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1 – Lower City

Skye – Tuesday, 10:57pm.

Mmm-mmm-mmm.

It didn't matter if you'd been working there the whole night; Velvet Crumble bakery always smelled wonderful, with its fresh pastries and loaves of bread, all baked daily.

It was hard work that went underpaid, but it was still a decent job, considering the location.

Skye sauntered out of the washroom and checked the clock. 10:58pm, two minutes before he was off his closing shift. All of his duties had been finished up, so he opted to leave then and there rather than waiting the last two minutes out.

Let's get this over with. He turned the lights off and headed to the exit.

As he opened the glass door, Skye checked left and right. Nothing suspicious. He slipped outside, quickly blending in to the flow of pedestrians around him.

He pulled the hood of his coat up. Not only did it help hide his identity, but the ever-present rainy mist from the upper city had already begun soaking into his messy, brown hair. His job had him inside for most of the afternoon hours, so daylight was a luxury, even though the “daylight” was merely a set of poor, imitation floodlights beaming down from the base of the upper city.

But it didn't bother him too much. He'd lived in the Miyatama's lower city long enough to accustom himself to the gloomy environment.

Guided by floating street lamps, neon storefronts, and holographic advertisements lining the walkways, Skye broke away from the crowds with a brief detour. The western road would take him to the ultraloop station that'd bring him home, but one of his favourite food stalls was only a few seconds north in a commercial district brimming with activity.

The street was known simply as 67-40, and the scent in the air was *amazing*. With every inhale, Skye got a whiff of various meals from several different ethnicities. No vehicles were allowed; the entire area was for pedestrians only.

Probably the only good part of the city.

Surprisingly, there were only two others waiting in line at his booth of choice, even at this time of night. *Not bad*. He could afford it; an extra minute or two in public wouldn't hurt. Plus, he'd been saving up for his monthly special meal for Cassandra. He lined up in front of Adeline Box, keeping his head down until it was his turn in line.

Seconds felt like minutes standing alone in plain sight. But he braved it. For her.

Soon, it was his turn, and he stepped up to the front of the stall.

"Hi, what would you like?" One of the chefs asked Skye, already pulling out a clean wok for one of the other chefs in the back.

"Can I get two pad thai specials?"

"Yes, 950 srakna."

A little expensive, but not egregious. Skye pulled out his wallet and handed him two bills, each for 500 srakna. "Keep the change."

“Thank you.” The chef accepted the money with a smile, tucking it into a register underneath the front of the booth, before putting on a pair of sterile gloves and joining his partner in the tiny kitchen.

Waiting in front of the glowing food stall felt like being on centre stage with a spotlight cast on him. Skye was torn between keeping a vigilant eye out by maniacally looking around every two seconds, or staying put with his head down. He chose the latter.

The two chefs quickly communicated back and forth in a foreign language as noodles and vegetables sizzled in the woks, filling the area with the delicious, savoury scent of Thai food.

Moments later, the chefs arranged the food in two compact boxes, bagged them, and presented them to Skye.

“Thanks!” Skye took them and power-walked back to his original route on the western road, blending into the crowds as soon as possible.

As the clock ticked onward, the density of the pedestrians around him slowly dwindled. By 11pm, the streets would almost be dead silent – an eerie juxtaposition to the currently bustling roads. It wasn't a situation he wanted to be caught in, given his circumstances.

Although the crowds offered him some level of anonymity, the ultraloop would be still have a fair amount of passengers. He could opt to wait until the near silence at around 11pm, but it was a risk he wasn't willing to take.

Skye approached the ultraloop station and branched off from the others again, making his way down the stairs to the underground passage.

Wide open, well lit, and only two large pillars in the middle of the ultraloop platform. By far, he felt the most vulnerable here. With very few faces to hide behind, he sat down on one of the benches against the central pillars. Head down, as usual.

Thankfully, with the sheer speed the hyper-speed train moved at, he didn't have to wait long; a loud *whirr* echoed from down the tunnel next to the platform, and the ultraloop shuttle came to a quick stop at the station.

The doors opened, and Skye rushed in to be among the first to board.

So far, so good. He quickly found a cushy window seat. Nobody sat beside him, allowing him a moment of solace. The ultraloop played a series of chimes before announcing its destination, arrival time (only a minute until his stop), and reminding everybody to lower their safety harnesses for the ride.

It was hard to tell when the shuttle began moving, aside from the shuttle's engines quietly humming throughout the cabins. The AZ-Gravitas technology used on the ultraloop – widely advertised and common knowledge to the layman – completely removed the sensation of acceleration, allowing the shuttle to change speeds at otherwise dangerous rates.

One look out the shuttle's window showed the tunnel zipping by in an utter blur,

despite resting at a total stop mere seconds prior; Skye couldn't look outside for long without risking motion sickness. He just kept his head down and waited for the chime.

Bing, bong. Moments later, the ultraloop came to a stop.

On cue, Skye rose from his seat and shuffled over to the ultraloop's exit. He exited behind a small group of people, two of whom were a pair of adorable, light purple, humanoid robots.

Skye cracked a smile, if only for a moment.

He rushed past the other people and hopped up the underground station's stairs to return to the streets. His home was only a few roads away, and he didn't plan on wasting any more time. Plus, he was hungry.

The quasi-residential district was much less inviting than the commercial streets. The buildings looked similar to the others – sleek, metallic, and tall – but they lacked the colour and vibrancy of the bustling crowds and neon lights. Not to mention the piles of garbage lining the sidewalks, the boarded up storefronts, and the occasional drug dealer hovering around the featureless intersections.

No dealers, tonight, though. Just a pair of guys toking next to an abandoned shop. Despite their outwardly jovial disposition, Skye cautiously crossed to the other side of the road.

59-39, a nearby street sign read. Skye's home was one road over, at 58-39. *So close, yet so*

far; his home was only minutes away, but he'd be trekking through the worst parts of town.

Turning the street corner was always a tense moment. Only a block or so away was his home. Aside from a couple more people on the opposite side of the street, he couldn't see anyone else around him.

No. Someone *was* behind him. The distinct rustling of clothes caught his attention. He reeled around—

Skye flew into the building next to him, recoiling from the impact of something on his head. He bounced off the tinted window and hit the ground on his side.

Someone was standing above him. Messily quaffed hair, denim jacket and green shirt: it was *him*.

He planted his foot down on Skye's chest. Skye grunted in pain.

“I'm getting fuckin' tired of all this wait-waiting around, motherfucker.” The man pulled out a handgun from a concealed holster, and he pointed it at Skye's face.

Skye didn't struggle or fight back. He stared up at the man through narrowed eyes, trying to catch his breath through clenched teeth.

“You don't get me my goddamn cash by the end of the week, you're fucked, cunt.” He rattled the gun. “Pop your *fuckin'* dome clean off. 79,000 srakna by Sunday or your bitch ass is goin' under. You fuckin' got it?”

“Y-yep,” Skye groaned.

“Last *fucking* warning.” He put the gun away back under his coat, and scraped his boot off on Skye's chest. He adjusted his coat and casually walked off, as if the encounter hadn't even happened.

Skye slowly brought himself up to his feet. With shaky hands, he brushed himself off and looked around, desperately hoping nobody saw what happened. Indeed, he now seemed to be alone, aside from that shark sauntering off in the distance.

His head was ringing and pounding. It wasn't the first time he'd had a gun pointed at him, but the idea of his life ending in an instant was something he'd never get used to. He put a hand on the side of his head where he'd been hit. *No blood... was it just a punch? Damn... that was a metal hand, for sure...*

He looked down; his bag of pad thai had fallen sideways on the ground. One of the boxes had opened up and spilled on the sidewalk, but the other seemed to be intact on closer inspection.

“Fuck.” Skye put the intact box back in the bag and lifted it up, flicking off a couple stray noodles into the pile of ruined food. “Fuck...”

He wasn't fond of littering, but the place was already such a dump that he didn't care all that much. Stray animals and rodents would get to it well before it spoiled, anyways.

Not even a block away, Skye's home was now in sight. Or, not his *home*, but the tiny alcove between two neighbouring buildings that led to his home, just as plain and metallic as the rest. He

ran across the empty street, straight towards the alcove.

Double checking to make sure nobody was watching him, he slipped inside. After approaching his door, he entered an eight digit security code on the door's keypad, and the lock clicked open.

Skye placed his palm on the door handle. He shut his eyes and creased his brow, exhaling sharply through his teeth. Several seconds passed before he pushed the door open.

He walked into the dining room and locked the door behind him. "Hello! I'm home!" he called out in a voice filled with elation, fighting past his aching head.

"Skye! You're home!" A young girl's voice enthusiastically replied. Footsteps pattered through the house until Cassandra, Skye's younger sister, met him in the dining room, wearing navy blue pajamas. "How are you?"

"Ahh... I'm okay." He smiled. "Feeling better now that I'm home. How about you?"

"How come you're all dirty?" Cassandra asked, ignoring Skye's question.

"Oh, that?" He looked down at his sullied coat and jeans. "I tripped and fell when I was coming home. No big deal! But hey, guess what I got?" Skye lifted the bag of food up onto the table.

"Mmm...!" Cassandra put a finger on her chin. "Pasta!" she shouted, dramatically holding her finger in the air.

"Close! Any other guesses?"

“Noodles!!” she triumphantly cheered.

“Yeah!” Skye pulled the box out of the bag and placed it at the edge of the table for Cassandra. “Ah, shoot... we'll have to use one of the forks we have here. I forgot to get utensils.”

“It's okay. I like forks, anyways.”

Skye set her up with the box of pad thai and a fork at the table. “Okay, eat up so you can get a good sleep tonight. I have to go take a shower now. Then it'll be bedtime after that.”

“Okay...” Cassandra's tone noticeably drooped. “Are you going to eat too?”

“Not tonight. I'll get something a little later. Sorry.”

“Aww... okay.” She dug into the pad thai without any further hesitation.

Skye stepped away from the table. Just to the right of the dining room was the living room, furnished with a flatscreen television, a pair of small couches, and a Serrako game console lying on the floor with two controllers attached. Not a window in sight, which was a welcome design choice for Skye.

On the left side of the living room was a small hallway with a closet, washroom, and two bedrooms: first Cassandra's, then Skye's at the end of the hall.

He slipped into his cluttered room for a quick second to grab the clothes sitting on the dresser next to the door – loose slacks and a baggy shirt. He then shut his door and made his way into the bathroom.

Skye flicked the light on and let out a deep breath. He stripped down, walked into the glass shower booth, and turned the water on.

“Ahh, shit, shit,” he hissed as the cold water hit him. He awkwardly crouched in the corner of the shower as he waited for the water to warm up.

Surprisingly, it didn't take longer than 20 seconds. *Hydro plants must be having a good one today.*

As the water heated up and steam began rising throughout the room, he shut his eyes and relaxed his muscles, washing the streets off both his mind and body.

2 – Daily Outing

Wednesday, 10:04am.

Skye sat down at his computer. After waiting for the screen to flicker to life, he checked his social media for any activity.

He had very few followers (about 15), but most were close friends he interacted with on a regular basis.

“anyone else still feeling rattled about Volons? I know they said they were cleared out of miyatama but,” read Skye's last post from a day prior.

“Kinda. That incident at Maroon was shocking” replied Saviour_Blue (better known as Skye's friend, Wrench).

“no” replied another friend, Ray, under the scholarly moniker of fucktowntyrant.

Skye scrolled down a bit more to see another comment from Saviour_Blue. “It's only been three months but I haven't seen anything weird around my shop. Idk about you. It's still creepy tho.”

Before he could start typing a reply, a *knock knock* was heard from the front door. “I'll get it!” he called out. Slinging his coat over his shoulder, Skye walked out of his room, to the dining room, and checked the peephole in the front entrance to confirm the visitor's identity.

He opened the door. “Morning, Kaori,” he greeted her with a smile.

“Morning, Mr. Devereaux.” Kaori – a prim woman with straight, black hair, dark skin,

and a long pea coat – stood at the doorway, with two textbooks held against her hip.

“Come on in,” Skye invited her, stepping aside.

“Certainly, thank you.” She walked inside and removed her shoes and coat.

“Cassandra!” Skye shouted. “Teacher's here.”

“Wooo,” could be quietly heard from Cass's room. She pattered down the hallway towards the dining room moments later. “Hi Ms. Bach!” she exclaimed upon seeing Kaori.

“Hey, little lady. How are you?” Kaori asked.

“Good!”

“That's fantastic to hear!” Kaori turned to Skye. “It'll be an average length session today. Three hours total, I'm estimating?”

“Oh, I'll be back way before then. What are you guys going over today?”

“Math and English.” Kaori placed her textbooks on the table and shuffled through one of them. “I can't remember where we were with math, but I think we're starting on some more advanced grammar for English.”

“Sounds to me like Cass is going to be a genius in no time.”

Kaori chuckled. “I think I agree!”

Cassandra smiled from ear to ear.

“Study hard, Cass! I'll be back in a while.” Skye put his coat on and made off to the front door.

“I will! Bye Skye,” she replied.

“You two take care. I'm a phone call away if you need me.”

“Excellent, thank you. Be safe,” Kaori advised.

“Yep, no worries.” Skye opened the door and walked outside.

The “rain” was pouring harder than yesterday, thus, Skye made a point of hustling under as many awnings and overhangs as possible. Even his hooded coat couldn't fully protect him from the misty downpour.

He didn't waste any time slipping out of the quiet streets he lived in, either. He didn't expect that shark to make a return so soon after last night, but waiting around was still unnecessary risk to take.

Plus, for his day off, he had a friend to meet for some grocery shopping – someone he'd feel *far* safer around.



Skye spotted him before long. Seeing as his friend's abode was only a ten minute walk, meeting up with him didn't take much longer than that.

Standing at the corner of a furniture store with crossed arms was a tall, buff robot, black and grey all over except for some bright green markings and matching rave pants. He also wore a black shirt with plain white text simply reading “leggy.”

“Ray,” Skye shouted at the robot, pointing a couple fingers at him.

The bot turned to face him. Ray's appearance was already unmistakable, but the cat ears, screen face, and jagged lower jaw served as further confirmation as he looked at Skye.

“Sup, fuck,” his deep, mechanical voice acknowledged Skye. They walked towards each other and slammed their right hands together in a powerful handshake, before giving each other a very brief hug.

“Ahh, not much. You?”

“Balling incredibly hard every goddamn minute of my life.”

Skye laughed. “Yeah, that's about it, huh.”

“Every day.”

“All right, let's get going.”

Destination: groceries. With a powerful friend by his side, Skye could actually keep his head up for once, rather than constantly trying to hide his identity.

They waited at the corner of a block, right at an intersection. Traffic was heavy, but the large majority of the vehicles were industrial tankers and cargo trucks; civilian vehicles were a luxury in Miyatama's lower city.

Soon, they got the signal to cross the road.

“So, like, dude...” Skye began, “you're not worried about those volons at all? I saw your reply to my post.”

“No? Even if there are any left in the city, what's some feral shitbag gonna do to me?”

“Okay, fair, but... if there are some left, what about the rest of us?”

“They said they cleaned up the incident at Maroon and left none alive.”

“You believe that?”

“Not really.”

Skye hummed. “I guess it would probably be a pretty big deal if any more appeared. But... it's been three months since that big news flash...”

For him, it was disquieting. And for the general populace, the unexpected arrival of not one, but *two* alien species had everyone at least a bit unnerved. Groups of lower class citizens bunched up around electronics stores showing the latest news were no longer an uncommon sight.

Volons – the much more outwardly violent of the two – seemed to emerge from the Maroon facility in Miyatama months prior, but the others...

Skye and Ray paused their conversation momentarily as they passed by a steady stream of pedestrians on the other side of the road. The juxtaposition was appalling: some were decorated with fancy electronic gadgets and biological augments visible to the naked eye, but some were notably down on their luck, wearing nothing more than old, tattered rags and worn-down clothes.

Humbling.

“What do you think about the genofexians?” Skye began again, referring to that other alien species.

“Not much.”

“You don't think much of them...?”

“I don't know.” Ray grunted. “As long as they don't try to kill us, I don't really care.”

“R... really?!”

Ray looked right at Skye.

“I can't even begin to list off all the things we could gain from meeting an alien race like this!” Skye exclaimed. “Like... the culture, the technology, the knowledge...”

“Just not my thing. You know me,” Ray dismissed him.

“I... guess. It's hard for me to fathom not being super stoked for this...! I mean, it could change everything, you know?”

“More power to you, mate. Glad you're happy for a change, whatever the reason is.”

Ray's lackluster response kinda bummed Skye out a bit.

The duo's go-to store for cheap food was just a corner away; the sign above its entrance had succumbed to years of wear and tear, thus, they weren't even sure if it had a name. To them, it was just a convenient corner store.

Ding-ding. A small bell next to the door chimed as they walked inside. Skye wiped his wet shoes off on the welcome mat.

The musty, worn-down shop smelled strongly of lilac and bleach. Not the best place to shop, but the prices were better than most places, even if the selection was comparatively small. Plus, it was quiet enough to not attract huge crowds.

Ray led Skye down an aisle, aimlessly looking around at the products on the shelves, hoping to spot a juicy sale.

“I got someone in my life,” Ray spoke up.

“Hm?” Skye looked over to him. “What do you mean?”

“A partner.”

“Fuck off. *You?*”

“Yeah. His name's Gyroloop.”

“Well damn, dude, tell me about him.”

“Heh.” Ray looked off to the side. “Scrawny little white twink with a security camera for a head. Kinda squirmy.”

“...Squirmy?”

“Easy to get under his skin. It's real cute.”

Skye chuckled, looking a tad concerned. “You don't treat him badly, do you?”

“Course not. Shit, what do you take me for? Heartless bloke that's all brawn and no brains?” He turned to face Skye, who didn't answer. “Well you'd be right. But that ain't mean I can't treat a man right.”

Skye smiled. “Yeah... I've never seen you with much of a soft spot.”

Ray grunted. “He's probably a good influence on me.”

“The bar's not particularly high there.”

“Fuck you, I'm not that bad.”

Skye stepped closer to Ray. “Yeah, I'm not the one wanted for *murder*,” he aggressively whispered.

Ray dismissively flicked his hand at Skye.

“Dude... that's, like, serious shit. I don't want my friend going away,” Skye continued.

“As if they care enough to catch me.”

“And what if they *do*?”

“Then I'll beat their skulls in.”

“Well... mmm.” Skye hopelessly dropped the topic. “So... what does Gyro do? How'd you meet?” he asked, inspecting nearby packages of instant noodles lined up neatly on the shelves.

“Heheh, I'll tell you the story of how we met when you meet him. I need to see his reaction.” He paused to scan the shelves along with Skye. “He works at Maroon. Human relations or something.”

“Maroon? Dude, explain to me how someone such as yourself gets involved with a white-collar “twink.” Please, enlighten me. Did you find him in a club or something?”

“Try the thresher district.”

