll get Jeremy’s team on it. Few other things need scheduling too.”

“Because cut-ins are up.”

The observation scores me a shrewd look. “How did you know?”

I shrug, ignoring the stiffness in my limbs. “Is it manageable?”

Turning back to the window, Logan takes his time replying. “Think so, for now. I should let you rest.”

“Is everything ready, for Byre?”

“A few adjustments left to organize.” Crossing the room, he adds, “Nothing we can’t handle.”

“Do you think he’ll be problematic?”

He pauses in the doorway. “Not sure if problematic is the word. Unpredictable, charming, mercurial; those are probably more accurate descriptions.”

The diplomatic response makes me smile. “So you’re saying we won’t be bored.”

An echo of my smile washes across Logan’s face. “No Grey, I don’t think we will.”

I’m almost gone when he appears, pulling me back from a drifting place. “Mykel.”

“Are you sleepy?”

He speaks so softly the question is almost indecipherable, but I know all his words, because they’re mine. “Mm.”

“Sleeping with a light glow again?”

Already the room feels warmer with him here, like the atmosphere has adapted to accommodate the new presence. Lounging on a chair directly in front of me, he leans back, and a gentle beam of light strays across the perfectly chiseled face.

My heart beats a little faster and my skin’s suddenly hypersensitive, as if the slightest touch would be too heavy.

“Did you want me to visit?”

“Yes.”

The sight of him soothes at least the top layer of my mind. Neither of us moves and the silence stretches, taking on a

different shape. Thinking of all the nights we've spent like this a languid feeling swells, sinking through my limbs, numbing more of my thoughts.

"The screaming's stopped." It's blissfully silent outside. "Nice if it could be quiet like this all the time."

He doesn't say anything. Reaching up, I take a piece of hair and twist it around one finger before letting go. The strand brushes my cheek as his cool, calm regard washes over my skin.

"Do you want me to leave?" The words are barely a whisper.

"No." I manage to sigh. "Stay."

He gets up and walks over to the edge of the bed, lowering himself onto the surface, becoming so still he could almost be inanimate, except for the rise and fall of his chest. The skin outlined in the dip of his shirt is golden. Art perfectly constructed, accessibility the arguable point.

"Beautiful," he says in his gentle voice.

"You can hardly see me," I tease.

"In my head you're always beautiful."

Old patterns slip into place. Relaxing, the edges of the day begin to seep away. He starts unbuttoning his shirt. Soon, the fabric slides off his body.

"Remember, no thinking. You think too much."

"It's ingrained," I remind him.

"No thinking Grey. Just relax."

The calm gaze and simple instructions are almost hypnotic. "No thinking. The only rule that matters." I made that rule.

He leans back languidly. "The rules will always be yours Grey." He says the words like some kind of vow. "Whatever you want. Whatever you don't want. You only have to say it."

"The rules are mine."

Should the rules be mine? The words echo in my head and for a second there's a subtle shift in perspective, as if a filter has slipped out of place. The room seems emptier. The figure on the bed strikes me as alien, almost displaced, and I'm momentarily

disassociated from the scene. What's happening? My mind won't clear...

Everything shifts back, back to the familiar. Mykel's sitting on the bed and it's the Mykel I've always known, beautiful skin glowing in the gentle light. My breath catches as he tilts his head to the side, silken strands of hair falling against his throat as he waits to see what I'll do next.

"I'm a little overdressed." The pattern slides into place.

"Take off your top Grey."

He leans forward, an avid expression in his dark eyes. I pull myself up and twist so the silken fabric slides over my head and the sheet falls to my waist. The air is cool and fresh against my skin.

"You're so beautiful." A hand reaches out to touch, hovering in the air between us, poised on the brink of change.

"No."

"That's right." He lowers his arm. "Only you can touch."

Those dark eyes are mesmerized by my hands moving over the mound of each breast, the curve of my stomach.

"Will you ever let me touch you Grey?"

I don't bother replying, since we both know the answer. I always know what he's going to say when everything is in the right place. A soft sound escapes my throat, then another. I try not to think about a stranger living inside these walls.

4(G)

“They’re coming up.”

Maria’s voice is barely a whisper. She glides back and forward across the room. Not pacing, not quite floating, just moving restlessly from one point to another.

I wonder if she registers what I can sense? The patterns of our days are reconfiguring. New data is reshaping the output, maybe even breaking down the program.

I smooth my hands down my thighs, wishing for some kind of crease in the fabric, but there’s nothing to wrap my mind around. Calling up an autoholo, I code for surveillance, pulling the scene I want into center focus.

Beautiful golden eyes glint in the light, like a tiger’s. Even with the naked gaze I can tell the pupils are authentic rather than simulated. I wasn’t expecting that, it’s a rare anomaly. In the barest of heartbeats the light plays across them, turning the iris from warm toffee to a fleeting, blinding gold, before settling on a muted, sheened metallic.

He’s looking around with an unreadable expression on his face. Maybe I should link up some sound? His lips shape words now and again, although Logan seems to be doing most of the talking. Not surprisingly, Char says nothing.

Something about the visual seems off-kilter. It takes a second or two for the elements to coalesce into solid thought. He’s moving like someone conserving energy. I recognize the studied control, the kind that lets you score a little more mileage from a severely depleted system.

“Quite close,” Maria murmurs.

I fade out the image. He’s much stronger—not in body, in a different way—than I imagined. I expected his face to seem

dissolute, even lost, but there's a strange energy beneath the skin. And he's taller than I envisaged. Lean, not ill looking, just...

My mind shies from comparison. Endless reams of files from the past, always trying to intrude on the present.

Logan walks in first. I can't read his expression, which comes as a shock. Before the implications sink in, Byre is standing across the room from me.

Logan, Char and Maria are almost as still as I am. I wait for Byre to say something, but he doesn't speak. Instead he stands there as still and silent as the rest of us.

"Grey, meet Byre."

Byre surprises me by crossing the space in a few quick strides. I look up into his face just as he touches me. His fingers graze the skin of my cheek before I can flinch. Lightly, almost nonchalantly, but I get the sense there's an undercurrent of purpose to the action.

Behind him, Logan makes an involuntary sound, and Byre's hand drops back to his side.

It's been so long since someone touched me. The sensation's peculiar. I wish I could stop time to think things through.

"Hello."

His voice is deeper than expected, and he's smiling at me now, a complex smile. The intense gaze is penetrating but veiled—seeing what he needs to, without letting anyone in—and the effect is somewhat mesmerizing.

"You're beautifully eerie. I didn't expect you to be so... unearthly." He almost sounds like he's talking to himself. Up close, the bright eyes are even bolder.

I don't quite know what to say. The almost perceptible shimmer of charisma, wielded like a God-given weapon, makes him dangerous. No wonder leading Trash Tabs allocate regular space. "Would you like a seat?"

I point to a chair across the room. He ignores the gesture and sits on the footstool at the end of the bed. Holding back a frown,

I wonder how much Byre's monitoring reactions on various tech-levels. Or could he be living this experience relatively cold? He looks like the kind of person who'd enjoy a blind ride.

"This is Maria, by the way." Logan interjects the words into empty air that seems to be waiting for some kind of sound.

Barely turning his head, Byre spares her the briefest look before his gaze locks on my face again. I glance at Maria, but he ignores the hint. His eyes remain fixed on my face, a coldness behind them now.

Breaking the awkward pause, Logan addresses Byre with the soothing tone he reserves for erratic clients. "I'll check if your suite is ready."

Throwing a reassuring smile my way, he grips Char's arm on the way past. With a speaking glance at Byre, Char lets himself be led from the room.

Maria turns to follow, pausing hesitantly in front of the newcomer. "It was a pleasure being introduced to you," she says.

Byre's response is as blank as before. If anything, his body tenses with distaste. When it becomes obvious he isn't going to respond, Maria exits the room.

I open my mouth to unleash some well-deserved comments about the attitude, before remembering how long he's staying. Indefinitely. With an inward sigh, I code a few symbols using my left hand. The soft melodies of *Specalia* drift through the room. A small smile works its way to the surface as the pretty tune trips through the air between us.

"Wired for readings. Most conceptualists don't like their living areas so monitored. Interesting," he murmurs, as if talking to himself.

"This conceptualist finds it reassuring."

He thinks on that for a moment before cataloguing the information away. I get the impression I'm a specimen displaying erratic behavior, and it's not a comfortable feeling. Having him here is disconcertingly surreal, as if an unstable

fragment from the conceptual world has slipped past the barriers.

Standing, he prowls over to my source set up. While his intention's engaged I move to the bed, crawling across it like I'm climbing onto a raft, no longer adrift at sea. Feeling safer, I try to think of a way to get rid of him.

"Would you like a tour of the building?"

He throws a blinding grin in my direction. "Oh, you don't need to put yourself out. I'll be here for a while."