“...Excuse me? Would you... would you mind repeating that for me there bud?”

“Try the thresher district.”

Skye rolled his eyes. “Okay, try elaborating, smart ass.”

“He got caught by this ragged motherfucker about to send him on a one way ticket to pissville. I actually heard him tell Gyro how much money his head was gonna make.”

“And... you saved him, I take it?”

“Thresher didn't have a face after I was done with him. Probably scared Gyro half to

death too. Least I got to feel like a good guy for once.”

Skye lowered his voice again. “Is that what the cops want you in for?”

“No.” Ray almost sounded proud.

“For god's sake, dude.”

While browsing the shelves, Skye reflected on what he knew of the thresher district. It was a series of streets owned by a gang of sorts, going by the titular district's name – the threshers. From what he'd heard, they were ruthless humans with penchants for disassembling robots and selling their parts in an underground market.

That's all he knew, and all he wanted to know; why Ray and Gyroloop were there was something he didn't exactly feel inclined to inquire about.

Skye snapped back to attention when he spotted some cans of precooked ravioli on one of the shelves. The electronic display showed 84 srakna for a can, down from 109. He considered loading his basket, but he knew the sale wouldn't last; as he took one of the cans off the weighted shelf, the price increased up to 86. He ended up taking three cans, leaving the product's final price at 90 srakna. Despite the “high supply, high value” marketing almost every store took advantage of, 90 srakna was still a respectable price compared to 109.

“Nice,” Ray plainly commented.

The two meandered down another aisle in their search for bargains.

“Ooh shit,” Ray continued as he made his way through the frozen section. “Pizzas.”

Skye watched Ray grab one, two, and eventually five frozen meat-lover pizzas from one of the freezers. He also watched the price change from 239 to 264 as the stock decreased.

After perusing the remainder of the shop, picking up a few miscellaneous groceries along the way (candies, instant meals), the two headed up to the elderly cashier who barely spoke a lick of English.

“Hi,” he plainly greeted Skye, who was up first.

“Hi,” Skye awkwardly replied.

His items were rung through the checkout and he paid with his credit card.

Ray went through next, but asked for “a box of Avarice Darks” before checking out. The cashier opened a cabinet behind him, pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and added it to Ray's items.

“Thank you,” he said to Ray after the transaction was complete.

“Yeh,” he replied.

Ding-ding chimed the little bell as they left the store, back into the chilly downpour outside.

“So I gotta ask,” Skye began, “does smoking do anything for you?”

“Dunno. I enjoy it.”

Skye wasn't sure how to prod any further than that.

“Not addicted or anything,” Ray continued. “Just takes the edge off.”

“If you say so. 'Cause, you eat food, right? I'm curious about the extent of how “biologically” you're designed to work. If that makes sense.”

“Dunno. Never really cared.”

“Yeah, figures. You're a real piece of work.”

“Damn right.” Ray took a smoke from his carton and lit it up.

Moments after they left the store, the holographic advertisement screens mounted on nearby sidewalks and buildings all changed to an amber and red colour scheme, with the words “EMERGENCY ALERT” displayed in capital letters next to a warning symbol.

“Oh shit.” Skye stopped in his tracks, prompting Ray to do the same.

The text faded away to show a missing persons report, along with a photograph of the person in question, and details of their last whereabouts.

“God damnit,” Ray huffed. They both continued walking.

“I wish they wouldn't scare us like that.”

“Just gonna ignore them from now on,” Ray declared. “Fuck's sake.”

“Mmm... there've been a lot of those reports lately. It's almost *daily* now.”

“Probably gang business.”

“But they wouldn't be missing people reports if it was, like, gang killings. Plus, in the last two weeks, none of those reports have been

robots. It's always humans. That weirds me out, man.”

“Then I got nothin' to worry about,” Ray boasted. “Guess I'll tell someone if I see them.”

Yeah, big talk for someone who never bothers looking at the reports.

They reached the intersection they crossed to get to the shop with perfect timing; the traffic light was red, thus, they crossed the street without delay.

“What are you gonna be up to today?” Skye asked.

“Same shit. Headin' to a club. Meetin' Wrench there.”

“Oh, nice! Say hi for me.”

“Don't wanna come yourself?”

“Nah... I've got something I need to work on at home.”

“Pussyyy. Yeh, I'll say hi to Wrench.”

“Yeah, you better.”

They soon approached the furniture store where they first met up.

“I'm goin' this way.” Ray pointed his thumb behind him, down the larger and more open street. “You dippin'?”

“Yeah, I gotta get working on my project today. Sooner rather than later.” Skye hesitantly glanced towards the darker and less populated street he came from.

“Catch ya later, then. Thanks for the shop.”

“No prob! Thank *you*. See you online later.”

“Yeh. Peace.” They gave each other a quick wave before splitting off in their own directions.

3 – Life Troubles

Wednesday, 6:28pm.

“First contact with aliens!”

“What we know about Genofexians”

“Aliens! Should we be scared?”

“How to tell if your friend is a Genofex”

“Genofexians and Volons: Are They Connected?!”

There was no escaping the sensationalized news about first contact. Every journalism website was picking up on the story, but Skye could hardly fault them – it was easily one of humanity's most historical moments. Sometimes Skye found it difficult to go about his everyday routine with something so massive looming over his entire race.

He squinted his eyes shut and told himself to piss off. This was *his* space, his place to wind down and focus on relaxing, not on world news.

Although his phone was still blinking with one unread voice mail, he tossed it on his bed and sat down in his computer seat, opening up a familiar chat program on the computer. The other two users in his most frequented group chat were online: “Saviour Blue” and “fucktowntyrant,” namely, Wrench and Ray. His A-team.

“yo” Skye typed.

Wrench replied quickly with a simple “hey.”

Evidently, Ray was busy, as he gave no reply.

“what's up?” Skye asked.

He had to wait a minute for a response.

“At the club with Ray. Prob can't talk much rn”

“right, you having a good time?”

“Wouldve been better with you.”

“Aww,” Skye said aloud. He was a bit disappointed he was missing hanging out with his friends, but there was something else that piqued his attention more than a party.

He spun his chair to face the right side of his desk, where he'd laid out an array of screws, wires, small pieces of electronics connected together, an elaborate brick of machinery he wasn't even remotely familiar with, and a cell phone.

“Youd rather work on your phone thingy than chill huh?” Wrench jabbed via chat.

Skye's heart skipped a beat. This was his chance to gush.

“i just feel like i'm getting really close to figuring *something* out!! i don't really know what though. but dude, i found out there's a continuous signal coming from somewhere that's affecting, like, all of miyatama. maybe more? don't know yet. but i THINK that could be what's making that message appear on everyone's phones.”

Skye turned on the cell phone on his desk. He tapped the messaging program and opened the only conversation he had on it: a very one-sided exchange with something named “madeakelor.” He scrolled up through the

message history – filled with dozens of messages from him, from “hello?” to “test” to “fdhfsrbgd” – until he reached the top.

He glared down at the only message he ever received from madeakelor: nothing. A blank message stared back at him, sent almost four months prior.

“NERD SHIT” replied Wrench, rather uncharacteristically.

Skye laughed. “yeah, hi ray,” he typed back.

“haha fucker”

“c'mon, give the phone back to wrench.”

“hes at the door talkin to some lost broad tht just walked in lol”

Skye prayed the club was in a half-decent neighbourhood for the broad's sake.

He turned to his project while he waited for Wrench to return, if that was even going to happen. His current tasks involved a lot of hardware rewiring and working his way through black market hackware with no documentation. Highly illegal, including the strange electronic machine on his desk, but he worried very little about being caught with it in a place like Lower Miyatama.

None of it had any documentation; given the price he paid for it all, he felt a touch ripped off. However, he had the basics of it down; his whole setup couldn't magically trace someone's phone down to a location, but it could give him detailed information about what any nearby wireless signals were saying, their duration of

transmission, strength, and a few other bits of various info.

And, as he'd explained to Wrench, some kind of radio signal was covering at least all of Miyatama. Although he didn't know when the signal started, he had a guess: four months ago, when "madeakelor" sent a blank text message to seemingly everyone he'd talked with since.

For Skye, it had grown from a curiosity into a fixation.

He exhaled a deep breath and looked back to his computer, minimizing the chat window to open up a video streaming website. He searched for "2200s classic Veirr league" and hit enter.

Tons of matching results appeared, so he clicked the first one that looked promising: a soccer match from the year 2278 between two relatively small teams, both hailing from Hallow's orbiting habitats.

It was nice background noise. Skye preferred having something other than the distant sounds of city life from outside, and Cassandra's cartoons in the living room weren't exactly the perfect substitute.

Occasionally, he'd hear Kaori walking around the house, probably preparing the rest of Cassandra's lesson. Their study time was the perfect opportunity for him to settle down for some quality time with his projects and online friends.

Knock knock. Someone was at Skye's door.

“Hey?” Skye responded as he quickly covered his tinkering project with a nearby sheet.

“Hi, it's me!” Kaori's smooth voice. “May I come in?”

“Oh, uh, sure!” He spun around in his chair to face the door.

“Hello,” Kaori greeted Skye with a smile on her face as she opened the door and walked in.

“Hey! Uh, sorry about the mess...” He anxiously looked around at the dirty clothes strewn about the floor.

“Oh, no no! It's not a problem.” She walked over to Skye's bed. “May I have a seat? I won't be terribly long.”

“Yeah! Go for it.” Skye cleared his throat as Kaori gently sat down on the squeaky mattress. “What's up?”

“Well... hm.” She lowered her voice. “It's about Cassandra. I... I have some... concerns.”

Skye raised his eyebrows. “O-oh? She's not misbehaving or anything, is she?”

“No, no! Nothing like that. Quite the opposite really; she's a joy to teach. But...” Kaori looked to the side. “I know this is not any of my business. And if I'm overstepping my bounds, please let me know, okay?”

“Mhm, sure.” Skye nodded.

Kaori leaned closer to Skye. “Have you considered... moving to a better place? As in... away from Miyatama?”

Skye looked down at his lap and took a deep breath. “I... yeah. It's been on my mind for a

while. It's just... money's kinda tight and all, and..."

"I understand, totally. And I know it's not my place to say, don't get me wrong!" Kaori raised her hands towards Skye. "Times are pretty tough down here. You know I love Cass to bits, but I just think... Lower Miyatama is—"

Skye nodded again. "I get you, I do. It's... really not a great place here. Especially not for someone as young as her. I try to give her the best I can, but it's... it's not easy. I guess I don't have to explain why." He gave a slight chuckle. "And! Don't worry about overstepping your bounds or anything. It's a valid concern. I don't like this place very much myself."

Kaori smiled again. "I'm glad we both feel that way. And by no means am I telling you to go shove off, but... for her sake, as well as yours, I'm glad you're considering your options." She put her hands on her lap.

"Yeah! It's... yeah. Not a problem. I'm definitely looking at my options, so... if anything comes up and we skip town, I'll let you know ahead of time."

"Marvelous, marvelous. Because, even just today," Kaori continued, lowering her voice further, "I saw a few shady characters off to the sides of your block. Now, don't worry about me! I know how to handle myself around these parts. But the idea of her getting hurt in some heinous act by this city's ne'er do wells... it terrifies me."

Skye was already plenty familiar with the thought.

“...Likewise,” he replied with a sigh. “I rarely let her go outside, especially not on her own, for that reason. But that's not fair to her either... I get that. She deserves more than this place. So... yeah. I'm looking into it.”

Kaori flashed another quick grin. “I'm glad to hear it. Really. Oh, before I forget, one other thing! Not terribly important, but I'm curious... does Cass know about the whole alien encounter stuff going around the news?”

Skye chuckled. “Keeping that from her would be an effort in futility with how *everywhere* the news is. Yeah, she knows, but thankfully she's more excited than scared.”

“Good! I could see that being a fun conversation topic with her.”

“For sure! We don't talk about them often, but when we do, it's always an good time. She'll ramble for hours speculating all about them. So, be careful opening Pandora's box, there.”

They both shared a laugh.

“Duly noted,” Kaori remarked as she stood up. “Well I appreciate the chat, Skye! I have to go get Cass ready for some more grammar lessons, but thank you for being so understanding about my worries.”

“No problem! Any time. If you need anything else, you know where I am.”

“Thank you, thank you.” She stepped outside. “Oh – door open or closed?”

“Closed, please.”

Click – she gently shut the door behind her.

“Okay, girly! Time to put the cartoons away,” Kaori announced from the hallway.

“Aww,” Cassandra whimpered, just barely audible from Skye's room.

Skye's stomach ached from stress. Kaori certainly didn't intend to cause it, but it happened nonetheless.

He looked over to his bed, over at the blinking blue light still coming from his phone. One voice mail. He knew who it was from, and he knew what it was about. But he sat still, staring over at it.

Tomorrow, he promised himself. *I can't keep putting it off.*

He looked back at his computer. His friends hadn't replied back yet, so he carefully lifted the sheet back off his project. *Time to focus, Skye.*

4 – An Unwanted Adventure

Wrench – Wednesday, 6:31pm.

Wrench and Ray both leaned against the nightclub's bar, taking a moment of respite after a full two straight hours of hard partying. The club's strobe lights continued flashing in sync with the booming music, much to the enjoyment of the ravers and partygoers living it up on the huge, open floor.

Nobody could be recognized in the crowd; almost everyone in attendance was wearing some form of LED lights, oversized cloaks with pointed hoods, masks, helmets, and even full character costumes. Even Ray was in black and green rave-wear, and Wrench was sporting orange and black clothes lined with several little chains.

It was the perfect place for Ray to unwind, and Wrench was always ready to go with the flow.

“What do you think?” Ray shouted over the music. “What's your verdict?”

Wrench hummed. “It's not my first pick,” they shouted back, “but this place isn't so bad. The location still sketches me out, but I dig this DJ.” They started gently nodding their head to the beat of the deafening, energetic beat. Their straight, bright cyan hair carefully swayed back and forth as they shut their eyes and smiled, taking a moment to embrace the music.

“We should've got Skye to come,” Wrench continued, somewhat disheartened.

“Tried,” Ray answered. “Too busy with his project. What a dork,” Ray laughed. “Can't believe he didn't want to come.”

“What!? I haven't seen him in weeks. I'll kick his butt.” Wrench made an exaggerated grumpy face. “I should chew his ass out,” they continued as they pulled out their phone from their jeans pocket.

“You messaging him? Let me at him too,” Ray demanded.

The phone had a few notifications blinking on the lock screen, one of which was a simple message from Skye, reading “yo.”

“Oh my god, there's the donut right now.” Wrench flashed a toothy smile across their face.

“No shit?”

“Yeah.” Wrench began typing something back. “He's just saying hey. Asking what's up.”

“Tell him to get his scrawny ass down here.” Ray commanded.

Wrench continued typing more messages; “At the club with Ray. Prob can't talk much rn,” followed up with “Wouldve been better with you” when Skye asked if they were having a good time.

As Wrench continued typing away, Ray reached into his pocket and pulled out a small carton of cigarettes along with a lighter.

Wrench glared at him. “You're gonna light up in here? You fuck?”

“Like anyone's gonna care.” Ray lit a cigarette and placed it snugly between his metal jaws.

“God damnit, dude. *I* do.” An irritated Wrench handed Ray their phone. “Talk to Skye for me. I'm gonna get some fresh air.”

“Heheh.” Ray happily accepted, immediately scanning through the flurry of messages Skye was sending, describing his passion project and how close he was to accomplishing *something*.

“NERD SHIT” Ray typed back with another hearty laugh.



As Wrench walked towards the relatively empty front door, a pale, visibly anxious woman shuffled inside, looking very out of place. She rapidly glanced around before making very brief eye contact with Wrench.

Don't talk to me, don't—

She stepped over to them. “I-I beg your pardon,” she began, grabbing Wrench's attention. “Can I ask you a question? It won't be long, promise.”

Fuck. “Uh, sure.” Wrench gave her an incredulous look. “What's... going on?”

“Do you know if there are any, umm... psychology... research... laboratories in this city?”

Wrench took a moment to process just how off-beat that question was. *What...? Research labs?*

“Uh... n-no? Other than Maroon, I guess.” They wanted to ask her just how lost she was, but couldn't muster the courage.

The woman's eyes lit up. “Okay, u-uhm... by any chance... do you know how to get there?”

“Nnnno, sorry.” Wrench was quickly becoming tense. “Are you... looking for something?”

“Well, I'm looking for a man named Carson Lowe.”

“Oh... okay.”

The lackluster reply caused a brief, awkward silence.

“I... don't know any Carsons,” Wrench finally continued.

“Okay. Th-thanks, and, thanks for your time.” The woman took a few steps away before confusedly looking around some more.

Wrench took a huge breath of air. *What... the hell... was that about?*

After waiting for the woman to blend in to the crowd, Wrench power-walked back over to Ray. “Did you see that?”

“Yeh.” Ray handed Wrench's phone back to them. “What did she want?” He almost sounded angry.

“She was lost, asked if I knew of any nearby psychology labs. Like... what?”

Ray tilted his head back. “Weird.”

“Apparently looking for someone named Carson. You know any Carsons?”

“Mmm, nah.” He took the cigarette from his mouth and exhaled a hefty cloud of smoke. “Heh. Labs? The fuck.”

Wrench grumbled. “I'm... gonna go get that air I wanted.”

“I'll be here.”

Wrench ambled back to the entrance, undisturbed this time around.

The club's interior was rather well-kept for a back-alley hot spot. However, the instant one stepped outside, the illusion of cleanliness was quickly stripped away.

Drug peddlers of questionable reputation, mooches looking for cheap sex, and illegal gambling setups all sat within thirty feet of one another, illuminated by the neon signs mounted atop every nearby building. It was the pinnacle of high culture in Lower Miyatama.

Despite this, the chilly outside air was still somewhat fresher than that inside the club, regardless of Ray's smoking. Wrench leaned up against an unoccupied wall next to the entrance and took in a deep breath in.

They put their hands in their pockets and contorted a strong glare across their face in an effort to deter any more strangers from striking up a conversation.

What the hell was that woman about? Wrench squinted. Psychology labs...? Who in their right mind would come here looking for a lab?

Their empty stomach proved to be a quick and sudden distraction. From their first visit with Ray two days prior, Wrench seemed to recall hearing about a 24-hour steak bar only a street away. It was far cleaner, both literally and legally.

Hmm. Ray oughta be down for a bite at this hour.

They stood outside for another minute, looking up at the tall buildings, enjoying the cool air, before walking back in to see Ray. No interruptions this time, either.

Still puffing away on his cig, Ray didn't even look when Wrench returned.

“Yo, do you wanna grab something to eat? Maybe that steak bar nearby,” Wrench suggested.

“It's two blocks away. You wanna walk that?”

“I wouldn't mind. Tummy's rumbly. You said it was a good place, right?”

Ray let out a long exhale. “Yeh. 'Kay, could do that. Gimme a minute first. Wanna chill some more.”