Crossing to the bed, he sits down. The sharp, fresh scent of his cologne swirls around me and I tense, my chest barely moving with each breath.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He's just very close. Logan and Char are a lot more circumspect when it comes to filling my space.

To my surprise he lies back on the bed and closes his eyes. "Have to impress you another day," he says softly. "I'm tired."

Relaxing a little, I point out, "You didn't need to rush here."

He makes a sound that's almost a laugh. "Oh, her highness preferred it."

The reference to his mother is so loaded with conflicting connotations that I let it go.

"You should paint the roof." His eyes are open again. "You've got some very blank white there."

Lifting my knees up against my torso, I wrap my arms around myself till I'm transformed into a neat package. Colors flare in my head, memories of frenzied applications and raw paint scraping against skin.

"You look like you're under attack." He rolls over to rest on one elbow, a hand behind his head. "What did I say?"

His eyes flicker to my fingers knotted tightly together and a worrying realization strikes. Handling him is going to be difficult.

"Don't worry, I won't be troublesome."

I get the unsettling feeling he's reading my thoughts. But wouldn't Logan have told me if he was wired that way? The idea that I've become transparent is somewhat disturbing. When did Grey become a color so easy to see through?

"Do you do that regularly?"

"What?"

"Leave the conversation while the other person's still in it." He frowns. "You wandered into your own head."

Something tells me people don't blank out on him very often. "I'm not used to strangers in my space."

"So I've read."

To escape the unsettling gaze I glance up at the white roof above us, but the blankness carries its own questions, and my eyes find their way back to his face.

I can't help twitching a little as he sits upright, crossing his legs. He smiles the whole time he's moving, like I'm a new pet he's trying to acclimatize. The ludicrous idea almost makes me laugh. It's a little interesting, wondering what he'll do next.

Opening a side pocket, he extracts a slim silver package and holds it out in front of him, the gesture almost reverent. "This is for you."

No one's given me a present in a long while. Gifts from fans, dignitaries, companies, and clients are all opened and evaluated downstairs. I take it tentatively, enjoying the mix of emotions it evokes.

"Char insisted on a thorough scanning. Totally safe."

"Thank you." Something tells me not to slide the box open while he's still here. He's already seen too much.

"Of course." He taps his left index finger against his thigh. "Will I be eating with you?"

"Eating?"

"Main meals?"

"There's no set meal schedule."

"A side effect of the sourcing?"

I shrug because I don't want my thoughts to wander there.

"Do you eat any meals vaguely regularly?"

"Breakfast," interjects Logan from the doorway, making me jump. It feels like an age since he left with Char and Maria. "The actual time can differ, somewhere between eight and ten. Will you be eating then, too? I can let them know downstairs if you like, and they can notify you when Grey wakes. She eats within fifteen minutes."

I glare at the turncoat. Crossing the room, Logan throws me a wink before placing a bundle of hard print documents on the bed between Byre and I, almost like a barricade. "Need some imprints."

Hard copies are handled in one of the conference areas. Less-than-subtle intervention it is. I should be offended, but I kind of appreciate the buffer.

Surprisingly, Byre cedes to the heavy-handed tactic. "Perhaps you could give me a tour while she works? Help me get acclimatized, since you seem comfortable here."

Logan meets the measured golden gaze with a blank expression. "Of course."

Looking amused, Byre lifts himself from the bed. "Later Grey." The words are accompanied by a lazy smile thrown over his shoulder like a promise.

My own smile has a puzzled frown locked deep inside it. I can't shake the feeling Byre's arrival is a prelude to something else. The intuition's nebulous, but strong, as if various signs and pieces are trying to link themselves together, striving to mesh into a recognizable idea or pattern that won't quite hold.

I can't source in calm or even organized chaos. Phases are sharp but confused, symbols oddly unfocused, pathways muted in transient mental inferences. I source for the barest time,

enough to control impacts and reactions, logging precepts and any files relevant. Tomorrow. All the concepts can flow tomorrow.

He's like a multi-faceted piece of a holographic puzzle, a continuous, restless stream of permutating existence.

The idea of him stalls larger issues, whispers my mind. His presence helps lock away growing worries. Information strands are becoming sharper, harder, and wilder; something's wrong, but I can't tell where it's coming from, or what any of it means. I'm skimming, not really sourcing at heart.

You don't know how long you can manage conditions on this level, warns a cautious part of my consciousness. Light daily readings are less damaging in terms of reactive fallout, but long-term, the cost could be cruel.

"Do you need anything?"

Maria's voice isn't as soothing as it should be. Usually the sound calms me but today it seems filtered, lacking depth somehow; a repercussion of his presence.

"No. Nothing." I have no need.

She leaves the room. I don't see her disappear, I never do, but I know. Almost empty moments, but the permutations linger.

One of the strange berries rolls across my hand. A wild, stark cut of color spliced into my life. What do you give to someone who helps shape the world?

His answer was berries, eight in total. An almost endless stream of references, both personal and cultural; places, tales, traditions, memories, emotions. Symbols old and new, connotations clashing and layering. A gift shaped by one man's will into a seductive tool, a handful of fruit that stretches and breaks perceptions. The fresh red gem I'm holding is in a stasis of its own. Messages layered in messages, a wild man's communication without words. Say it.

"Say more," I implore the tiny globe of color in my hand.

I consume it in an attempt to consume the curiosity the object evokes. It's a sharp, fast experience, and then just aftertaste. If only other elements of life could be experienced so neatly.

My feet walk a little further, closer to a small window, away from the source. I don't see any people, since everything's in shells, but they're easy to imagine. It would be nice to have no glass, but I know Char would say those kind of fields aren't an option for the protected.

Still, there's a sudden need to see more. Maybe even feel. Surely the light would be different up here? Cleaner. Closer. My mind's seduced by the potential for purity.

I curb an impulse to touch the glass. Someone would sense it, and perceiving the random, discerning change, is always alarming.

Right now his face haunts the perimeter of too many discontinued thoughts, cutting through layers of relentless, jagged confusion, and the nebulous unease birthed from sourcing. Leaning forward, I offer my words to the city below, an environment always waiting, constantly relying, already consuming. "I hope you know what you're doing Iralene."

"Meet Mane."

The hum of conversation and motion in the Control Room cuts out at Char's words, like a lost channel of sound in an audio sample; no fade, just a ruthless exclusion of volume.

I've never been so close to a dragon before. His eyes look like dark, opaque plastic. Meeting his gaze is like staring into a void. "I'm sorry, I don't know where to look."

"It's a common reaction." He sounds almost disinterested, as if we're discussing a worn out topic as mundane as the weather.

I get a vague impression of light coffee skin tones and silken dark hair to the jawline, but since we're exactly the same height, it's eye line to eyeline.

Next to me a technician shifts in her chair, while a junior operator heads for the door. Logan mentioned a dragon's presence seems to set off some kind of primal alarm, the overwhelming sense of otherness prompting people to instinctively recoil.

Staring into the double abyss, I can understand their response. It's hard to feel any sense of connection to shadows and darkness.

"I'm giving him a quick tour. Acclimatizing the newbie."

Char's voice jars me from my musings and I get the impression he isn't happy with my tactless reaction. Feeling ashamed, I manage to dredge up a fuller representation of a smile. "Of course."

Overcompensating for my previous faux pas, I impulsively offer a hand to shake. One of the senior analysts makes a sucking sound, like he's choking on his own breath.

The dragon appears bemused. "No."

I must look offended, because he adds, "Thank you."

It's such a naïve way to handle a potentially complex situation I can't help smiling.

"Byre thinks I have basic socialization skills." While low, his voice has an interesting firmness to it. Surprisingly, I like the sound.

"Don't worry, I'm guessing his responses are a shade too complex."

"Perhaps. Occasionally I do feel like I'm floundering."

The barest hint of melancholy is buried in the sentence, and for a moment, instead of being intimidated by the formidable strength coded into that physical frame, I feel sorry for the consciousness inside it. Life must be complicated when you're Made.

“Grey, you need to check this.”

Damon offers Char a quick nod and Mane a sharp glance before returning his attention to the information streaming between the data sticks on his wrists. For a moment I’m shocked by his casual nonchalance till I notice he’s standing as far as possible from the dragon, supposedly by chance.

“We’ll get on with the tour.” Trust Char to describe outlining the minutiae of security protocols as a tour. “Always good to know a fresh scenario by sight.”

“Wouldn’t a staggered information transfer be more appropriate?”

Damon’s comment earns him a piercing stare from Char that he misses, attention fixed on the material in his hands. He’s entering data now, fingers blurring.

“We have an I.Tran scheduled for later but the personal touch is a better start. Lay of the land, so to speak.”

Damon nods without bothering to look up, like he’s barely in the conversation. I have to give him credit points for a convincing performance.

Mane’s staring into space, processing maybe? To be fair, he could just be daydreaming. Dragons are still technically human, albeit a little realigned.