“Fiiine.”

Wrench leaned back against the bar again, this time a couple feet farther from their friend, clear of most of the smoke.

The DJ transitioned to another track with a much faster pace, coupled with quick, high-pitch vocals singing incomprehensible, spliced words in tune with the uplifting melody. The dancers erupted with cheers and shouts, getting down to the beat's new pace.

Wrench was rather fond of it. Crossing their arms, they couldn't help but bob their head and tap their foot, trying to look cool alongside their rather tough friend.

“Ah, fuck. Fuck. Yo, let's bounce.” Ray suddenly smacked Wrench on the shoulder.

“What? Why? What's up?”

Ray nodded towards the club's entrance.

“Huh?” Wrench took a long, hard look at the front doorway, though it was hard to identify anyone over one of the ubiquitous crowds that had migrated in front of the main entrance.

Ray put out his cigarette on a nearby ashtray and grabbed Wrench beneath the shoulders, lifting them up in the air.

“Whoa, what the hell—!”

“Look,” Ray ordered.

Wrench looked over at the door again.
“Oh.”

Stepping into the building was a group of six or seven people all in the same outfit: a lightly armoured body lined with bright red LEDs, and a distinctly insectoid, full-face helmet, complete with hexagonal eyes and two tall antennae. People near them discreetly shuffled away, but most others didn't take any notice.

“Threshers?” Wrench asked.

“Mmm.” Ray put Wrench down. “*Let's bounce.*”

“They wouldn't screw with us, would they? Not in such a public space?”

“Seen them EMP a bunch of bots on the street who were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Don't matter there were a trillion witnesses. Threshers. Don't. Give. No. Fucks.”

“Shit.” Wrench almost looked impressed, were it not for the fear written across their face.

“They hate me, too.” Ray smirked.

“What do you mean they hate you?”

“I fuck with 'em too much. They want me dead and disassembled.”

“And you wanna leave when they've got the only entrance covered? Maybe we could just keep a low profile til we can get out...?” Wrench was, clearly, still quite skeptical.

“Ain't the only entrance. C'mon.” Ray grabbed Wrench by the arm and hastily tugged them towards the back of the building, to the left of the bar.

“Where are you taking me? Hey!”

“Backrooms. Got an exit back there.”

“Yo, hold up! That's staff only back there; we're gonna get shot!”

“Not gonna get shot, you fuckin' dweeb. You rather those cunts snatch your ear?” Ray pointed his thumb back at the front door, letting go of Wrench's arm.

Wrench frowned and touched their left ear – the only mechanical part of their body. “Not my ear,” they overdramatically pouted.

“So let's go.” Ray began marching towards the staff doors at the back of the club. “Rather get flayed by a club boss than some shit gang.”

“Very reassuring!” Wrench sarcastically remarked. Am I seriously about to go along with this? I thought he was supposed to be the chill one of the group. They begrudgingly followed close behind.

Most of the partygoers were busy elsewhere in the room, and the scant security had

their eyes on the larger crowds. Ray took the chance to make his move.

The first door he tried was unlocked. He opened it rather carefully, guiding Wrench through, before shutting it behind them in the same manner.

It was significantly quieter the moment Ray closed the door behind them. The building clearly had impressive soundproofing; even the bass trembling through the walls and floor was muffled.

Ahead of them was a tall, narrow hallway with noticeboards on the right wall, and a kitchenette just on the left. As the two trudged forward, the hall branched in two directions: straight forward, and right. Forward only had a pair of washrooms on the left side, so Ray took Wrench down the right path.

“Threshers probably ain't comin' in here unless they saw me. Can take it easy now.” Ray slowed his pace down to a casual walk.

“Take it easy? We're not supposed to be here!” Wrench growled.

Someone exited one of the washrooms just as they turned the corner.

Shit dick, we're screwed. Wrench looked back at the junction to see a scruffy man peering back at them, more curious than upset.

“Yo,” Wrench slapped Ray with the back of their hand. “Behind,” they whispered.

Ray turned around to see the person. He nodded and threw horns with one of his hands.

The man nodded back before carrying on with his business.

“Just act like you belong,” Ray said.

Wrench peered ahead of Ray down the narrow corridor; a small 3-step staircase was ahead of them, leading to a door protected by one robot guard.

Is this the DJ booth?

The guard definitely noticed them, but she hadn't moved an inch or said a word.

Wrench punched Ray in the side. “Yeah, now what, genius?” they aggressively whispered.

Ray stopped in his tracks and looked back at Wrench, whose eyes suddenly lit up. “Let's ask for help,” they suggested.

“The fuck?” Ray whispered back.

“Pretend we're lost, just like that woman. Ask for the nearest exit.”

Ray looked up as if in thought.

Not like we're really pretending, anyway.

“Let me do this.” Wrench quickly shuffled ahead of Ray and approached the robot guard.

The bot looked down at Wrench with a powerful gaze.

“Excuse me, we're... just a little tiny bit lost. Could you show us the nearest exit?”

“Mhm. I'll escort you; you two aren't supposed to be back here. This area is for employees only. Move along,” she said, ushering them back down the hall, descending the stairs to guide them along.

Wrench breathed a sigh of relief, but Ray didn't seem to have much reaction at all. However, they both fully cooperated.

“Left,” the guard instructed.

They backtracked down the hall they'd come from, through the junction, until they got back to the kitchenette—

BANG, POP-POP, CRACK. From out in the main room, some incredibly loud noises blasted over the booming music; not gunshots nor firecrackers, but they certainly weren't normal sounds to hear at a nightclub.

Dozens of screams and shouts followed shortly after.

“Fuck,” Ray shouted.

“What was that?” Wrench asked.

“Take a guess.”

The guard started pushing Wrench along. “Up there. Door. Move!” she commanded. She pointed to a corner of the kitchenette that was hardly visible when they entered the staff area, which had a door, plain as day.

“Okay, I'm going, I'm going!” The two hustled across the tiny kitchen as the guard rushed past them, darting out the door they initially came through.

Ray opened the door to be greeted by a filthy alleyway along with its crisp city air.

“Whew! Uh, good call, huh?” Wrench commented.

“Threshers. Don't. Give. Fucks,” Ray repeated. “Bet you 200 srakna it was the threshers that caused the scene.”

“I'd rather just take your word for it...”

Nothing else was in the alley, except for soggy trash bags and overflowing dumpsters.

“Let's get out of here,” Wrench continued as the two jogged through the alley. One of the main streets was only a couple dozen feet ahead.

“Never lucky,” Ray mumbled. “Can't just chill and have a good time nowadays.”

“Didn't you say *you* were the one who fucked with them in the first place?”

“Ain't why they hit that club. Woulda come straight for us. Or, straight for me.”

“I guess. So, running from gangs: that's not, like, a normal day in the life of Ray?”

“Lately it is. Fuckers getting more bold everyday.”

“Doesn't sound good...”

“It ain't. Why I like fuckin' with them. Keeps those shit stains on their toes.”

Wrench opted not to comment.

They both reached the open streets, where ordinary pedestrians were walking about, and motorbikes of several varieties were either riding or parked nearby.

“Looks like we're in the clear.” Wrench checked behind themselves, just to make sure. “Yeah.”

“How 'bout that bite?” Ray suggested.

“W-what? Right when a bunch of threshers are active not even a block away?”

“Eh.” Ray shrugged. “I'm hungry.”

“You are the most self-destructive cocksucker I have ever met.”

“So? Comin' or not?”

Wrench grumbled and looked to the side.

“I'm getting mine to go.”

“Whatevs. Chill at my place after?”

“Yeah... all right.”

5 – Robots and Remites

Ray kicked his foot up against the wall just beside the front door to his abode, propped up like a bouncer to a VIP club. Wrench had decided to take a quick detour before coming over, so he waited outside for his friend to arrive. It gave him a good chance to keep an eye out for any suspicious characters.

Only a couple minutes after he'd leaned back, just as he was about to light up a cigarette, Wrench walked around the nearby street corner. They waved to Ray as they quickened their pace, with an ice cream cone in their other hand.

“Yo!” they called out.

Ray nodded, stoic as ever. “Ice cream?” He put the smoke back in the carton.

“Cotton candy flavour!” Wrench grinned. “Dude, it's so good.”

“Heh heh. C'mon.” Ray opened the door and they both walked in.

Wrench was immediately bombarded by the vile scent of smoke. It wasn't just the entrance, either; the entire apartment smelled like an ashtray.

“Dude...” Wrench began, pulling their shirt up over their nose, “this place smells horrid.”

Ray grunted. He stepped over to the living room window, brushed the burgundy curtains aside, and opened the window. “It ain't that bad.”

“It's so bad.”

“Hey. Been laying off since my man started staying over. Opening windows and shit. Better than it used to be.”

Wrench grimaced, slowly uncovering their nose so they could continue eating their ice cream. “Oh yeah... you told me you had a significant other.”

“Yeh. He's here right now.”

“O-oh!” Wrench froze up. They weren't sure if they were eager or anxious about meeting Ray's new boyfriend. “I... I didn't know!”

As Ray tidied up the living room, Wrench had a chance to take a look around. It had been months since their last visit, but everything was still the same: kitchen on the left with a miniature dining table covered in magazines and empty take-out boxes, living room on the right with a leather couch and TV (somewhat cleaner than the kitchen), and a hall down the middle where the bedrooms and washrooms were located.

It was remarkably similar to Skye's suite, with some added filth. *Maybe this is just a standardized layout?* Wrench wondered.

They meandered around between the living room and kitchen, taking a good look at everything, quickly concluding that, no, nothing had changed at all.

Wrench glanced down the hall and suddenly found themselves in a staring contest with a half-naked remite: a human in every sense of the word, except their head was some kind of inanimate object. This one had a security camera for a head.

“Aah! Ray!” the remite exclaimed, darting off to a nearby room. “You didn't tell me we were having company!”

“Sorry. We're having company,” Ray said.

“Well, gee!” He shut the door to the room he'd entered.

“Oh my god, Ray, you don't tell anybody anything!” Wrench looked away with a silly smile on their face. “That's your new ride?”

“Yeh. Name's Gyroloop. He's cute.” Ray raised his voice. “Kinda squirmy, too.”

“Am not!” Gyroloop shouted from his room.

“Am so!” Ray responded in kind, walking over to the kitchen.

Wrench laughed. Their nerves over meeting someone new were quickly calming.

They went over to the living room and plopped themselves down on the lengthy couch that curved around the whole room. Opposite the couch was a huge, flatscreen TV, alongside two game consoles sitting beneath a mess of cords. And, just beside the TV was a laptop propped up on a TV tray table, and a cheap looking seat just before it.

Wrench generally didn't see Ray as much of a computer person. *Gyroloop's computer, maybe?*

“Want a beer?” Ray asked as he opened the fridge.

“I'm okay, thanks.”

“Aiiight.” He pulled a can out for himself and joined Wrench in the living room before long.

Ray sat down and spread his arms out along the top of the couch. “Always good to be back.”

“Yeah,” Wrench replied, but without as much conviction. “I wouldn't have minded staying longer, but...”

“Yeh. Same.” Ray cracked open his beer and took a swig.

“Yeah.” Wrench nibbled around the edges of their ice cream cone.

A door down the hallway opened. Footsteps approached the living area; Wrench braced for impact.

There came Gyroloop, fully dressed this time around, in sweatpants and a white t-shirt with a flashy video game logo on the front. “Hi guys,” he greeted them with a wave. “Sorry about that, haha... I just got out of the shower.” Despite having a camera head, Gyro's voice sounded surprisingly human.

“No problem! I didn't see anything,” Wrench lied. “Call me Wrench. Nice to meet you.” They extended their hand.

“Likewise! The name's Gyroloop! Or, just Gyro.” The two shook hands.

“Or, Fruit Loops,” Ray added.

“Really!” Gyro put his hands on his hips and stared at Ray, lowering the shutter on his “eye” to form an angry expression. “I can't believe you.” He was quite visibly flustered.

“Aw, don't be mean!” Wrench teased Ray, still smiling away.

“What? You love it,” Ray said to Gyro.

“Not in front of other people...!” Gyro whined. He took a seat on the couch against the other wall.

“So, hey, you're into games, I see!” Wrench pointed out, looking for some form of small talk.

“Oh, yeah!” Gyro stretched his shirt out so it could be more easily read. “Have you heard of Warcell Abyss?” he eagerly asked.

“I haven't, what is it?” Wrench took a closer look at his shirt. The logo featured the head of a rugged robot general, and the game's title written beneath it in jagged, eroded text.

“It's, like, a platformer beat-em-up game where you play as a robot soldier and you have to descend down a giant military facility and fight bad guys along the way. It's honestly so cool; I don't think I can do it justice just by telling you, haha!”

“Neat!” Wrench wasn't much of a gamer, but still appreciated Gyro's enthusiasm.

Gyro relaxed back into the couch. “I haven't had much time to play recently, though. Work has been slapping me around left and right. This is, like, the only day off I've had in a week.”

“Ouch. What do you do for work?”

“I'm the head of employee resources at Maroon!” he proudly announced. “I know Maroon kind of has a... *reputation*, but, honestly,

it's a not a bad job. I love helping people, but it sure can be tiring sometimes..."

"His boss is a shithead," Ray added.

"Oh no." Wrench winced.

"Ah, well... my boss is... weird, I guess?"

Gyro squinted. "He can be condescending sometimes... but he doesn't shout at me or anything."

"You're too soft, Loops. I remember those days where you came home in the dumps after a tongue-lashing from that fuck," Ray explained.

Gyro sighed and lowered their gaze. "I... guess there were those days too."

"Damn..." Wrench waited a couple seconds before continuing. "Hey... you know that incident at Maroon a while ago? The one here in Miyatama."

"Oh, yes?"

"I hope you don't mind if I ask, but... were you affected by that...?"

"No, thankfully. I work primarily at the headquarters in Era; I'm only here on a business trip. So, I guess I got pretty lucky."

"No kidding."

"It's... it still boggles my mind. I keep trying to make sense of what exactly happened there, but it's hard to wrap my head around. "

"Volons? What the heck even are those? Did Maroon make its own alien or something?"

"Well, uh... hmm..." Gyro quickly looked to the side and remained silent.

...This guy sure isn't very subtle, Wrench thought, inquisitively looking Gyro over.

“I ever see one of those freaks, I'll spin its fucking jaw,” Ray declared.

Wrench raised their eyebrows. “Remember back when Maroon was just a space exploration company?”

“Yeh, now they own the whole fucking universe,” Ray growled. “Fuck.” He looked over to Gyro. “Not digging at you, bud, just don't like big corporations.”

Gyro nodded. “I understand. If I could work somewhere else in the same position with pay this nice, I would, for sure.”

“Maybe you'd have a better boss.”

“...Maybe...”

Ray put his beer down and clapped his metal hands together. “Yeh. But tonight's not a night for moping! Got good company, just need some good laughs and some good food. Kick back, relax, play some games.”

“That's right!” Wrench cheered, raising the remainder of their ice cream cone in the air.

“Let's order some grub.” Ray stood up. “And some of those fancy robo-packets for Gyro.”

“Uh, sure!” Gyro replied. “I think I can afford a treat.”

“On me tonight. Put your wallet away.”

“Aww...!” Gyro's expressions were limited, but Wrench could definitely read the happiness on his face. “Thanks!”

“You're still hungry?” They asked, quite surprised. “You just downed a plate of steak like an hour ago.”

“So?”

Wrench's eyes grew wide. “Damn. I knew you were a big eater, but... *damn.*”

“Feel like Chinese?” Ray asked.

“Ohh... I'm not too hungry, but... bah, fuck it. Get me some chow mein. With everything on it. But, uh, not too much though.”

“Good taste.” Ray walked over to the kitchen, picked his phone up off the table, and started dialing a number.

Wrench laid back into the couch some more while Ray dealt with the phone call. In the interest of avoiding an awkward silence, they turned and faced Gyro.

“So, I have a burning question. Okay, two actually, but we'll start with one.”

“O-oh? Fire away!”

“How did a proper, high-ranking employee in a mega corporation hook up with *that?*” Wrench asked, subtly gesturing over to Ray as they quickly finished off their ice cream cone.

“Oh my goodness, right? I don't know what came over me,” Gyro playfully jabbed.

“Hah! Like, how did you meet?”

“Well... oh boy. I should've known that would come up.”

Wrench scooted closer, now extra curious.

“Okay, so, short version... I got in trouble with a couple guys... nothing too serious or big, but they were... kinda trying to rough me up?”

And... well. Ray, a perfect stranger, came and stuck up for me.”

“...That's it? No juicy details?”

Gyro quickly got flustered again. “Well! Uh... it's... well, n-no, that's...”

Wrench stared at him with squinted eyes and a huge smile, with their head tilted against the couch.

“It's, just... it's embarrassing, is all!” Gyro stammered.

“Aw, it's okay. I'm just messing.”

“Whew! Thanks, really, haha.”

But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't even more curious now!

“All right, so, hey. Can I ask about something different?” Wrench continued. “I'll stop grilling you after this, promise.”

“Haha, sure!”

They lowered their voice regardless of Ray's preoccupation. “Do you, perhaps... know something about what happened with those volons at Maroon?”

Gyro froze up. “N-no, uhh... hmm... well.” He paused for a few seconds. “I guess... I guess I kinda just overheard it, so... I suppose it wouldn't hurt...” He hummed a bit, twiddling his thumbs.

“You want special hoisin sauce?” Ray suddenly bellowed from the kitchen. “They got a deal goin' on.”

“A thousand times yes... but just a small order, okay?” Wrench's mouth started watering, even if they weren't particularly starving.

“I’ll get the extra jumbo supersized serving,” Ray spoke into the phone.

“Oh, get fucked.” Wrench laughed.

“That sounds *really* yummy,” Gyro cheerfully commented. “I’m jealous!” The sudden shift in topic allowed him to quite visibly relax; his tone of voice and mannerisms betrayed his feelings very clearly.

However, Wrench wasn’t going to let him off the hook that easy.

“So? So?” Wrench quietly began again, putting on an excited tone of voice. “What’s the hot gossip?”

Gyro nudged himself a bit closer to Wrench so their legs almost touched. “So...” he started, taking a quick glance around first. “I heard Maroon was working on some project based in Miyatama called “Victor Capital Foundry.” Since I live in Era, I didn’t get to check it out or ask too much myself, but every once in a while I heard coworkers and employees mentioning it like some grade school rumour. I didn’t think of it much, since Maroon is always expanding and buying out other companies, so... I thought it was probably some lesser establishment that Maroon assimilated.

Wrench couldn’t help but notice how much Gyro used his hands while he talked.

“But, a couple weeks ago, I overheard – or, okay... maybe it was more like eavesdropping – my boss talking about Victor Foundry, and in the same sentence, he said “shapeshifting capabilities.” So, I’ve been thinking... maybe that’s

connected to the volon incident that happened here...? Those things seem weird and crazy enough that maybe he was talking about them. Maybe they can shapeshift?" Gyro shrugged.

Wrench tilted their head and pursed their lips, deep in thought, considering everything Gyroloop just said. "Do I know your boss?"

"Probably not."

"Humour me."

"His name's Soma Jagson. Really secretive guy. I guess he's not *technically* my boss, but he oversees so much of employee resources that he might as well be."

"Hmm." Another brief pause as Wrench lost themselves in thought. "Nope, I got nothing."

"I thought so."

"Although... all this sounds like, you know... sensitive corporate info. I know I'm a curious little shit, but, should I maybe not have asked?"

"...I think it's okay. Victor Foundry is a pretty common term to hear in there, so it's not some *huge* secret. Plus, Maroon's going to have to give some sort of explanation or statement regarding the Miyatama incident." He followed up with a small chuckle.

Wrench nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense to me. All right."

Gyro looked away for a few seconds, then looked back at Wrench. "But... I guess I would appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone that I told you that?"

"Told me what?"

“Huh?” Gyro seemed confused. “Oh! Oh. Haha, good.” He instantly looked much more relieved.

Ray put his phone down on the table and looked over at the two, smiling with his jagged mouth open, almost as if he was expecting a reaction from Wrench.

“Motherfucker, I ain't eating a jumbo supreme meal!” Wrench exclaimed, giving Ray exactly what he was hoping for.

“More for me.”

“Yeah, okay, fair point.”

Ray sauntered back over to the living room and sat down beside Gyro, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. “So! You guys wanna play somethin' while we wait?”

“Oh? What did you have in mind?” Wrench asked.

“Got a selection right down there,” Ray explained, pointing down at the game consoles on the floor. “You into racing?”

“Sure, I could go for some. What games do you have...?” Wrench crawled onto the floor and began searching the pile of cords and game cases. “World Traverse 2299,” they read out, picking up the case for a rally racing game.

“Old school! I love it,” Gyro cheered.

“You down?” Ray asked both of them.

“Sure, yeah,” they both answered.

6 – A Budding Partnership

Janice – Wednesday, 1:15pm.

“Don't be so nervous,” an innocuous man named Glenn said. “If I can't tell, no human can.”

The tan-skinned woman beside him, going by the name Janice, was hesitant to walk inside the cafe.

“You're only going to draw more attention if you act all intense like that,” Glenn continued.

“I know, I know... I just...” Janice paused and took a deep breath, steeling her nerves. “Okay.” She walked forward and pushed open the glass door of the cafe.

About a dozen people were sitting down at the coffee shop's tables, minding their own business, sipping drinks and enjoying afternoon snacks. Anywhere else, it might've been strange to see two people walk in without taking their sunglasses off, but for them, it was a precaution more than anything else.

Glenn led the way to an empty table, and they both sat down.

“Should we order something to not look suspicious?” Janice urged.

“Calm down. We're fine. You wanted to get away from Tenna's place to relax, so let's not squander the opportunity.”

“...Yeah. So, anyways... like I told you... I want to go back to Miyatama.”

“I thought you said you wanted to relax,” Glenn repeated with a smirk on his face. “I kid. Go on.”

“I know it sounds crazy, but I have some unfinished business I need to take care of there. People I have to find.”

“You mentioned. Zev and Carson?”

“Mainly them... yes.”

“Carson, sure, but regarding Zev... you're aware of the phrase about the fine line between bravery and stupidity, right?”

Janice forced a quick smile. “Yes, I know. But I've been doing a lot of thinking, Glenn. A lot of soul-searching. Other than those logging setups and campsites I frequented so often back in the day... where else is there for me to go? Don't—don't say Tenna's hideout.”

“Now now, you and I both share the same sentiments about her.”

“Right.”

“But, you do have a point, I suppose. Much easier to find a place to stay in Miyatama than Ystets, anyway.”

There was a lengthy pause.

In the midst of their meeting, Glenn kept looking around the room without an ounce of subtlety, occasionally staring down the other people in the cafe.

Janice continued, breaking the silence. “Well... the money and phone you gave me? I can't tell you how much that means to me, really. And I don't like asking for favours, especially

after you've already shown me so much generosity.”

“No need to beat around the bush, Jan. Let's cut to the chase.”

“Could you... maybe help me figure out a way to get to Miyatama?”

Glenn bit his lip and looked down at the table. “Are you looking for *directions*, or a *lift*?”

“Weeeellllll...” Janice peeped. “I'll take what I can get.”

Glenn flashed another smirk. “Don't think we're going to be doing much in the next handful of days, as far as operations go,” he explained, keeping his voice very quiet. “The assault on Maroon has things pretty hot out there. Not to mention it was one of the tightest escapes we've had yet.”

“I couldn't see anything in the back of that truck, but I could sure hear it all.” Janice winced.

“Be glad you couldn't see it.”

Janice solemnly nodded.

“So, yeah... I don't see a problem with giving you a ride,” Glenn continued.

“Oh! I thought you were saying you weren't going to be able to.”

“No, no, I mean I'm free to do things in the meantime since I'm not caught up with Tenna's business.”

“Ah! That... that would be awesome, to have a ride to Miyatama! Are you sure?”

“It's not an issue. I enjoy driving, and I have piss all to do back home. Watch news.

Organize our stores. Mess with Eckire. Gets stale after a while.”

“Ah! My goodness, thank you so much! Maybe there's still hope for finding them after all.”

“Glad to help a volon in need.”

Janice's eyes shot open. “Not so loud!”

Glenn shut his eyes. “We're in Ystets, remember? I'd wager at least half of these people are volons themselves. If a human suddenly made a ruckus about volons in here, it wouldn't end well for them.”

Janice carefully looked around the cafe, discreetly side-eyeing the other patrons to look for any identifying features. She couldn't see anything out of the ordinary; everybody else looked like perfectly normal humans. Without being able to closely inspect the other peoples' eyes, she had no way of discerning a human from a volon in hiding.

“That's... creepy...” Janice mumbled.

“How so? We're doing the same thing.”

She creased her brow. “Wait, why are we bothering with these sunglasses, then?”

“Because I didn't know how many of the customers in here were humans. I have a much better idea now.”

“...Elaborate, please? How can you tell?”

“Once you've been around long enough, you start noticing minute details volons often get wrong when mimicking humans. It's mostly body language. Unusual limb movements, rigid posture,

and most only have a very rudimentary understanding of colloquial speech.”

A lightbulb went off in Janice's head. “You've been spying on the others in here.”

“So to speak. I could tell you with high certainty that at least half of the 13 people in here are not human.”

After a brief moment of awe, Janice quickly looked down at herself. Prior to coming to the cafe, she'd shifted her skin to be a darker, more human tone rather than her usual grey. “Can you tell that I'm...?”

“Aside from your rampant paranoia... no, actually. You're rather well-adjusted. Besides, not like any human would be able to tell even if you weren't; you certainly look the part, and that's all you need in most cases.”

“Good... but it's... just not easy to be calm about this. I don't want to get caught. I don't want to go back to Maroon's “lab.””

“Yet you want to go back to Lower Miyatama.”

Janice huffed. “I want to know my acquaintances are safe more than I'm scared of being imprisoned again. And some answers wouldn't hurt, either.”

“Okay, well said.” Glenn clasped his hands together on the table. “Just calm your nerves, and you'll not be noticed by anyone.”

“Right... I'll do my best.”

The remainder of the meeting was largely devoid of meaningful conversation. Glenn continued with some small talk, including a bit of

cheeky gossip about Eckire and Tenna, before walking over to the front counter and ordering some refreshments for the two. Janice got a small glass of lemonade with a bran muffin, and Glenn ordered a dark roast coffee.

Before long, they'd finished both their snacks and their talk, and they prepared to leave the cafe. This time, Janice led the way.

She took a few moments to take a deep breath of air as she opened the coffee shop's door, allowing the fresh outdoor breeze to waft over her body. Shortly afterwards, her gaze meandered over to the neighbouring city in the distance.

Even from afar, Miyatama was a breathtaking view. Suspended in the sky, positioned atop a myriad of enormous structural supports, was an entire city, shimmering in the bright afternoon light. It was the first time Janice was able to take a good, long look at such a marvel of engineering.

"It's something, isn't it?" Glenn commented as he walked out of the cafe, sharing the view with Janice.

"It's incredible," she wistfully replied.

"It's a shame they lost the lower city to misguided bureaucracy. The top is still pleasant, at least."

"Ah?"

"Lower Miyatama isn't known for being the safest or most progressive place on the planet. Although, High Miyatama is a different story."

"And down there is where we were. Zev and I."

“Yep. You two and a wide array of other volons.”

“Glenn... were there any other volons in there like us?” Janice was confident she already knew the answer to her question, but she couldn't help but ask anyways.

“Not that I'm aware of. Better off asking Tenna about that, since she knows the most out of our group.”

“I'll just take your word for it.”

Glenn chuckled and continued along to his truck with Janice in tow.

“I wonder if Zev is still there. Or if they're even alive,” Janice pondered.

“You probably know better than I do. How resourceful are they?”

“Oh, uh... good question. I don't really know.”

“More on the feral side, yeah?”

“Yes, that's right. I don't actually know what Zev is capable of, as far as urban survival goes. I didn't get to spend *that* much time with them.”

“The odds are stacked against them with Maroon on full damage control after the assault. I doubt they'd be taking any more prisoners after that.”

Janice looked down at her hands again, opening and closing her fingers. “You really don't think anybody will know?”

“If you keep worrying about it, everybody will know.”

Janice sighed.

“You're fine. Seriously. Take it easy.”



A mere five minutes later, Janice found herself on the road to Miyatama in Glenn's pickup truck. Neither she nor Glenn had any compelling reason to go back to Tenna's base before their road trip, so they got moving without delay.

The truck was noticeably old and stuffy; there was a powerful, musty smell that permeated throughout the entire cabin, thus, Janice opted to leave her passenger window unrolled. She rested her arm out the window, slowly waving her hand through the rushing wind.

Normally, the city buildings and the plentiful pedestrians would be an intriguing sight for her. Her time in the great outdoors, away from any dense urban landscape, had given her a curious and eager disposition while traversing city streets. However, after Glenn's remarks about the sheer quantity of volons present in Ystets, she couldn't help feel rather unsettled.

...Unsettled, and beyond anxious. Janice knew Miyatama was where she *needed* to go, but it was still a terrifying endeavour nonetheless. She did have a friend in Glenn, but she didn't know the extent of his goodwill and generosity; he'd been exceedingly pleasant to her thus far, but she had no intentions of pushing it.

Where will I stay? Does Glenn have any contacts in Miyatama, maybe? He did mention it would be easy to find a place to stay there...

No. I can't keep stewing like this. Just ask him, for goodness' sake!

Janice exhaled, puffing out her cheeks. “Hey,” she spoke up.

“Yep?”

“Do you know of any places in Miyatama I can stay?” she asked.

“Sure.” He paused for a few seconds before continuing. “Motels and B&Bs are a dime a dozen in Miyatama. Might not be the best quality, but it probably won't be much worse than what we have back at base.”

Damn. “Know of any decent ones?”

“Sure, a couple. I'll give you some details once we get there.”

At least that was somewhat reassuring.

Glenn reached over and pressed some buttons on the truck's dashboard, prompting a groovy, electronic song with a powerful, driving beat to begin playing. He smiled and gently nodded his head to the beat.

Janice wasn't sure if that was a cue to shut up, or if Glenn just wanted some music. Either way, she mirrored his actions and sunk back into her seat, enjoying the tunes. Only then did she realize how tense she'd been the entire drive thus far.

It still wasn't exactly easy to unwind, but with a quick reminder that this was the last bit of respite she'd have for a while, she consciously eased her muscles, starting with her legs and ending with her arms and neck. She rolled her shoulders and adjusted her seat position to something slightly more comfortable.

“Do you know how long it'll be until we're there?”

“30 minutes, give or take a few.” He must have seen her wiggling about in her seat, since he reached over again and patted on her on the leg. “You're not in this alone, Jan. I doubt I can help with your manhunt, but the least I can do is lend you a hand here and there. And I'm not exactly the therapist type either, but if you get overwhelmed, give me a call.”

Janice smiled, almost feeling tears welling up in her eyes. She inhaled sharply through her nose to stop it from happening. “Thank you, Glenn. I.. I-I really can't thank you enough.”

“Volons look out for each other. Just like you are with Zev.”

She hadn't thought about it that way until Glenn mentioned it just then. “Yeah... I guess you're right, huh.”

“Of course I'm right,” he teased. “Let's enjoy this drive, yeah? This is one of my favourite songs.”

7 – Urban Adventuring

Janice's arm was starting to go numb from hanging out the window in the chilly breeze for so long. She pulled it back inside and rolled up the window halfway, tucking her cold arm beneath the other.

The small talk between the two had more or less ended, leaving Janice to her own thoughts once again. She found herself looking up at Miyatama's impressive double-decker city standing tall above the rocky grey and green landscape, her mind meandering everywhere, occasionally glancing at passing signs.

110 km/h. Exit 52, 500m. Red and white triangle.

...Can people go in those support pillars? I wonder what the insides of those pillars looks like. The view must be amazing from up there. How did they even build that huge platform? For whatever reason, the rambly questions made her smile.

As they drove closer to Miyatama, the exceptionally tall city began blotting out the sunlight, covering the environment around them in crisp shade.

Janice hummed in disappointment. It was suddenly a lot cooler now that the sun was gone.

But then, she tilted her head to the side. *The sun... we're orbiting that, right?*

She peered out the window, looking out at the horizon to her right. There was an enormous “pillar” beyond the clouds that seemed to wrap

around the sky, connecting the two horizons like a narrow, cloudy rainbow. It was something she never thought much about until the drive to Miyatama, since she had nothing but time to kill. Its details were impossible to make out due to the sheer distance, but its shape was unmistakable.

With the engineering marvel of Miyatama freshly in her thoughts...

“Hey,” Janice spoke up.

“Yep?”

“Forgive me if this is a stupid question, but this *is* a planet, right?”

“...What, like, the one we're on right now?”

“Yeah.”

Glenn hesitated. “What makes you ask that?”

Janice pointed out at the horizon, despite Glenn's attention being focused on the road. “You know that big pillar on the horizons?”

“I... do you mean the ring?”

“Maybe? The big line in the sky.” She winced at her utter failure to articulate what she meant.

“Ah. Yeah, that's a ring. Ban Vatnia, it's called.”

“Oh, a ring like the ones we see on other planets from space?”

Glenn shook his head and smiled. “It's a ring *world*.”

Janice stared at him, awaiting further explanation.

“It's an artificial habitat built in the shape of a ring that orbits Hallow. It's essentially a world just like Hallow, with customized climates and biomes to properly suit humanity.”

Janice's mouth hung ajar. She mouthed the words, “what?” before resuming her shocked expression.

Glenn quickly glanced over to her, chuckling at her face. “Yep. You thought Miyatama was crazy? Humans have done some *truly* wild things.”

“So... that ring... it orbits this planet,” Janice repeated, trying to get the idea through her mind.

“Yep.”

“So, hypothetically, if I got a spaceship, I could go there? And, like... live?”

“Yep. Although, you might not want to. I've heard the populace leans towards the snobby and elitist side. Plus, apparently its spaceports are way too stuffy about “unauthorized” visitors landing there.”

“Oh. Damn.”

“Still pretty cool though, no?”

“Yeah! It's...” she paused, struggling to find the right word, “...amazing.”

She reflected back to a certain moment during her time with Zev in the basement of that Maroon facility. She'd told them that humanity as a whole was far more powerful than volonkind, but she had no idea of the true scope of the humans' capabilities. It was humbling.

“Have you ever seen it at night?” Glenn asked. “It lights up the sky brilliantly.”

Janice was about to respond when her heart pounded with an all too familiar ache. The question instantly brought her back to the forest she once lived happily in, back to those times where she'd lie on the grass and watch the evening twilight above canopies of verdant leaves.

“Um, yeah... I think I have.” She wasn't sure – she'd definitely seen some strange light patterns in the night sky back then, but she never gave it much thought. Her understanding of Hallow and human culture was very limited during those times.

Undoubtedly, it was a simpler life.

“Catch it when its orbit lies it flat against the horizon,” Glenn continued, “it looks like a wall encompassing the world. Really cool.”

Janice simply hummed in acknowledgment, her mind still very distracted.



While driving under Miyatama's looming shadow, a passing car blinked its headlights as it drove by.

“Hm.” Glenn raised an eyebrow. “Cops ahead...?”

For once, this was something Janice knew about human culture. “Blinking headlights at other people, that means caution ahead, right?”

“Essentially. Usually police or a car wreck up ahead.”

Janice kept her eyes focused on the road ahead, trying to see if she could see anything.

Traffic was relatively light on the highway, but as the duo approached Miyatama's outskirts, the road converged into a single lane, and traffic had suddenly back up into a standstill.

Glenn slowed the vehicle down and came to a stop as he turned off his music. "Wonder what this is about."

Janice unrolled the window again and looked down the road. Up ahead on the side of the road was an orange sign reading, "checkpoint ahead."

"It's a checkpoint," she explained.

"Oh? What kind?"

"The sign up there doesn't say."

"Hmm. This must be a recent thing. I've never had any traffic stops along this road before. Mind turning on a livecast?"

Janice looked at him, puzzled.

"Beside the stereo controls here, press the button to unlock the monitor."

Sure enough, there was a small button labeled "monitor" beside the dashboard. When she pressed it, a small computer screen raised up from the passenger-side dashboard, with large buttons for GPS, livecasts, and auxiliary music control on the screen.

Janice tapped the livecasts button, and a list of what looked like radio stations appeared in a neat list after a brief loading delay.

"Oh, it's like a radio."

"Yeah, that's right. Look for something local to the Miyatama or Ystets area."

The list began with a couple fitting entries: Miyatama Community Watch and Local Region Weather (Ystets). Janice pressed the button beside MCW.

“–who went missing three days ago,” a man's voice spoke up from the truck's speakers. “Local authorities are on high alert and they are beginning a thorough investigation of the north-eastern area of Lower Miyatama.”

“The fourth disappearance this week,” another male commentator added with a click of his tongue. “I don't know, man. Something's going on. I hope those people return home safely.”

Janice pursed her lips. She felt as if she knew too much about that particular subject.

The livecast's host went on about local events in both levels of Miyatama city, mentioning new art exhibitions, street food vendors – a popular commodity in the lower city, apparently – and paid opportunities for volunteers for medical testing.

After that, they finally got what they were waiting for.

“But once again in case you missed our hourly traffic report, a warning to all road travelers this week: make sure to leave a *few* minutes early if you plan on leaving or entering Miyatama, as the MPD has set up road checks on several major roadways to check for “ties to *volon* activity,” which sounds a little strange to me, even with that monster outbreak at the Maroon complex.”