His head turns sharply in my direction, making me wonder what I did to merit the attention. Reminding myself to breathe, I work on holding the obscure gaze that’s both intoxicating and curiously familiar.

“We’ll see you later,” says Char.

I nod farewell. The entire room relaxes with their departure.

“What was it you wanted, Damon?”

“Nothing. Thought you were a caught little off-kilter, is all.” He makes another notation. “Adjustment takes time.”

Noting my stunned expression, he actually winks at me before sauntering across the room. A young tech across the way hyperventilates at his approach.

Sometimes people are so unexpected.

For a fleeting second, a part of me wonders what the dragon's touch would have felt like.

5(B)

The view is breathtakingly bland, generically Central. From this perspective it's all just a mass of movement, an undefined, distant montage of metal, plastic and people.

"Soundtrack might add something."

Turning, I trade the less than riveting panorama for a much more interesting narrative on this side of the glass. I'm starting to understand the connection between them. Not what I expected.

Moving to the nearest armchair, I wave him to the opposite seat, and kick off the carefully formatted conversation. "Is every room in this place gray?"

"No, you got lucky." Logan grins as he sits, tapping at the console built into the arm of the chair. Don't worry." He picks up the flute that slides into view. "Red obsidian's a surface impression, according to the wires." Eyes never leaving my face, he takes a long sip of the golden liquid.

I reach for the identical glass sure to be mirrored on my own armpiece, an enigmatic smile flickering across his features as my fingertips find the surface. Complicated, this one. Or it could be the echo of her touch in his thoughts. Hard to say.

"I would play some tunes but it's bordering on antitech in here. Press reports of my conversion are grievously exaggerated, by the way."

He snorts with laughter. "Yeah, you're one for purist tendencies. We weren't sure what you needed, in terms of equipment."

"The specs should arrive any time."

"A few personnel have been coded for follow-up. Two primaries, Simon and Sarah." Before I can ask, he verifies, "Flesh, by the way. Feel free to adjust your own living quarters as

you like.” He taps the fingers of one hand against the glass in a wild, erratic pattern. “So what did you think of Grey?”

that/shes/beautiful/maybe/a/little/bit/beyond/that/because/beauty/implies/a/certain/insipidness/a/surface/glamour/thespirit/can/never/compete/with/her/inner/complexities/outshine/the/skin/the/body/or/those/eyesSTOP

that/shes/been/waiting/for/me/she/doesn't/know/it/yet/its/a/shock/seeing/her/here/in/her/shell/touching/her/flesh/killed/the/contaminant/but/contaminated/me/in/a/whole/different/waySTOP

that/sex/with/her/would/be/dangerous/i/like/sex/every/style/but/she/threatens/new/parameters/shes/going/to/reshape/everythingSTOP

that/beyond/it/all/beyond/conceptualism/shes/sharp/and/shes/going/to/figure/us/all/out...

“No answer?”

If only he knew. Internal dialogue’s a bitch.

“I’m guessing it’s lucky you’ve coded and scrambled all your sensory output right now. An introduction to Grey can generate a lot of thought.”

When my calm smile doesn’t falter, he throws his head back and gives a sudden, barking laugh. “Like your style, Byre.”

Scrutinizing the nondescript figure in front of me, the non-threatening façade, compels me to say, “Right back at you.” Sipping my drink, I’m surprised by the taste of champagne. Interesting. What could we be celebrating?

He stretches his legs out in front of him. “Do you have any questions?”

An open doorway, or the illusion of one at least. That’s unexpected. “A few, since you’re here. How many staff in this facility?”

“Around a thousand.”

“Skeletal for a major conceptualist. Not even ten percent of other national conceptualists’ primary staff.”

“Grey prefers to outsource certain functions.”

“Corporate affiliations?”

“It’s a staggered working structure, a relatively balanced economic approach. I can have a detailed outline forwarded to you, with history and cross-affiliations of each company listed, as well as contract summaries. It would take hours to break down verbally. The information listings are available to the public, so you wouldn’t be crossing into territory protected by the Privacy Act.”

“Sounds far too complex and time consuming,” I drawl. Not to mention the system’s within Iralene’s jurisdiction, and bound to be monitored. “I’ll just focus on Grey, if you don’t mind.”

“That is the question, isn’t it?”

The red stare’s making me restless, which is kind of ironic, considering Mane’s gaze doesn’t bother me at all. Glass in hand, I get up and walk slowly around the room, pausing in front of a riotous canvas on the nearest wall.

The image in front of me is made up of shades of gray, but with an unsettling vibrancy, as if some kind of spirit or energy’s trapped within the chaotic canvas. “Word has it Grey likes to have meetings with certain clients.”

“Meetings?” Logan’s tone is guarded.

“I’ve heard a few favored individuals are talked through creative concepts by The Grey Lady herself. To those in the know it’s a quaint anomaly. Nothing dangerous, quite harmless.”

“More childlike? Oversimplified?” He sounds relaxed now, as if he’s reached a decision. “Sometimes she likes to talk things through, and yes, we patronize the inclination, but of course, it’s primarily an illusion. Conceptual communication could never be achieved within the limits of vocalization.”

He takes a sip while I try for predictive placement based on color and structure, but no living artist comes within thirty percent probability. Perhaps my data files need updating.

“Client-conceptualist conversation is more for the benefit of her conscious mind. A reassuring oversimplification,” finishes Logan.

“Hey, I doubt anyone’s going to argue with her procedures. Grey’s boosted the economy so wildly she could demand her own holiday.” I take another sip of the champagne. Definitely not simulated. The strange canvas pulls my gaze, almost biting at the eyes. “How many concepts does she process?”

“In a month? Thousands, but it fluctuates. Modern consumerist culture operates on many different levels, so they’re buried in reams of figures and commentary. Maintaining a presence a step ahead of the flow, directing appropriate ideas to the right areas of the creative and capitalist structure... You know how complex it is.”

Predicts or controls?”

I turn around to find him smiling at me.

“Question of the Age, isn’t it? Here’s an interesting one for you Byre. Why are you only asking questions you already know the answers to?”

“You’re right Logan, this isn’t fun. There are no surprises.” Pulling some tabs out of my pocket, I offer him one. “We should up the stakes.”

He hesitates before taking it from me, flicking it between his fingers. “What does it do?”

“Amplifies the effects of alcohol, with a few extra edges. Has to be pure, old-fashioned, fermented alcohol though. No modern manipulated stuff.”

“In other words, this tab’s a toy designed only for the obnoxiously rich.”

That makes me grin. “For sure. But instead of getting slowly drunk, you get drunk in the way you would if you were drinking something like absinthe. Think uncontrolled hallucinatory impressions and partial acceleration of the body’s natural responses. At the same time, it curtails the culminated aftereffects.”

“Instant intoxication, minimal hangover. Is that all?”

“Good question.”

“There’s always a catch.”

“Catch is the tab inhibits certain side effects of alcohol intake, like slurring when speaking, access to vocabulary. Those pathways in the brain remain relatively unaffected.”

“So I’ll experience the lack of inhibition and emotional responses alcohol causes, but I’ll say whatever I’m thinking, feeling, or hallucinating at the time, a lot more clearly than anyone ever should?”

“Exactly. A nice, random ride.” I place one of the tabs on the tip of my tongue. “Are you in?”

He lifts his glass to gulp the remaining golden liquid in one swallow before using the tab. “Byre, why do you keep asking questions you already know the answers to?”

“A conceptualist stands at the door of Heaven.” Hopefully the blur in front of me is Logan, ‘cause this is important. “They look for the conceptualist’s name on the list. What’s written next to it?” Silence. “Addict? Prophet? Demon? Lunatic? Genius? Manipulator? Victim? Savior?” I stop filling in the blanks. “Saved civilization or destroyed it?” The real question.

“Moot point. This is a conceptual nation, not a religious nation.” Logan pounds his fist on the table for emphasis, misses the table, and almost falls off the chair. “I will never be drunk enough to answer that question.”

He takes a swig out of the bottle in his left hand to emphasize the point. I take a swig from the bottle in my right hand, as a show of support. Partly for mirrored synchronicity, partly for practicality, because the bottle in my left hand’s almost empty.

“We should turn the lights up,” he says.

“No, no, we turned them down so you could see the fishes.”

“Forget about the fishes. It wasn’t the light, they were in your head.” He makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a gasp. “Color streams everywhere.”

I’m confused. “Do you mean purple rivers? Or pink water?”

“When you move your hands, lines trail,” he explains.

“Not moving my hands.”

“When you lift up the bottle.”

“You’re right, I do keep moving my hands.” This strikes me as funny. I start laughing and then have to stop in case I fall over.

“Are you a friend of Sahala’s?”