“It is a little strange, and it might not be entirely legal, either,” began another man on the livecast. “Local police are demanding all travelers submit to *blood tests* on the road, and according to first-hand accounts, they're carrying this out with a handheld machine that pricks your skin; it's nothing worse than a tiny poke, and then they take a look at it and send you on your way.”

Blood. One of the only ways a volon could instantly be identified, and Janice knew it. Cold sweat flashed over her body.

“G-Glenn,” she shuddered.

“I know. I heard.” He put a finger to his lips and pointed to the dashboard computer.

“Now, what if you don't want to have a needle stuck in you, by police of all people?” the host asked.

“Well, that's what has people up in arms. Apparently they *do* have trained professionals present to administer these tests, but that doesn't have anyone any happier about the situation. It's a clear violation of your rights as a citizen of Hallow, and protesters have gathered around most of these checkpoints, trying to shut them down.”

“Not good,” Glenn said.

“We can't go through there...!” Janice replied.

“No... we can't.” He looked ahead. “Damn. No roads to turn to from here. Welp, hold on a moment.”

Janice didn't realize he meant it literally. The truck accelerated and lurched to the left as

Glenn did a quick u-turn, pulling out of the line of traffic, crossing over into the oncoming lane.

“W-whoa! Geez!” Janice hung on to the handle beside the top of the door.

“Sorry. Can't risk it. There's a smaller road that leads to Miyatama a couple minutes back this way.” He straightened the vehicle out into the lane. “It'll take us a while longer to get there though.”

“Yeah...” Janice looked back out the rear window, hoping nobody paid their stunt driving any attention. About fifteen seconds later, another vehicle did the same maneuver – a beat up pickup not unlike Glenn's. She worried it might've been someone pursuing them, but after a while, it just seemed like someone with a similar thought process.

Minutes passed as they drove back the way they came. Janice periodically checked the rear window for any suspicious followers, but nothing came of it. They seemed to be in the clear despite Glenn's questionable u-turn.

He took the next exit and slowed down, the two volons now traveling on a narrow two-lane road between a shallow valley of rocky hills.

“Do the police want you for anything?” Janice asked. “Like, officially?”

“Officially? As opposed to... unofficially?” Glenn seemed puzzled.

“Uh, well, you know what I mean. Are you wanted?”

“Ah. No, I'm an angel. They have nothing on me.”

Janice gave an amused snort. “Clean as a whistle, then?”

“That’s right.” He smiled. “I wouldn’t be risking a cross-city drive if I was. Way too much surveillance.”

“Let me guess – the cameras mounted on every second road sign?”

“They like to keep only a few bright and visible so people lower their guard after passing them.”

Janice thought about Maroon’s containment facility. *They probably did the same strategy with the cameras there too. Yikes.*

Slowly but surely, the rocky terrain parted, and was gradually replaced with the sight of buildings dotted with countless little lights...

...and another roadblock.

“Fuck.” Glenn slowed down.

Janice inhaled sharply.

Before another moment passed, Glenn leaned forward and squinted his eyes. “Hold on, that’s not a checkpoint...”

“It’s not?”

“Oh.” He hummed in dismay.

As the duo approached, it became clear what was blocking their way – a crime scene in the middle of the road just next to a gas station, taped off and surrounded by emergency vehicles with lights blaring.

Just before the scene was a series of orange signs directing all drivers to turn around and find another route to enter the city.

“No way,” Glenn huffed.

Janice said nothing, instead concerned for the situation ahead, trying to piece together what was going on.

Glenn stopped the truck right before the sign blockade.

“Shit. Well, looks like your best bet would be to go on foot from here.” Glenn didn't sound particularly happy to break the news.

“No other way around, I'm guessing?” Janice asked.

“I'm afraid not. These are the only two ways into Miyatama from Ystets.”

“Damn... okay. Still, thank you for the ride.”

“Try to get to street 7-29. It's got a few reliable places to stay there. People I know.”

Janice quickly pulled out her phone. “7-29... let me write that down here.” She navigated to the notepad program and typed it in. “Got it. While I have you here – do you know of any real psychology labs around Miyatama?”

“Real?”

“As opposed to... Maroon.”

“Ah. You'd probably find something along those lines near the Maroon branch, but it's been cordoned off after Tenna's attack. That said, I happen to know of a psychotherapy studio a little ways from 7-29. By some nightclubs. I don't think you'll find your guy there, but maybe some employee can give you a lead.”

“Okay, thanks!”

“And...” Glenn continued, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a small black wallet and

produced a few pieces of paper from it. "You're going to need it." He handed them to Janice.

She looked down at them. *Srakna... that's money!* "How much is that in all?"

"60 large."

"60,000?! I... thank you so much, Glenn! But I don't even know how I can repay you for this... for everything!"

"Relax. It's pocket change. Maybe someday you'll find some way to help me out, but until then, don't sweat it. Just don't die out there."

"Psh, thanks for the vote of confidence," she joked as she took the money and pocketed it. Janice unbuckled her seat belt and opened the door.

"I'm a call away," Glenn reminded her.

"Yeah, thank you!" She stepped outside and shut the door, waving as Glenn accelerated and turned around, disappearing into the distance.

Suddenly, she was on her own. It'd been far too long since she'd been alone with no supervision of any sort; the sensation was jarring.

She took a deep breath. *Okay, let's do this. You're a tough girl. For Carson... and Zev... and the rest.*

Janice walked over to the gas station on the left side of the road. There was just enough room for pedestrians to safely skirt around the edges of the police line. As she walked by the crime scene, she was overtaken by morbid curiosity. She couldn't help but snoop around, trying to find out what happened. What could it have been?

*We didn't hear about it on that livecast.
This must be a recent incident.*

Standing too close would risk grabbing the attention of the police, so she stood a safe distance away as she craned her head around, trying to look by the emergency workers attending the scene. A few other average-looking humans were doing the same thing, so she figured she probably wouldn't be singled out for being curious.

Then, she caught a glimpse of something terrible – a leg, unmistakably. A human leg, clothed in the remainder of a pair of jeans, detached from its body. The ground beneath it was stained dark red.

Janice gasped. She looked away and power-walked past the crime scene, pretending she hadn't seen it.

Why did I have to look...?! she scolded herself. It was a volon... it had to be. Why else would there be a leg lying on the street? But... was it Tenna's volon? Or Maroon's...? The answer to that question wouldn't have made a difference to her, so she dashed it from her mind and focused on her objective.

7-29, Janice thought. Up ahead about 100 metres was an intersection, which also had a traffic blockade preventing any vehicles from coming down her road. Thankfully, the sidewalks were still open to travel on.

She kept her eyes up, looking for anything that would help get her bearings.

“15-1,” she read the sign above the intersection aloud. “Wait, hold on,” she mumbled as she reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone.

This thing has GPS, right? Sure enough, her memory proved accurate. However, upon opening the GPS program, she was greeted with a lengthy loading screen that didn't seem to be making any progress. Moments later, a popup told her she needed to download an update, and when she pressed “OK,” the phone told her she needed an internet connection to do so.

Crap. She had no idea how to get that working. *Don't panic... these street numbers sound orderly. They're probably arranged in a grid.*

To test that theory, she continued onward to the intersection, waiting until the pedestrian signal turned on to announce it was safe to cross. As she traversed further into the city, the sound of passing traffic picked up all around her, and the enormous shadow cast by High Miyatama made it feel as if it was already nighttime, with the world illuminated only by street lamps, storefronts, and rushing headlights.

A minute later, she arrived at the next intersection.

15-2 – great! Now, what about the other direction...

She repeated the process, turning left instead of crossing the intersection. More and more humans were going about their daily lives as

she proceeded deeper into the city, but she took a deep breath and steeled herself.

Glenn told you you're fine. No one's going to know. Have a little faith, Janice.

As she hoped, nobody paid her any mind while passing by. She even noticed that some of the humans weren't actually humans at all; some of them were machines.

She smiled a bit. *Maybe they're used to strange folk walking about.*

A couple minutes later, another crossroad lay before her. 14-2.

Score one for me! With that, her plan became clear. Go from 14-2 to 7-2, then from 7-2 to 7-29. Now that she had a clear means to reach her end, her muscles were already less stiff, and breathing had become far easier.

I probably won't look like such an outlier now that I have some purpose here.



Walking eased her psyche even more. She already felt much safer being in public compared to only a few hours prior.

Janice soon discovered that the city wasn't built in a perfect grid pattern, but it was still arranged in such a way that she didn't have much trouble figuring out how to get from one major road to the next.

It was a considerable trek to get to 7-29. She must've been walking for at least an hour, barely resisting the urge to scout out a store or cafe for some refreshments.

Regardless, she had arrived at her destination without incident. And, as promised, a row of motels and inns lined the right side of the street; she wasn't sure which one Glenn meant when he said “he knew some people there,” but asking a couple of the establishments couldn't hurt.

Well... while I'm in the walking mood... what about that psychotherapy place?

There weren't any clear indicators or signs directing her to local clinics or therapy labs. *I should've asked him for specifics.*

To her surprise, 7-29 seemed like it led to a dead end with no major roads branching off it – a stark contrast to how most of the streets that she'd walked were laid out. With only one way to go, she proceeded onward with a quick shrug.

Maybe I could get used to this!

As she proceeded down the relatively narrow street, the density of pedestrians rapidly increased, but these didn't seem like “normal” humans. Most – if not all – were decorated with flashy neon outfits, some wore helmets and masks, and quite a few of them were dancing on the sidewalk and road alike. As before, some of them were actually robots, too.

He mentioned nightclubs... maybe I'm close? Hmm... humans have double-decker cities and ring worlds, but they put therapy buildings beside nightclubs...? It was weird, even to her.

The road ended in a cul-de-sac brimming with partygoers and booming bass from some distant music.

These people don't seem to be minding anybody else around them, at least. Just act like you belong. It's worked so far.

Onward she went to the end of the road.

Casually sauntering past both individuals and groups of people proved simple enough. As she noted earlier, nobody paid her much attention at all.

The right side of the cul-de-sac expanded into a short lane ending with a brightly glowing building, its front wall fashioned into a huge, open entrance dotted by sleazy looking people and general filth.

Geez... well, Glenn did say it was by here...

She cautiously meandered over and gave it a cursory inspection. No guards or anything of the such in sight. The music quickly grew in volume as she approached, but not so much so that she couldn't bear it.

This can't possibly be the right place, can it?

As she stepped inside the club's wide open entrance, she looked around for a moment before making eye contact with a nearby human, who sported a head of striking cyan hair.

Instead of panicking, an idea formed in her head.

“I-I beg your pardon – can I ask you a question? It won't be long, promise,” she asked, suddenly lacking her prior confidence.

“Uh, sure,” the human replied with an incredulous look on their face. “What's... going on?”

“Do you know if there are any, umm... psychology... research... laboratories in this city?”

Great – way to mess that one up, Jan!

8 – A Place to Call Home

Well, no luck there.

She wasn't sure what compelled her to ask a perfect stranger about her search. A self-imposed deadline? Fear of missing out on a limited time opportunity?

After asking that human, it was clear she was obviously in the wrong place. She started backtracking to the motels on 7-29, and, seemingly, her timing couldn't have been better.

A squad of several robots – or, people covered in heavy mechanical gear – were marching up towards the club just as she was leaving. They were all decorated in the exact same way: bright red lights from head to toe, and a metallic, bug-like head.

However, they paid her no mind; Janice shuffled to the side of the lane as they passed through. Evidently, city dwellers outside of Maroon's bowels took little notice of random passersby, which she was more than thankful for. Within the last hour or so, she'd already made considerable progress in relearning how to exist in human society – namely, remembering that not everybody was out to get her.

Aside from the group of scary armoured people, the walk back to the motel strip was uneventful.

She stopped on a broken sidewalk filled with gravel and looked at the building beside her. *Fairweather Motel*. It looked as decent as any,

and it had a flashing “open” sign beside the front door, so she pulled the door open and walked in.

Janice found herself in a small but comfortable office space, mostly occupied by the clerk's portly desk. She walked up to the receptionist, who happened to be a sleek metal robot with a white finish and a singular blue eye looking back at her.

“Hello!” they greeted her. “Can I help you?”

“Hi, yes, I want to rent a room for a couple days,” Janice answered.

“Of course! Our rooms go for 9,200 a night. How long would you like to stay?”

Yow... maybe 60,000 wasn't so much after all. “...Three nights,” she responded without any prior thought. It was a compromise between price and duration, she told herself. “Um, can I ask kind of a weird question, first?”

The robot tilted their head. “Of course.”

“Do you know anyone named Glenn?”

A lengthy silence permeated the air. The receptionist tilted their head straight up, and then back down in the world's slowest nod.

“Ratcliff?” the robot asked with a drastically different demeanor.

Janice pursed her lips. “He drives a truck. Semi driver,” she confessed, unsure if that information would suffice in place of Glenn's surname.

The receptionist answered with another nod. “Who's he to you?” Their voice had lowered considerably.

She retorted with a downcast gaze. “Friend of mine who drove me into the city from Ystets. I'm looking for a safe place to stay for a couple nights. He told me there were some good people around here.”

“You hot?”

Janice suddenly looked uneasy. “Am I what...?”

The robot leaned closer. “*Is anyone coming after you?*”

“Oh, no, no! Nothing like that. Just in a... kind of a transition period right now.”

“Understood, understood.” The clerk began operating their computer, clicking away with the mouse. “I'll just need your name.”

“Janice.”

“Last name?”

She wasn't prepared for that question. Janice blurted out the first thing that came to mind – “Viella.”

“Perfect. All right, Ms. Viella, three nights will be 18,400 srakna.”

Janice raised her eyebrows at the final price. *An error that blatant couldn't be accidental.* She decided it was better not to question it. “Do you take cash?”

“Yes.”

Janice rifled through her pocket and pulled out her wad of paper money, and then handed the clerk five 5,000 srakna bills. The bot sorted the money into a drawer behind their desk before presenting Janice with her change.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Of course.” The receptionist handed her a key from behind their desk. “Your room is 112, just down the hall. Check out time is 11am. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask!”

“Thanks!” she repeated.

Ms. Viella... I sound so dignified! Janice Viella walked down the hall with a bright grin across her face. Although the idea of living in a numbered room was still a touch disquieting to her, too many things were going nicely to let it ruin her mood.

At least it's not 33, she halfheartedly joked.

Room 112 was mere seconds away. The hallway was brightly lit with no windows, and the burgundy wallpaper gave the building's interior a warm, comfortable atmosphere. It was a sign of what was to come – she opened the door to 112 and was greeted by an equally clean space with matching décor.

She smiled even more as she carefully browsed the room, looking over the queen-size bed, desk, table for one, kitchenette, and holographic display television mounted on the wall opposite the bed. It was a small space, but she didn't mind. For three days, it was *hers*.

Janice flopped down on the bed, which was a tad squeaky, but it was a very minor issue she had no problem ignoring.

Next step: figure out how to get internet on this phone...! She pulled it out of her pocket and gave it a determined glare.

9 – Looming

Skye – Thursday, 11:18pm.

Skye dropped the wet washcloth into the water-filled sink in the staff-only section of the lobby. He looked over the orderly (and rather extravagant) tables and chairs of Velvet Crumble's lounge, spotless after his diligent cleaning.

Not bad. He gave himself a little smile. *Just in time for closing.* Customers had been scarce since around 10pm, giving him ample time to clean up the public lobby.

With all his duties complete, and just a handful of minutes left before his shift ended, he perused the display of baked goods in front of the main cash register. Everything from cakes to fruit buns were plated on short, regal platters, beneath which was a velvet carpet lining each shelf.

A pain to clean, Skye noted, but it certainly looked classy.

To his delight, he was allowed a fair portion of free bakery goods at the end of each shift to make up for the relatively low wage. He eyed down the food, landing his gaze on a mound of pineapple buns and butter tarts.

Skye knew it wasn't the healthiest choice, but when funds were tight, anything helped.

Under 1,800 srakna, he reminded himself as he mentally tallied up the cost of the buns and tarts. He stepped over behind the counter and opened the glass door to access the pastries, taking four buns and eight tarts, ensuring there

were some of each left over for the following morning.

The only reason he was allowed to take home products without supervision was because of the two cameras placed discreetly in the corners of the lobby. He glanced over at one with visible discomfort before finishing packing his goods – the buns bagged, and the tarts in a clear plastic container.

He placed his food on the counter and–

Skye locked his vision outside. Just beyond the front entrance's glass walls, someone was standing idle. Except it wasn't just any random person.

They were tall. *Really* tall. Skye could only see feet and legs; the rest of the figure's body was too high up to be seen from inside.

Skye froze, transfixed on the person outside.

His most reactionary thought, *is it those loan thugs looking for my again?!* was quickly dashed as he thought it over. *No human could be that tall, even with augmentations. That's a fucking cryptid...!*

Then, the figure stepped to the side, just out of sight. By that point, Skye was crouched behind the shop's service counter, just barely peeking out above its surface.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He quickly unlocked it with his fingerprint, only briefly glancing at the screen to ensure he didn't miss anything outside, and

navigated over to the camera program. Without delay, he began filming and pointed it outside.

“Hey, it's Skye,” he whispered, narrating the video, “there's a really, really tall person outside... it's, like... 11:30 at night... I haven't seen anyone else pass by in maybe an hour or two. But there's this really tall dude just standing ominously outside. So, if you're watching this, and you don't know where I am, I'm probably dead. Tall man probably got me,” he half-facetiously commented.

A shadow fell over the entrance. Ever so slowly, a head craned down sideways, staring into the shop as the figure stepped back into view. The person's – no, *creature's* – face was ghostly white, and its eyes were two huge, black crosses. It wore a wide-brimmed hat, covering a head of unkempt hair.

Skye let out a short gasp as he ducked down, shakily keeping his phone pointed at the thing outside. Cold sweat was creeping up his back. His mouth quickly became dry. He didn't dare move another muscle.

“Smells good,” a strange, rumbling voice remarked, presumably coming from the creature outside. A pale white, gangly hand crept down towards the entrance's door handle.

Skye hadn't locked it.

Panic set in. It was too late to run over and lock the door.

Then, he remembered.

Skye dropped his phone on the counter and crawled beneath the cash register. There was a

button underneath it to remotely lock the front entrance in case of theft or emergency.

He felt around under the desk; without any light, he couldn't tell where it was.

Oh my god, his head raced, *oh my god*.

He felt something circular and hard. A button?

Click. Skye pressed it, barely suppressing the urge to hammer it with his fist several times.

The door rattled.

Oh god, please work, please work, he prayed. He couldn't bear to look back up at the front door.

The door rattled again and again. And then it rattled again.

The creature let out a loud growl. "So hungry..."

Skye built up the courage to look past the side of the cash register to see if he was doomed.

The door was closed, and the creature was still outside.

Skye let out a hefty sigh of relief, almost falling down onto his back. He slowly caught his breath, each inhale and exhale less laboured than the last.

Oh my god, he continued in his head, repeatedly swallowing saliva to remedy his dry mouth. Despite narrowly averting disaster, he couldn't work up the courage to pick his phone up and continue filming. *Oh my god*.

Skye sat concealed behind the counter for a couple minutes, barely any calmer than a few moments prior. He had no idea if the creature was

still there or not, and he wasn't ready to check. However, he hadn't heard any sounds since locking the door. He knew full well that the entrance's glass walls could be easily smashed open, but the creature didn't seem violent... yet.

Only after another two minutes and a continued lack of noise did he look back up over the countertop.

Nothing. The monster was gone. At least, it wasn't visible from Skye's limited view of the street.

Fuck, how am I gonna get out of here?!
As far as he knew, Velvet Crumble didn't have a back entrance. He was tempted to go look for one, but leaving the lounge unattended with a freaky monster nearby didn't sit well with him.

He decided to sit still and wait it out just a while longer. In the meantime, he carefully reached up to the countertop and picked up his phone, which was still recording. He stopped filming and watched the video he'd captured.

"Hey, it's Skye," his video's quiet narration began. Uninterested in his brief spiel, he skipped ahead a handful of seconds to when the gangly creature made its appearance.

There it was, clearly illuminated by the bakery's lights. He paused the video and glossed over the monster.

White skin, black cross-shaped eyes, huge toothy grin, messy silver hair, a wide-brimmed hat, a black coat, and a pair of purple scarves worn around both its neck and hat. He shivered just looking at it.

“What the fuck is that thing...?” he asked himself. “Is that a volon?” Skye reflected back on the news reports about the breakout of “volons” at Maroon's office branch in his very city.

He peeked back up over the countertop again. Still no monster outside. With every minute that passed without a scary figure at the door, his nerves gradually calmed down.

Maybe it lost interest and left...

Skye still didn't want to chance it. Waiting it out for a handful more minutes wasn't going to hurt.

He checked his phone – 11:31pm, one minute past closing time. He still had no desire to properly close up shop until he felt safer. If his boss gave him hell the next day for it, he'd just show her the video he took. Surely that would be explanation enough.

For the moment, he switched over to the social media program on his phone and began typing.