“To borrow your words Logan, I’ll never be drunk enough, etcetera, etcetera. Wouldn’t be politically efficient to affiliate with Sahala at this time.” Taking another swig, I swirl the alcohol in an attempt to wash away the sour taste of sarcasm.

“You know for someone with a whispered history of Sensory Splicing, you’re pretty together.”

“Your history’s not so calm either.”

“Touché,” he concedes.

A swarm of info-flyers cruise past the window, killing the conversation. We watch until they loop out of sight around the building.

“Bloody late night action. Don’t they ever sleep?”

“You know why they’re curious.” I wait a beat, but he doesn’t respond. “Come on, it’s a valid avenue of enquiry. The only two conceptualists with no immediate living biological family.”

“Interesting to the info-addicted.” He takes another swig. “Not so much for the economically conscious. Kind of abstract.”

“A link is a link is a link!” Yelling at the ceiling makes me think about the ceiling in Grey’s room, and what Logan said. Pieces of a puzzle. “Why does she pretend?”

“Pretend?”

“That it’s all just ideas.”

After a pause, he says, "I think it comforts her, communicating on a purely human level. Slow it down, simplify, speak. These things make her happy."

"She's not happy."

"No, but who is?"

I take a while to mull that over. "Had sex with her?"

"Course not."

"You're addicted in a whole different way." I try looking at the view. "Her skin's so smooth. Do the windows open?"

"Course not."

"Want to ask me a challenging question?" I'm feeling generous. The conversation's not so bad. The night's not so bad. The alcohol's very good.

"What are you doing here?"

"You know what I'm doing here."

"No, I know why other people want you to be here. Why did you come?"

Shaking my head, I take another swig.

"Met the dragon. Is he—"

"Sh!" I hold an unsteady finger to my lips. "Not talking about it."

"That's right. Cause we're—"

"—never drunk enough to answer the question!" I finish for him. "Have another drink."

He gulps a large mouthful, spilling some on himself, and I take a mouthful to keep him company. Around us the room's too quiet. With the lights so low it's like being locked in a glamorous cave. "We need to move."

"What are you suggesting?"

My mind runs through the possibilities, although the pace of my thoughts is closer to a jog than a sprint. "If the windows open we can climb."

Logan considers the idea. Encouraged, I keep going. "Or we could free fall."

“Char’s got the whole building wired. Anything falling inside the zone, instant gravitational suspension.”

“There’s this device that will bypass security. Very sophisticated; has the best attachment, only kicks in when adrenalin peaks. Then it allows building security to register you, and voila, handy suspension. Problem is we’d be stuck in the air waiting to get released. Am sure Char would send someone, though.” Thinking through the logistics is difficult, what with the spinning. “Well, for you at least.”

“Wait, if you don’t panic or get excited, you eat dirt?”

“No one eats dirt. Packed it in the cupboard, let me dig it out.” Peering around the room highlights a slight problem with the plan. “Cupboard’s gone AWOL.”

“Doesn’t matter. Windows don’t open.” Logan actually sounds disappointed.

“This might break the surface.”

I throw the bottle in my right hand at the barrier. The full one. Fuck. Wrong bottle. The sound of shattering glass seems too loud, and that’s only the bottle. The still-intact window didn’t even notice the attempted violence.

“Bit dramatic, that,” murmurs Logan.

“No good. Too protected. Got a laser gun in here?”

He’s busy looking at the view. “Your life’s pretty wild.” Or maybe he’s looking at the glass fragments on this side of the view. Hard to tell.

“Not a question.”

“Guess not. Tired of it?”

“Are you?”

For a second I think he’s falling, then realize he’s lowering himself to the ground. Crawling toward me, he raises his bottle in the air. I lean forward to gently tap my own in salute, except the bottle goes the wrong way at first, and when they do meet there’s a smashing sound.

“Smashed, smashed, smashed,” he sings, before lying down.

Heading over to the table for more bottles proves a challenge. When I finally get there, I have to lean on the flat surface for a bit.

“Had enough yet?” Don’t want to open all the bottles if nobody else is drinking.

“It’s Char, Char, Char,” sings Logan from the floor.

He’s right. It is Char. “Where’d you come from?”

Char doesn’t say a word as he lifts Logan, sliding an arm underneath his torso in one easy motion.

“Goodnight Blurry,” I yell, “and goodnight Lover Man.”

“The next time you call me that, you’ll be dead.”

It’s not a threat, simply a statement of fact. Scary if I was sober. Luckily, I’m relatively drunk.