“guys there's a freaky monster outside my work, and i'm completely alone right now fuck...”

~~~~

Skye munched on one of his pineapple buns as he scrolled through his media feed, checking the front windows every handful of minutes. It was 11:50pm now, and there was still no sign of the tall creature.

“What? Call the police, maybe?” suggested Saviour\_Blue in a reply to Skye's earlier post.

“hell no,” he began typing back, “i’ve watched horror movies dude. the moment the cops get here the monster will be gone and they’ll give me shit for wasting their time.” He posted his reply.

Skye peeked outside once more. *Okay. It’s still gone*, he told himself. *It’s been a while now. I just need to get home quickly.*

With his chores done, closing was simple: set the alarm, turn out the lights, lock the door, and leave. Skye stood up and walked towards the office behind the main lounge, peeking behind his shoulder one last time to see if *it* was there. Once again, nothing in sight.

He leaned into the office and started pressing buttons on the electronic panel fixed to the wooden desk.

Skye took a deep breath.

*Beep.* The alarm was now active. Or, at least it would be in one minute. Now he *had* to leave.

The light switches were just beside the office door; he flicked each one off, picked up his bag of baked goods, and approached the front door.

He peered left and right outside as he felt around in his pocket for the keys. The coast was clear, although it was the one time he *wished* there were other people around.

Skye pushed the door open to be greeted by cold nighttime air. After the entrance shut closed behind him, he locked it up and set off home with utmost speed.



Now utterly vulnerable, he checked behind himself every few seconds, listening closely for any noises, constantly on high alert. The shrill rustling of the plastic bag only served to heighten his paranoia, and he cursed the distant vehicles filling the air with unwanted ambience.

Skye held his breath as he passed each alleyway between buildings. The monster could've been in any one of them.

*Where is everybody?! Of course there's nobody around when I need someone! Maybe the scary man scared everybody off...?*

Left, right, left, right. Skye also cursed his footsteps for being so damn loud.

He was almost a block away from Velvet Crumble when—

“Hello.”

An unfamiliar, grating voice interrupted his thoughts.

Skye reeled around to find its source. Just to his right, leaning against a wall in the alley next to him, was the very same monster he saw outside the bakery.

“Hhh... hi...” Skye stammered, frozen in place.

“Smells good,” the monster said, turning towards him. “I'm really hungry.”

“Hungry? Food? Y-you want food?” Skye scrambled to find the right words to pacify the tall creature. “H-here! Food! Take it, okay? I-it's good!” He held the bag out in front of himself.

The tall creature leaned down with its enormous mouth hanging open, rapidly inhaling

and exhaling in front of the bagged goods. After a few moments of consideration, it snatched the bag out of Skye's hand and stood up straight, holding the bag up to its eager face.

It wasn't looking at Skye anymore. He took a step back while it was distracted.

No reaction.

Another step. Still, no reaction.

The monster tossed the entire bag into its mouth and started chewing.

Skye took the opportunity to sneak away, one quiet step at a time, until he could turn the corner and break line of sight. Adrenaline rushed through his entire body. Every step, closer to freedom.

It still paid Skye no attention as it chowed down on the bag and everything it contained.

He was inches away from the edge of the wall forming the alley. Taking a big risk, he sped up his pace and turned the corner.

The instant he was sure the monster couldn't see him anymore, Skye broke into a sprint and charged down the dark street.

His destination: 67-40, the normally bustling market street where he got his favourite meals from. However, it was already past 11:30pm. Chances of finding any crowds to blend into were slim, and most shops would be closed.

Skye glanced behind him every few seconds. Nothing in pursuit yet.

The glowing lights of 67-40 were moments away. A wave of relief washed over him

– he spotted some people walking about, minding their own business. It wasn't enough people to form large crowds, but enough to distract the monster should it find him.

*...What am I thinking?!* He felt a pang of guilt for merely considering the thought of using others as bait. Nevertheless, he slowed his sprint to a power-walk and stayed near the sides of the street by the storefronts. He still checked his six every few seconds.

The creature didn't seem to be following him. He took a moment to catch his breath and pull out his phone. Skye flicked through the screens until he got to his contact list. He called Wrench – the only one who'd responded to his panicked social media post.

*Ring...*

*Ring...*

*Ring...*

*Come on, dude. I know you're around!*

*Ring...*

Some muffled clattering was heard on the other end of the line.

“Hello?” Wrench answered.

“Yes! Hi, it's me,” Skye frantically replied. “Where are you right now?”

“I'm at home, just doing some garage work. Why? Are you okay? Did that monster find you?”

“Yeah, it did find me and I'm running away as we speak and if you're nearby I *really* wouldn't mind hooking up for a bit.” Skye barely had time to draw a breath between words.

“Is it chasing you?!”

“I don't think so, I'm okay right now but I'll tell you more later. Can we meet up?”

“Okay, uhh... I'll be done here in a few minutes. Where would you want to meet?”

“My place? Actually, maybe the ultraloop station near my place. You know the one? Just a few blocks away.”

“Ah, yeah, okay, I'll be there. Stay safe, all right?”

“I'll try,” Skye breathed. “See you soon.”

“Peace,” Wrench finished off the call.

Skye hung up and shoved the phone back into his pocket. The ultraloop station was only a few minutes away on foot – even less with his current pace. He changed his route back to the main road connecting to 67-40 street. There were far fewer pedestrians after leaving 67-40, but he'd be at the shuttle station in no time.

He checked behind himself once again. Still no monster anywhere in sight. Skye took another quick moment to slow down and catch his breath before continuing down the dark, wide-open street.

The thought of meeting up with Wrench gave him some peace of mind, but he still needed to make it there intact.

## 10 – Midnight Creep

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Still no monster around as Skye hopped down the staircase leading to the underground ultraloop station. His footsteps echoed off the metal steps louder and louder as he descended.

He snapped to attention. Just as he set foot in the station, the hum of a decelerating ultraloop shuttle reverberated through the spacious room. A glance to the left side of the station told him that was his ride home.

Only one person exited the shuttle as it stopped and opened its doors. Skye sprinted over to it before the doors closed, just barely slipping inside before it was too late. He caught onto a pole inside the shuttle to slow himself down before flopping down on a pair of empty seats.

Skye took a deep breath. He was safe for the moment, and having Wrench around would only add an extra level of security. Watching the shuttle depart from the station calmed his nerves even further.

He survived.



Skye walked off the ultraloop, now standing in the station nearest his home. Wrench wasn't at the station; *no problem*, he told himself, still quite rattled from his encounter. *They're probably on their way.*

Skye's love-hate relationship with public crowds was rearing its head once again. As he sat down on one of the cold station benches, he couldn't tell if he was happy or concerned about

the lack of people. On one hand, there was nobody around to bother him, but on the other hand... the utter lack of people in a shuttle station was unnerving. The incident outside Velvet Crumble wasn't doing his paranoia any favours either, prompting him to check both of the station's stairwells whenever he heard – or *thought* he heard – some distant noise.

The next 10 minutes of his life weren't particularly comfortable. Skye had to repeatedly remind himself to calm down now that he was kilometres away from the monster.

*It wasn't out for me. It was out for food.*

He pulled out a lighter from his coat pocket and flicked it on and off. It was one he'd modified to have an extra tall flame – almost half a foot high – and it was a convenient tool to help keep him grounded in reality.

*Just focus,* he reminded himself as he watched the narrow flame flicker to and from existence. *You're fine.*

Only a couple more minutes passed before quick footsteps approached from the leftmost stairwell. Skye eagerly looked over to see Wrench hopping down steps two at a time.

“Ey!” Skye called out.

“You rang?” Wrench answered with their hands out to their sides.

Skye hopped out of his seat and walked over towards Wrench, his friend's arrival instantly putting his heart at ease. “Damn I'm glad you're here.”

The two hi-fived and fist-bumped each other.

“No problem. You know I got your back. So, like... what the hell happened? Did you really see a monster?”

“Yeah. I'll show you. Lemme get my phone.” Skye sat back down on one of the metal benches, prompting Wrench to do the same, sitting down beside him. He pulled out his phone.

“Okay, let's see this.” Wrench leaned closer to Skye, trying to get a better view of his phone.

“And... here,” Skye muttered as he navigated through his gallery, found the video, and pressed play.

“Hey, it's Skye,” his video introduction began. After his recording rattled off details of what was happening, the strange creature from earlier craned down and showed its face to the camera, just as eerie as he remembered it.

“Yo,” Wrench exclaimed. “Real shit?” They leaned in even closer.

The monster's hand crept towards the door after it stepped into view, and the video went black when past-Skye dropped the phone and tried to remotely lock the bakery's door.

“Dude. Every paranormal investigator in the world would suck your dick for this footage,” Wrench joked.

“Except that's not a ghost. It's very fucking real.”

“Can you rewind and pause it? I want to see its face again.”

Skye did just that, rewinding back to the point when its head first came into view outside the bakery's glass doors.

“What a hottie. Do you think that's a volon?” Wrench asked.

“I bet you any money it is. I mean, what else could it be? It sure as hell doesn't look like a robot.”

Wrench stared closely at it for a few long seconds. “Humour me on this,” they began, “did it seem to transform or shapeshift in any way?”

“Not that I can think of...?” Skye scratched his chin. “The way it looked down into the bakery from so high up didn't exactly seem natural, but it *is* really tall... I don't know. Why?”

Wrench smiled. “When I was hanging out with Ray yesterday, I got to meet his new boyfriend, named Gyroloop.”

“Mhmm?” Skye listened with keen interest.

“Gyro works at Maroon.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Not in a bad way or anything, though. He just takes care of employee resources. But that's beside the point – apparently he's overheard some higher ups talking about some secret project with shapeshifting capabilities.”

“And you think volons might be that very project?”

“That's what Gyro thinks. It's an interesting theory.”

Skye hummed in thought. No, he really hadn't noticed anything shapeshifty with that



monster, although he could easily attribute that to his intense fear and panic at the time.

“Did gyro mention anything about them being hungry?” he asked. “It kept saying it was hungry... so I gave it my take-home food 'cause I was freaking out. That distracted it enough for me to get away.”

“Nah, I didn't hear anything like that.” Wrench shrugged. “Damn. Wanna go back there?”

“Back... where?”

“Velvet Crumble.”

“And get killed by a giant monster? Yeah, I'm down,” Skye dryly answered. “Are you serious?”

“Totally serious.”

“Oh my god. You've been hanging out with Ray too much.”

Wrench laughed. “No, man, listen. That thing might look scary, but it didn't attack you. It wasn't violent, right?”

“Not really, aside from snatching my food rather aggressively...”

Wrench held their hands out. “The dude's just hungry! Besides, how do we *really* know that it's one of those volon things. It could easily be a super tall robot that likes eating food, right? Just like Ray.”

Skye wanted to argue – that creature was far too organic in its appearance and mannerisms for him to believe it was a robot. But there was always the chance that Wrench was right, with how advanced robotic technology had come in the past few years. There *were* androids out and about

that could eat food, or pass as a human, even in a place as neglected as Lower Miyatama.

Whatever the case, Skye still wasn't particularly fond of the idea of going back.

"Look." Wrench pulled back the side of their coat just enough to reveal a handgun discreetly holstered on their waist.

"Shit, dude," Skye quietly remarked, almost a bit startled.

Wrench covered it up again. "It's a taser. You know – the ones that shoot out the prongs attached to the gun?"

"Where did you even get that?" Skye asked.

"Take a guess."

"Ray," Skye declared without a second thought.

"Yeah."

"Figured as much. Just don't get caught with that..."

"Ain't nobody gonna find it. That is, unless I have to use it. So... feeling a bit safer yet?"

Skye sighed and leaned his head back, looking up at the ceiling. "It's... it's still a no. It's been a long day and I'm still just a *little bit* fucking freaked out about that thing."

"All right, I get you. I'm probably still going to take a look around, see if I can spot anything spooky over there."

"Dude..." Skye paused, knowing full well he didn't have the energy to try to convince his

friend not to go. “Please be careful. For real, okay? Please. I don't want to lose a friend.”

“Come on, as if. This is hardly the most dangerous thing I've done. Ray and I almost got caught by threshers at the club yesterday. This is peanuts.” Wrench's words radiated confidence.

“Yeah, famous last words.”

“Think of it like this. I'm going out there to secure the perimeter so we know your work is safe.”

“Well... yeah, I guess.” Skye knew in his heart that Wrench wouldn't blindly throw caution to the wind, despite their outward bravado. They *were* armed, and he didn't doubt that Wrench would be capable of using that stun gun in a pinch. “Just don't get hurt. If you die, I'm gonna kill you.”

Wrench nodded. “Yeah, that's about what I'd expect.”



Riding alone on the ultraloop, Wrench tapped their foot on the ground to pass the time. They didn't want to admit it, but not having Skye with them did put a slight damper on their confidence. Nevertheless, they were determined to see this through. Skye would surely ask how it went, and telling him “I chickened out” wouldn't be a good look.

The shuttle eventually came to a stop at the station nearest the bakery. There was nary a person in sight, even when Wrench reached the streets, and eventually passed by the iconic 67-40.

Even if they were armed, Wrench kept their wits about them, traveling through open, well-lit areas as much as possible. The street lamps lining the larger roads were a godsend, but one out of every ten had succumbed to poor maintenance and general wear.

Their heart started beating faster as Velvet Crumble came into view, perhaps only 100 feet away. Was it apprehension, or excitement? Or some combination of the two...?

Wrench was on the opposite side of the street, as there were no nearby alleyways for someone to ambush them from. They put a hand on their stun gun just for a moment to give themselves a quick burst of confidence.

Slowing their pace, they kept a vigilant eye out for any movement or strange sounds, focusing mainly on the opposite sidewalk. While their claims of “the tall creature didn't seem violent” rang true, there really was no telling what exactly would happen should they encounter someone as peculiar as that.

*Is that thing really a volon?* They didn't know for sure, but the idea of encountering another new alien species was thrilling, thus, they were absolutely willing to believe it. How they got to Hallow without an enormous fanfare as with the genofexians was a question for another time.

The alleyway closest to the bakery came into view. Wrench walked slowly as they gradually got a better look into it, mentally

preparing themselves for an encounter with the tall man.

...At least, they *tried* to prepare themselves. When Wrench actually saw the same creature from the video in the alley, they froze in place and let out a tiny gasp.

They couldn't make out many details (aside from the fact that it hadn't noticed Wrench yet), but the silhouette was unmistakable. No ordinary civilian was that huge.

*Ho-ly shit. It's real.*

...I should get its number.

Despite their curious attraction to the creature, the undeniable possibility of danger prevented them from approaching any closer.

To the contrary, Wrench walked back to way they came as casually as possible, only stopping once they were sure they were out of the tall man's line of sight.

*I better tell Skye to be careful at work tomorrow.* They considered calling the police for their friend's sake, but what was there to report? An abnormally large person? No, that'd be ridiculous. Plus, it hadn't even stolen Skye's food – he was the one who willingly offered it.

Wrench pulled out their phone and got the camera ready. They crept forward again just enough to see the figure, and silently snapped several photos before cautiously returning from where they came once again.

The monster still hadn't noticed them. At least, it hadn't *acknowledged* them.

Wrench kept their phone handy as they walked away, occasionally checking to see if they *had* been noticed, until they were at least a block away. Nobody was in pursuit – *mission success*.

They dialed Skye's number and waited for two long *rings* before their friend picked up.

“Hey,” Skye greeted them.

“Hey,” Wrench replied. “So, it's still there.”

“The monster? Shit, are you okay?”

“Yep, I'm fine. I'm a street away and I don't think it noticed me. But it's still *very there*, like, one building away from the bakery. It was just chilling in the alley.”

“I encountered it in an alley when I left. It's probably the same spot.”

“Maybe. Either way, do you have work tomorrow? If so, you should probably be careful.”

“Yeah... I work tomorrow night.” Skye audibly sighed over the phone “I'll call my boss tomorrow and tell her there's a suspicious person loitering around the bakery... see if she can do anything about it, and play it by ear afterwards.”

“Good plan. Are you still at the station?”

“Hell no. I'm two steps from home.”

“Ah, yeah, that's fair. I'll just head home too then.”

“See you online when you get home?”

“Yeah, I'll be around.” Skye paused for a quick second. “Thanks for coming out there on such short notice. For real.”

“Nah, no problem. I'm always down for an adventure.”

“Well, if you can call that an adventure.  
Anyways, catch you later.”

“Right, talk to you soon.”

“See ya.”

Wrench ended the call.

## 11 – Persistent

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**Ray – Friday, 1:00pm.**

*Dev sent: BAKERY\_HELL.vid.*

“raw footage. don't mind me whimpering and freaking out lol,” Skye – under the moniker Dev – typed as he sent the video file through to his group chat with Saviour\_Blue and fucktowntyrant.

“He showed me earlier. Spoiler, the monster's hot,” Saviour\_Blue wrote in reference to when they met up with Skye and watched the video from his phone.

“if by hot you mean terrifying,” Dev replied.

“No, I definitely meant hot.”

Ray silently downloaded the video as his two friends bickered about the monster's attractiveness. As soon as it finished downloading, he played the video.

Plain as day, the monster craned down and leered into the bakery. Then the hand crept down towards the door handle, and Skye dropped the camera. Ray skimmed through the rest of the video, and it was all black except for the very end when Skye turned the camera off.

“shit cunt,” Ray typed into the chat. “monster IS hot.”

“Oh my god, a monster stalks me at work and you guys think it's sexy,” Dev wrote.

“it is,” both Saviour and Tyrant replied at the same time, followed by “ASDSBJGHBV” from Saviour barely a second afterwards.



Dev posted a snapshot of the monster's face, taken from the video. "Any of you have any idea what or who this thing is?"

"nah" Tyrant replied.

"About as much as I knew when I met you in the subway," Saviour answered.

"Damn," Dev typed in response.

"Hey! How's it going?" Gyroloop suddenly greeted Ray from the hallway behind the computer table.

"Eh. Same old. Got something interesting here though."

"Oh?" Gyroloop walked up behind Ray and began gently massaging his shoulders, peeking over him to see what had caught Ray's attention.

"Yeh. Check this out." Ray opened the bakery video from Skye. "Know my friend Skye?"

"You've mentioned him, yes."

"He took this at work yesterday." Ray maximized the video and pressed play.

"Hey, it's Skye," the video narration began as Skye briefly described what was happening. It showed the front of the bakery for several seconds until the white face of the monster leaned down from above, looking straight inside the building.

Gyroloop gasped. "Wait, Ray, pause it! Pause it on that thing's face."

"Kay." Ray rewound the video.

Gyro stopped massaging Ray's shoulders and stepped beside him, looking extra close at the screen. "Oh... oh god..."

Ray laughed. "Seen a ghost, bud?"

Gyro staggered back and shook his head.

"Yo... you good?" Ray asked, uncharacteristically concerned.

"Aha, well... Ray... that thing... um... it's..."

"Spit it out, man."

Gyro put a hand on their "chin" (or, the bottom of their camera lens). "Um... Ray, this is... I-I need a moment." He suddenly walked back down the hallway and into his room.

"...Loops?"

Something was wrong. Ray had spent plenty of time with Gyro watching horror flicks and scary videos together. Not once had he ever reacted like this.

Ray got up from his seat and slowly walked down the hall to his room, where Gyro was lying down on the bed.

"That... too much?" Ray asked. "Sorry bud."

"No, it's just..." Gyro synthesized a deep breath of air. "Your friend is in danger. Serious and immediate danger."

Ray sat down next to Gyro. "Explain."

"I'm... bottom line is... I think I know who that is."

"Who? Who is it?"

“I’ve... I’ve heard rumours about it. I think it might be one of those volons. But I-I... I don’t know for sure, I could be wrong...”

Gyro’s frantic attempts at denying what he’d just said told Ray more than he needed to know. He didn’t buy the “rumours” explanation either, but he also didn’t want to exacerbate Gyro’s already shaky mood.

“How is Skye in danger?” Ray asked, attempting to keep a calm tone. “That thing gonna come back?”

“Yes, it’s... persistent. If it is who I think it is, it is *very* persistent and dangerous. And if Skye survived an encounter with it, it will most definitely be returning for a second visit.”

Ray looked down at Gyro. “You sure?”

“I... I can’t be 100% sure, but um... chances are, yes, I am pretty sure, I think...”

Aside from his metallic head, Gyro’s body was ghostly pale. How he knew all this was beside the point – Ray figured it was something to do with Gyro’s position at Maroon, and that was a conversation for another day.

Bottom line: Ray’s friend was in danger. And if there was one thing Ray had confidence in, it was solving practical problems.

“I’ll take care of this.” Ray stood up.

“W-wait, what are you going to do?” Gyro stammered, leaning up to look at Ray.

“Scout the area. Plan out a patrol for later. Maybe see if that thing shows up.”

“If... it... does...?”

“Fuck it up.”

Gyro drew in a “breath” of air before humming in concern.

Ray walked to the opposite side of the room, over to the very securely locked closet. Two combination locks prevented any entry, and only he knew how to unlock them.

Of course, the flimsy wooden door could easily be broken into if someone *really* wanted to; they were largely there to deter snoopy guests.

The first was a simple rotating dial lock, which took him a couple seconds to spin around and unlock. The second was a much more high tech lock that featured a tiny keypad and a screen that asked for a six digit combination.

Ray looked back at Gyro, who was still lying on the bed, but watching with intense curiosity.

“Guess I never told you what's in here,” Ray said.

“...No, I don't think you have. But... something tells me I know now.” Gyro's eye remained fixated on the closet.

“No recording, bud.” Before opening the door, Ray double checked to make sure the small red light on Gyro's head was *not* on, indicating that he was recording whatever he was looking at.

“O-of course, of course.”

The door opened to reveal an array of guns, ammunition, and relevant accessories. The wall had a pair of machine guns and hunting rifles mounted and in pristine condition, while the floor had a series of handguns, tasers, mace, and a few

miscellaneous attachments off to the side, like scopes and silencers.

“W... wow.” Gyroloop almost sounded scared.

“Don't go tellin' anyone.”

“Of course not! That's just... uh... wow.”

Ray looked down at the pistols on the floor. He'd need something small and discreet for a scouting mission – a Kinrod-56 loaded with a 12 bullet magazine would do the trick. Sleek and small enough to hide beneath a coat, but it still sported a level of stopping power Ray felt comfortable with.

“I just want to know... are *we* in danger?” Gyro asked.

“Hm?”

“Like, with all those guns. Nobody's going to come looking for us, are they?”

“Nah. Not involved in risky business like that.” Ray loaded the Kinrod as he spoke. “Guns are a lot simpler than other black markets. No strings attached.”

Gyro didn't look particularly reassured. “O-okay. If you say so.”

“Yeh. We're fine. Gonna be okay while I'm out?”

“Um, yeah, I think so. It's... all just a bit overwhelming. Your friend encountering that thing, and... all those guns...”

Ray looked down at the bed Gyro laid upon. “Didn't think about that. My bad.”

“It's okay! I'll just need a few minutes to compose myself here.”

“Good man.” Ray walked out of the room, back into the living area. He closed the laptop and looked around for his coat, which was sitting on the back of the couch. His wallet and keys were on the kitchen counter, and with that, he mentally tallied up everything he'd need.

*Yeh. Good to go.*

He didn't feel perfectly comfortable leaving Gyro alone in his current state, but Ray felt it important to investigate the area before nightfall, when the creature would supposedly be coming back to give Skye a visit.

*I'll give him some TLC when I get back.*

“Hey, Ray...” Gyro stepped out of the hallway, much to Ray's surprise.

“Mmm?” Ray turned to face him.

“I changed my mind. I want to come with you.”

Ray visibly recoiled. “What? You were just shitting yourself a minute ago.”

“I know. But it's midday. There will be people around, and knowing you, well... I know you're strong. If anything happened, you would protect us.”

“Yeh. What if we *do* find that thing?”

“Well... that would be scary, but, we could get away, right? If you're armed...”

“We ain't gonna be running from it. It's gonna be running from me.” Ray holstered his handgun beneath his coat. “I ain't stoppin' you, Loops. Just don't want you freaked if I do find that fucker.”

Gyroloop looked down to the side.  
“When are you leaving?”

“Now. Can take a minute if you need.”

“Okay. Thanks...” Gyro sat down on the couch and looked back up to the ceiling. “I’m not exactly... feeling *adventurous*, it’s just really important, if that thing is who I think it is, that I know for certain. Score brownie points with Soma, maybe.”

Ray hesitated at the mention of Soma.  
“You’re gathering intel for Maroon?” His voice took on a gruff tone.

“As far as I’m aware, the identity of that person is all I – or, Maroon – would care about. Nothing else, and especially nothing about you. Whatever Maroon wants with it, it doesn’t involve you. It’s more of an internal issue.”

“Mmm. Good. Don’t need no corps readin’ me.”

Gyro forced a chuckle. “You chose a pretty bad boyfriend, then!” He tapped his camera-head.

Ray laughed too. “Yeh, guess so. Well, get ready, bud.”

Gyro’s company altered his plan a bit – icing a monster wasn’t something he was keen to do with his boyfriend around, so he planned on sticking to just scouting the area for a patrol route.

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“yo.” Ray messaged Skye from his phone, roughly 15 minutes away from the bakery.

“hey,” Skye replied a few seconds later.

“im scouting velvet right now”

“oh shit? Like, checking for that thing?”

“yep.”

“dude... thank you! Please be careful though.”

“yep”

Gyro pulled Ray's attention away from his phone. “I don't think I've actually seen Velvet crumble before.”

“High end shit... maybe. Sure looks expensive.”

“Ooh, sounds nice.”

“Yeh.”

Gyro hadn't yet shown any signs of trepidation. Ray chalked that up to the bustling streets giving him a level of comfort in anonymity, but that was just a guess. Whatever the reason was, he was glad he didn't have to “babysit” gyro, for lack of a less condescending term.

Time passed quickly as they navigated through the flocks of pedestrians, until they were just beside Velvet Crumble.

“Oh wow, this place really is beautiful!”

Gyro sounded excited.

The inside looked perfectly normal: two staff members behind the counter puttering about, a couple people sitting in the small yet elegant lounge, and someone at the till buying some baked goods; nothing at all to hint there was a strange encounter here just last night.

“Down here,” Ray directed Gyro. He walked away from the storefront and into the

nearest alleyway, leading to another smaller crossroad up ahead.

Although all the streets were generally dark given Lower Miyatama's position below another city, the alleys were often darker and quieter than the main roads, shrouded from the hustle and bustle of daily life.

Ray walked into it with a brisk pace, but Gyro had slowed a bit.

“You good?” Ray asked.

“Yeah. Just takes me a bit to get adjusted to places like these.”

Ray grunted in acknowledgment and continued on, but not before waiting until Gyro was by his side.

Compared to the clean sidewalks outside Velvet Crumble, the nearby alley was filthy. Scraps of paper and shreds of plastic bags were caked into the concrete below, while dumpsters and graffiti lined the sides of the nearby buildings. The two even encountered a homeless boombox-remite not too far in, feebly pushing a shopping cart filled with garbage bags containing who knows what.

“Damn...” Gyro muttered once he was sure the other remite was out of earshot. “I don't think I like this place too much,” he said with a hint of jest.

“Yeh. Not so nice in these parts.”

“Although... hmm...!” Gyro suddenly hummed with courage and determination. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. “Maybe I *can* do something to help...”