“Got it Char. Sorry Char.” I keep leaning on the table as the combined shapes move to the door. “One last question. Do you think she’s sane?” The blur stops moving. “I don’t mind, just wondered.”

We’re all allowed our idiosyncrasies,” Logan declares, nodding sagely. He starts laughing. “Why, do you think you are?”

Now I’m laughing too, even though it’s not funny. Then they’re gone, and I can’t get the cork out of the next bottle.

Pain pulls me awake. Mentally calling up some body readings, I check they’re all within okay ranges. A bit battered, but fine. No need for a medic.

“Just hung over,” I tell the pillow. Last night must have been too much for the tabs to handle. Probably those last few solo bottles.

“Sorry sir?”

Don’t know that voice. I turn my head to the side and get the general impression of a perky brunette standing a few feet away.

I wonder how long she's been there? Bits of last night's conversation drift by as I roll onto my side. "Sarah."

"Yes sir."

"Got any water?"

The glass is next to me before the sentence is finished. I drink all the water, hoping they've boosted it.

"To your specifications."

"Not telepathing?"

"No sir, just a guess. Logan has my clearance certificate and grading on file. He prefers the upper levels clean of uncontrolled mental activity."

I bet he does.

"Your tech also arrived to oversee the instillations, and your assistant contacted us this morning with general personal specifications for your comfort. He apologizes for the delay."

"Not his fault. Originally logged a later arrival." Mother's going away gift kicked in a lot faster, and harder, than expected. Staying vertical long enough to touch Grey was a bit of a challenge. I barely made it to the building.

Rolling onto my back, I wait for the pain to dull before coding some movements in the air to test the system. A stream of information shimmers into existence above me. I run through a few points, check my preferred filters are coded in, switching channels and settings a few times to be thorough. Logan's marked a handful of reports, but they're better read with a clear head.

"Would you like your tech sent up, sir?"

"No, it's all good." I'll log in properly later, once my private scramblers are accessed. Hopefully that'll keep Logan off my info trail for a while.

The sound of someone else moving around the room has me flinching. God, don't let that be Grey.

Sitting up, I find the space transformed, the mayhem from yesterday gone. A few bright pieces of metal here and there

suggest a lot of equipment's been installed while I was out cold. They must have sound-sealed the area around the bed while they worked.

"Good morning sir." A young guy moves to stand beside Sarah.

What did Logan say? "Simon, right?"

"Yes sir."

Around the same age as Sarah, his hair is also dark and thick, but while she wears hers in a long, polished sheet, his strands are cropped short and close to the skull.

"All the tech specifications given so far are in place. Is there anything else you immediately require?"

They both have striking light green eyes, like cats, which reminds me. "Some color in here would be good." I can't take much more of the gray.

"We did check with your assistant, but he suggested we confer with you first," says Simon. "He provided a complete interior history of your primary residencies around the globe, if you would like them emulated in any way."

I smile languidly at Sarah, and while she doesn't blush, a slight flush of color appears around the collar of her shirt. My eyes wander all the way down.

"Contact Takosh's team. Let him do whatever he wants. My limitations are outlined in his files."

Simon taps his left palm, making a neat note on the receptors, I'm sure, of every syllable spoken. When he looks back up, I offer an echo of the smile I gave Sarah. Like his counterpart, he's too professional to blush, but the same telltale color tints his throat.

Sarah moves to stand beside him. Glancing from one to the other, I note the same kind of beauty; similarly strong bodies, despite her curves and his wide shoulders, like a matching set.

"Are you two twins?"

"Yes sir."

That Logan is one sick bastard.

The killer headache pounds, reminding me I stored last night's experiences in short-term synapse files. "Actually, I'd appreciate it if you could send my tech up."

I want to process Logan's answers more carefully later on, check them against any vital signs that might have seeped through his filters. Not many, I'm guessing. He's almost as heavily coded as I am, but a few of the readings could lead somewhere, especially when the conversation got a little diverse.

"Let me know when Grey's ready to eat."

"Sorry?"

Simon seems confused. Not surprising, considering the aura of isolation Grey's nurtured for herself within the building.

"Logan's organized for me to breakfast with Grey each morning. Make a note on the schedule."

"She's not here, sir," ventures Sarah.

"Not here?"

"She went out this morning," says Simon.

"Out?" I stare at him like he's switched to a nationalized dialect. "Out where?"

He gestures at the window I tried to turn into an exit last night. The bits of broken bottle are gone and not even a hint of stale alcohol scents the air. Everything around the powerful is always so clean.

"Out there."

I realize he's pointing toward the city.