Not a moment later, he spun around and power-walked back to the other remite. Ray stopped and watched.

Over in the distance, they had a brief exchange of words before Gyro reached into his wallet and pulled out, presumably, some money before handing it over. The remite tramp shook Gyro's hand, bowed, and they even hugged – despite Gyro looking slightly surprised and awkward about it. They then parted ways, and Gyro walked back over to Ray.

“Feeling good?” Ray asked.

“Yes!” Gyro was very chipper. “I hope she gets back on her feet someday.”

“How much you give her?”

“1,000 srakna.”

Ray grunted. “Cutie.”

“Ohh, come on...” Gyro playfully waved a hand at Ray as they continued walking along. “It's not like I'm *poor*. Maroon, for all its faults, does pay pretty well...”

“Guess so, huh.”

Ray and Gyro soon entered a junction in the alley – ahead of them was another lane of similar quality, while to their left and right was a small road with a few people walking to and fro. It was one of the rare side streets that actually gave the impression of daytime, positioned beneath a strip of functioning skylights from the underside of the city above.

“If I was some freaky motherfucker...” Ray thought aloud, “where would I hide out?”

“There's always the chance it's not from around here,” Gyro added.

Ray led Gyro down the well lit lane, planning to scour the surrounding area for locations where a huge creature could lie in wait.

“If it's as persistent as you said... doubt it'd chill too far,” Ray replied.

“If it's who I think it is.”

“Don't buy it, Loops,”

“Huh?”

“I ain't seen no giant monster fuck in my life in this city 'til now. What do you mean you *might* know who it is? Motherfucker's pretty unique.”

Gyro didn't respond, at least for a handful of seconds. “Um... yeah.”

Ray looked at Gyro.

“I've... seen a few of them. Not in Miyatama, but... elsewhere.” He sounded very unsure.

After a moment of consideration, Ray looked forward again. He did know Gyro's job took him places – it was the reason he was in Miyatama – and Ray had never been to Era, the city in which Gyro primarily lived and worked.

However, his demeanor puzzled Ray. He'd seemed fine just prior to mentioning he'd seen more than one of those creatures.

“You know more,” Ray declared.

“Umm...”

“C'mon, Loops. Don't hold out on me. This shit's important.” Ray turned left down

another nondescript alley, prompting Gyroloop to do the same.

“...You said Miyatama is, well... *lax* on surveillance, right?” Gyro asked.

“Compared to the shit you told me about Era's cameras riding your ass 24/7, yeh. You ain't gonna find any of that in this place either.” Ray extended a hand towards the entirety of the alley they both found themselves in.

Once again, Gyro hesitated before speaking. “I don't know... I mean, yes, I do know some stuff that *might* be relevant, but I also know how much you hate Maroon. I figured it would be best just to pipe down about it. It's... it's not really anything that would *help*, per se, it's more of an... origin story sort of deal? If that makes sense?”

“We got time. Try me.”

“And... you're sure there's no big brother listening in on us right now?”

“Only see one camera.” Ray tapped the side of Gyro's head with the back of his hand.

“Fair, yes... that's... fair.” He began explaining his theory about the identity of the strange creature – about how he thought it was one of the “volons” mentioned on the news after the attack on Maroon's branch in Miyatama. He recited what he'd told Wrench when they'd first met in Ray's flat: the murmurs of “Victor Capital Foundry” between Maroon coworkers, and overhearing the phrase “shapeshifting capabilities” in the workplace.

It took Ray a minute to digest all the information. “So where'd you see those other monsters?”

“I, well... I saw them at Maroon.”

“Shit, Loops. What the fuck.”

“It's not dangerous there or anything! They weren't really *present* where I was. Sometimes I look through video clips when dealing with certain ER cases, and there have been two times when I've seen someone who, well... showed similar characteristics to our resident creepy creature.”

Ray listened intently as they turned another left corner, slowly circling the block.

“One of them was normal-ish. She looked like a human with the same pale, discoloured skin, and the same black crosses in her eyes. The other... I think the other one I saw might be who you're after.”

There was a long, silent pause between the two.

“Those cases were from the Lower Miyatama branch. Soma always told me to keep quiet about those ones.”

“Heh. Coulda told me it was classified instead of spillin' the beans to some street thug.”

“I suppose, but he never explicitly said it was classified. I suppose it was less him *telling* me, and more him *encouraging* me, hoping I'd get the idea. But, you know, maybe you were right! I've been thinking about how Soma treats me, and maybe you're right about him being a... a dick, so

to say. Maybe this can be my petty revenge, telling you something he doesn't want to get out.”

Ray didn't like the last part of Gyro's spiel. Although he'd never met Soma before, he knew better than to mess with people in powerful positions, and Gyro seemed to have a dangerous level of naivety regarding just that.

“So. Feelin' better with that off your chest?” Ray asked.

Gyro took a few seconds to respond. “I think I am, actually, yes. That felt nice.”

“Good. Don't do it again.”

“Huh?”

“You know I ain't never gonna narc, especially not if it's about your cunt boss. But you shouldn't fuck with people like him. They got power and resources.”

“I guess so...”

“Be careful who you tell too much to. Just sayin'.”

“Right, right.” Gyro quickly went from upbeat to solemn.

As the two chatted, Ray had been regularly checking left and right, looking for any convenient hiding spots for an alleged volon. He hadn't seen much, however; the surrounding buildings solidly lined the alleys, leaving no nooks or crannies for someone to hide out in.

That changed when they reached the end of the current side-street, where the right side opened up into a vast scrapyard dug into the ground. It didn't appear to be active, at least not at the moment – no vehicles, toll booths, or much in

the way of maintenance supplies, and the chain-link fence encompassing the yard had succumbed to rust and disrepair.

Ray stopped and stared with his hands on his hips. Gyro looked over at him expectantly.

Scouring a scrapyard with Gyro by his side wouldn't be an ideal use of Ray's time, but the yard gave him a good idea of where he'd be patrolling later tonight – when Skye would be working.

He couldn't deny the possibility of the monster hiding out there at that very moment, but he didn't want to risk putting Gyro in any situation that would compromise his safety. Thus, he turned left and started walking down the street, circling back to where they'd encountered the tramp minutes ago.

“Yeh. Let's go,” he said.

“Hmm? You don't want to check out this yard?”

“Gonna come back here tonight when Skye's workin'. Catch that fucker when it don't expect nobody. Don't need to jump in there right now.”

Gyro caught up to him. “Don't you think it could be hiding out in there right now?”

“...Dunno. But if I was a giant that needed to lay low before stalkin' someone two streets away, that's where I'd do it.”

“Oh... well, I guess that's a good point. But if you're coming back later... don't you think it might be easier to just wait outside the bakery and see if it comes back?”

“Yeh, but the cops want me in, and I ain't about to risk loitering in one spot at night for hours.”

Gyro slowly looked to the side. “Oh.”

The walk back to the main street was relatively quiet after that last exchange. Despite the short trip, Ray felt confident that he had a few solid places to patrol in search of that *thing*.

Tonight, he'd have his friend's back.

12 – Completely Ordinary Day of Work

Skye – Friday, 10:47pm.

On the outside, it was just another same-old day at work. But in the inside, Skye was restless and uneasy.

The encounter from last night had been riding on his mind so much that he'd almost forgotten about the Sunday deadline to give those loan sharks a suitable payment for their borrowed money. The realization quickly amplified his stress, leaving him dizzy with even more things to worry about.

Just breathe. Breathe, Skye... the monster hasn't shown up yet. It's probably moved on. And Ray said he was going to scout the area too. Plus, with today's paycheck... I can give those sharks what they want. Although, the idea of simply walking into the money-now shop didn't sit well with him after the threat he received earlier in the week. How he was going to manage that was a problem for future Skye.

The reassurances he told himself were only a temporary respite. Each time his stresses wormed their way back into his head, the queasy feeling rushed back and the cycle continued.

The bakery was empty, as was usual for that time of night. Skye was almost thankful that nobody would have to see him in his current state.

He'd managed to finish his chores just minutes earlier, so he pulled out his phone and messaged Ray.

“Hey, are you around Velvet right now? I'm almost off but I haven't seen the creepy guy yet,” he typed.

Ray said earlier via instant messaging that he was scouting the area, but Skye wasn't sure if that meant he was going to be returning later or not. And as the minutes passed without a response from Ray, he became more and more unsure if he even had any protection at all.

Before finishing his closing duties, he walked to the front of the lounge and peered outside the glass door, checking down the street for any signs of suspicious – or gigantic – people. Of course, there was nothing to be seen.

Right... of course they wouldn't be so obvious. Skye sighed.

Walking back to the main countertop, he opened the glass compartment containing all the baked goods, and slipped a small handful of pepperoni rolls into a plastic bag. He'd helped make them earlier in the shift, and they both looked and smelled delicious.

He just hoped he'd make it home with them.

Skye peeked into the office where he'd turn off the lights and activate the alarm. It was the point of no return – he'd have to leave once the alarm was set. His fears made him hesitate, but he ultimately managed to pull through and finish his closing duties.

Still no reply from Ray.

He let out a deep breath and left the bakery, pepperoni rolls in hand, checking both

ways for anything creepy. Nothing out of the usual so far.

Instead of walking down the sidewalk next to the bakery – next to the alleys where he'd encountered the monster yesterday – he jaywalked across the empty road and hopped onto the opposite sidewalk, where he not only had a clear view of the gaps between each building next to the bakery, but there weren't nearly as many crevices for something spooky to pop out at him.

The street ended in the other direction, so he inevitably had to pass by the dreaded alleyway.

Thus, he cautiously walked home, listening for any strange sounds beyond his footsteps and the rustling plastic bag in his hand. It was the second lane past the bakery where the monster took his food last night; he continued walking, but as that alley came into view, he discreetly peered over to see if it was there.

Skye's heart almost stopped. It *was* there.

Casually standing against the wall in the same spot as before was that giant, strange person.

Before Skye had a chance to turn back and find an alternate route, it looked straight at him from across the street.

“Hello again!” it said.

Skye peered at it through the corner of his eye. The creature wore the same toothy grin as before.

He resisted the urge to stop, or turn around, or shout, or anything that would betray his fear. Fighting against the adrenaline coursing through his body, Skye kept walking forward at

the same pace, pretending as if he hadn't heard the creature at all.

“I'm very hungry,” it sang, this time with a peculiar cockney accent.

Every second felt like an hour. Every step was heavy and arduous. But he kept walking, and the monstrous figure spoke no further, nor could Skye hear it moving.

He was almost out of eyesight. He didn't dare look back to see if it caught on to his ploy – not until he was certain he was clear of that alley.

Anticipation started welling up in him. He was almost clear. He could run and escape. His plan worked.

“Kyeheh-heh-heh,” the monster cackled in the distance.

Skye looked back.

He was past the creature's alley, and it hadn't come out to chase him.

He bolted into a frantic sprint, adrenaline pushing him far faster than he thought he was capable. The street lights blurred together and the cold wind rushed past him – none of it mattered; his only goal was to *get away*. He didn't even stop at 67-40, still fearful that he might've upset the monster by giving it the cold shoulder.

Where the fuck is Ray when I need him?! The thought fled his mind as fast as he'd conjured it. The ultraloop station wasn't far, and he didn't plan on stopping until he made it there. His legs were sore and his lungs ached, but he couldn't risk stopping. Not now.

A few minutes later, he was racing down the stairs of the subway, narrowly avoiding tripping on the steps, until he made it to the station.

Skye doubled over on one of the benches. A few other people waiting for the same shuttle shot him some curious glances, but nothing more. However, their presence was the last thing on his mind.

In. Out. In. Out. His chest burned and his legs felt as if they were about to fall off. *In. Out. In. Out.*

He hadn't even bothered to check behind him as he was running. No big monster had rushed down the stairs in hot pursuit, so he assumed he was in the clear.

He wiped his forehead, sweat glistening on his hand, and he shut his eyes, focusing solely on breathing. The pain in his chest slowly faded as the minutes passed, and he was finally able to catch a few long, deep breaths. Still no monster.

The ultraloop arrived not too long later. He hobbled on board after the others had entered single-file, flopping down in a seat near the door.

Once again, he'd survived. But this time, it was far less relieving; how he was going to live with a monster stalking his workplace was a problem he had no ready solution to. Calling his boss was the first option he thought up, but it was just after 11pm. That would have to wait until tomorrow morning.



Home was always a genuine relief. A shower helped clear his mind, and his room was a sanctuary where he could put the world behind him, at least for a handful of hours. *Live in the moment*, he often told himself with varying degrees of enthusiasm. This time, it wasn't particularly enthusiastic.

Ray still hadn't replied to his messages, and Cassandra had gone to bed, leaving him alone to his thoughts. Not necessarily a bad thing, though, as his secret project was a great way for him to occupy his time before bed.

"The Mystery of Madeakelor," he liked to call it, imagining he was the star of some movie where he was a cool tech-hacker-dude. He hadn't received any further messages from the enigmatic madeakelor, so he prepared to continue his work on the device that would hopefully identify the signal covering the Miyatama region. He was certain the two must have been related.

Skye pulled up a chair and looked over his work desk.

...Tap tap tap.

He froze for a moment, immediately losing focus on his project. That sound was coming from the window just to the left of his desk. The curtain was drawn, blocking out any view of the outside.

He had no idea who it could've been. Was it Ray, perhaps? Worse yet... one of the loan sharks?

He didn't want to humour the third guess that came into his head.

Tap tap tap. Just a bit louder this time. It was a sharp but gentle noise – not too aggressive, just enough to get someone's attention.

There's no way it's a coincidence someone's tapping on MY window after all that's happening. Opening the curtain was the last thing he wanted to do, but if it was someone who meant him harm, he could just keep the window locked. That's what he told himself, at least.

“Hello?” he asked the window.

No reply.

Skye hesitated, but he stood up and pushed his chair back, slowly walking over to the window. He reached for the curtain, pulling it back just an inch so he could see outside.

An enormous white face stared inside at him, with two black crosses for eyes, and a smile containing far too many teeth.

“FUCK!” Skye yelled, staggering backwards as he flung the curtain away, catching himself on the chair to avoid falling on his rear.

“Kyeh-heh-heh-hah!” the monster laughed without restraint, now clearly in view. “I was right! You really are fun,” it continued in the same silly accent as before.

It knows where I fucking live! Did it follow me?! Shit!

“I'm still hungry, human,” it said with a commanding tone.

Skye looked over to his desk, where he had an open box of granola bars sitting by his work station. That was all he had at the ready. Without hesitation, he snatched it off the desk.

“L-look, I'll give you these, just *go away*, okay?! Please!” he practically sobbed as he stepped forward, still clear of the window.

“*Just give me something to EAT, human.*” Its playful, cockney voice turned into a sharp growl. “*Or maybe I'll have to come in there.*”

“N-no no, that's okay!” Skye stammered, working up the courage to walk a few feet forward to hand the monster his snacks. “This is all the food I have,” he lied, “so... just please don't come back again, okay...?”

Skye walked up to the window and slowly slid it open, just enough to slide the box through.

The monster snarled. In one quick motion, it grabbed the window, slammed it open, and reached for the box.

But it didn't grab the box. It grabbed Skye's arm.

It yanked Skye up and out of the window so fast as to send an excruciating, searing pain through his body from his shoulder as the creature lifted him high up into the air outside.

Skye screamed as loud as his lungs would allow, both in terror and pain.

The monster looked up at him with that same terrible grin as before. “You think that tiny morsel will fill my stomach?! Kyeh-heh-heh. No, I think I need something *more.*”

Beyond intense throbs of pain and panicked hyperventilating, Skye looked down at the monster's face. As it finished speaking, it

opened its mouth far wider than Skye would have thought possible, revealing several rows of pointed, yellow teeth, and a discoloured tongue that snaked out of its mouth.

“NO!!” Skye yelled. “Please, no! Don't eat me! Oh my god, please don't eat me!” he pleaded.

BANG. A piercing sound filled the air – a gunshot. *BANG, BANG.*

The creature unleashed a fell roar as it staggered forward, carelessly dropping Skye in the process. He plummeted towards the ground, unable to brace his fall as his body slammed into the cold cement below, back first.

Another surge of pain shot through his head, and he could hardly hear anything – his ears were suddenly ringing far too loud. His whole body ached and throbbed.

“Help,” he whined. “Help...”

Two more gunshots cracked through the air, just loud enough to hear over the ringing. With great effort, he turned his head to the side, looking over at what was happening.

The monster was nowhere to be seen – it'd fled, presumably – and Ray was standing just in sight with a pistol in his hand, pointing it down the road.

Ray stood frozen in place for a few seconds before lowering his gun and turning to face Skye.

He couldn't tell if Ray was saying anything – he barely moved his mouth when he spoke, and Skye could still hardly hear.

“...Hey!” Ray shouted just loud enough get through the ringing.

“I can't hear you,” Skye mouthed, unsure if the words were coming out. “Help... it hurts...”

Ray reached into his pocket, pulled out a phone, held it up to the side of his head. “Don't fuckin' move... could be fucked up,” he spoke before running out of Skye's vision.

Skye laid his head down on the concrete, only then realizing how cold the ground was.

He just hoped Ray was calling an ambulance.

A handful of seconds later, Ray emerged back into view with a blanket in hand. He crouched down beside Skye.

“—You hear me?” Ray said.

“Hey,” Skye spoke, still unsure if he actually was talking or not.

Ray brought the blanket over and lifted gently lifted Skye's head up, placing part of the blanket underneath it. He draped the remainder over Skye's body.

Ray leaned down right next to Skye's ear. “Ambulance is coming. Hang tight.”

The words lent Skye a moment of relief, but the throbbing quickly eliminated it. The ringing had subsided just a touch, but his hearing was still heavily impaired.

Ray sat down beside him.

“Am I bleeding?” Skye asked, just barely able to hear his own voice.

“Yeh.”

“Oh no... where from...?”

“Your head, I think.”

“Am I gonna die...?”

“Fuck no.”

Skye limply reached up and touched his face with his left hand, retracting it when he touched liquid. It wasn't blood, rather, it looked like water.

He only then became aware that he'd been crying since the incident.

“Probably banged your head,” Ray explained. “Head injuries bleed a lot. But you'll be fine.”

“Painkillers...?” Skye whimpered.

Ray shook his head. “Got none... sorry bud.”

“Skye!” a distant voice called out. Young, female – he quickly identified it as his younger sister Cassandra.

“Fuck... Ray... don't let her see me like this...”

“Too late, bud.”

A shadow fell over his face. Skye leaned up to see his younger sister standing above him, looking utterly terrified. “Skye, what's wrong? Are you hurt?”

“U-uh... hey...” Skye mumbled.

“Need me to help with this?” Ray asked in a rare moment of compassion.

“Please, yes...”

“Yo, miss,” Ray began talking to Cassandra. “Skye got hurt and he needs to go to the hospital. Gonna stay with him 'til they get here, and I'll come watch over you after.”

“...Who are you? Do you know him?” she asked, tears welling in her eyes as she looked between Ray and Skye.

“Yeah, he's a good friend,” Skye said. “You can trust him, okay? I'll be all right.”

“C'mon. Go inside,” Ray told her, standing up to walk along with her.

Cassandra was hesitant, but ended up going along with Ray. A door shut not too far off in the distance, and then Ray returned not long afterwards.

“When you go back inside,” Skye began, “close my window.”

“Yeh. Sorry 'bout the mess. Climbed into your window to get the blanket.”

A mess in his room and a bad laundry day were the least of Skye's concerns.

Ray sat down beside Skye again, and a few minutes later, approaching sirens filled the air, and flashing lights could be seen around the street corner. An ambulance drove into view, parked roughly a dozen metres away, and out came two paramedics ready to help – one man, and a four-armed robot.

“Hello, are you Ray?” the man asked.

“Yeh. The guy's right here.”

“Okay. Do you know what happened?”

As Ray talked with the male EMT, the mechanical paramedic approached Skye.

“Can you hear me?” the robot asked.

“Um... yeah.”

“Can you move?”

“...I don't know.” He moved his legs around gently – the least painful area on his body – quickly proving that, yes, he could move. “Yeah.”

“Are you in any pain?”

“Yes... head... right shoulder... hip... bleeding from my head.”

The robot leaned over and delicately checked Skye's head, before pulling out a strip of gauze from their satchel. “I'm going to lift your head and place this on the bleeding area, okay?”

“Mhmm,” Skye answered.

They did just that, applying pressure against the back of his head. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Skye... Devereaux.”

“Okay, and what year is it?”

“...2342.”

The medic continued asking him questions and performing some brief field tests: Do you know where you are? *Lower Miyatama, just outside my home.* What day of the week is it? *Friday.* The questions were simple, but they slowly began blurring together in his head, as if he was a spectator watching himself run on autopilot.

“How did you hit your head?” the medic asked.

Skye hesitated before answering. How was he supposed to explain that he was attacked by a monster?

“I fell,” he said. “I got lifted up... and dropped.”

Aside from the last question, being able to answer the paramedic's questions accurately enough gave Skye a small dose of relief; perhaps his injuries were less serious than he thought.

"I'm going to shine a light into your eye, okay?" The robot did just that, one in each eye for several seconds.

"Are they working?" Skye asked.

"...They seem to be, yes, but you may have a mild concussion." The robot shifted position to Skye's other side, looking at his shoulder. "I'm going to apply gentle pressure to some locations," the robot continued, the rest of its speech trailing off as Skye struggled to focus on its speech.

"Yeah," Skye replied.

A poke on his lower arm. "Any pain?"

"No."

Another poke. Then on his upper arm, and elbow. Pain? No. Pain? No.

Then the medic touched his shoulder and it screamed out in searing pain.

"Pain, pain!" Skye called out.

"Okay. And here?"

Skye winced. "Yes... not as bad."

"Okay. Your shoulder may be broken or dislocated. We're going to take you to the hospital, okay Skye?"

"Okay..."

The medic met up with the other EMT talking to Ray, and they walked over to the back of the ambulance before bringing a stretcher over to Skye.

They placed it on the ground beside him and carefully lifted him up, prompting another jolt of pain as his body was inevitably jostled.

“I’ll come see you,” Ray said, standing just beside him. “Hang in there. You’ll make it.”

“Thanks...”

The medics lifted him up and brought him into the back of the ambulance – he squinted from the sudden change to the brightly lit interior of the vehicle. The robot sat down beside him.

“Am I going to live?” Skye whined, trying to control his breathing as he attempted to squirm into a less painful position.

“Oh, yes,” the bot said, taking on a very optimistic tone. “I’ve seen far worse.”

That was all he needed to hear to stifle most of his fears.

The other medic shut the ambulance's rear doors, and a handful of seconds later, he entered the driver's seat and the ambulance started moving.

Skye made a mental note to never open his window again.

13 – Company in Wait

Skye rested his head against the pillow of the hospital bed, restless beyond words. He wasn't sure what time it was – with no phone handy and no clock on any nearby walls, he almost felt like he was trapped in some strange limbo.

At the very least, the hospital was clean and didn't smell too strongly of disease. The white paint with teal décor gave the place a modern feel, contradicting everything Lower Miyatama stood for. Even the staff members were nice; a surprising number of the nurses were robots – *less room for error that way?* Skye wondered. It didn't bother him, rather, it further piqued his interest about mechanical citizens' roles in human society.

But that was about it. He was stuck in the hospital with nothing more than his thoughts, and the occasional flicker of pain.

It was a dislocated shoulder, the nurses told him. Skye was certain it happened when the monster had yanked him out of his room, seeing as that was when the first blast of pain erupted from his shoulder. The doctors had carefully resocketed the joint, causing the strangest feeling he'd ever experienced. It was still sore, but he'd been given some painkillers and a shoulder brace to ease the brunt of the pain.

As for his head, yes, it was a concussion. “It's not too serious. I doubt you'll experience any long-term issues,” one of the nurses had told him. They'd done a thorough scan of his head with some unfamiliar hospital equipment, and found no

bleeding around his brain. The external bleeding, however, required a few stitches.

Aside from all that, he'd been a bit banged up from the fall. His hip and the surrounding area had a few nasty bruises, but no other serious injuries.

Skye considered himself lucky, given the circumstances. The hospital staff still wanted to keep him in for at least a night to ensure there weren't any complications with his head or shoulder, which is largely what was taxing on his mind. His sudden absence from society couldn't have come at a worse time.

Those sharks... I need to pay them something by Sunday! But I don't know what day it is... Saturday, maybe? Fuck. He'd slept for some time after the nurses gave him the green light to do so, but he still had no idea what time it was.

Cassandra... she's probably worried sick. Not to mention Ray isn't exactly nanny material... I hope she's okay. And when the thought of finances crossed his mind, he forced out a small chuckle. Even if I have to miss work... at least the monster didn't take my bread rolls this time. Yeah, budgeting!

The jest was short-lived, though. He was still living paycheck to paycheck, and missing out on a single day of work would cost him dearly.

He sighed. *When I get home...* he thought, hesitating to make a future commitment. *I'll call dad. I... I can't handle it here anymore.*

He couldn't help but fidget his fingers around, trying to calm himself down. Not too long

passed – five minutes, maybe – before one of the nurses approached his “room,” which was little more than some curtains blocking off sight from other patients.

“Mr. Devereaux? You have a visitor.”

A familiar thuggish bot stepped into view from beyond the curtains.

“Ray.” Skye smiled.

“Sup.”

“Has there been any more pain or discomfort, Skye?” The nurse asked. “No complications?”

“Ah, it's been getting better with the meds you guys gave me. No sudden spikes in pain or anything.”

“Okay, great. I'll check in with the doctor and we can probably have you discharged tonight.”

“Nice!” Skye grinned again.

The nurse returned the smile. “I'll give you two some space.” She walked out of Skye's room.

Ray stepped over beside Skye. “You got fucked up, son.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

“You good?” Ray asked, crouching down beside Skye.

“I think so. Minor concussion and dislocated shoulder. I got lucky.”

“Like fuck you did. You'd have been monster grub without me. Fucking hell.”

“Yeah... I can't possibly thank you enough, Ray. You literally saved my life.”

“Hmph. Get me a good T-bone steak when you're outta here and we'll call it even. None of that synthetic shit, though. *Real fuckin' meat.*”

Skye grinned again. “You'd probably get along with that monster.”

“Like hell I would.”

“It certainly seems to like me. I could hook you two up.”

“Fuck off.” Ray sat down in the seat just next to Skye's hospital bed.

“So, dude... what happened?” Skye inquired. “How did you... *know?*”

Ray crossed his arms. He went on to detail how he'd shown Gyro the bakery video, his reaction, and then the brief scouting mission that took place afterwards. He kept his voice quiet.

“Didn't really hit me that I wouldn't be able to go dive into a scrapyard looking for a giant creep with the boyfriend with me until we were standing right there. Called it quits when I saw the yard, but I had a hunch I'd be comin' back there soon,” Ray explained.

“And Gyro said... that monster's persistent enough to keep coming back?” Skye desperately tried to convince himself that he'd misheard Ray.

“Yeh. It did, didn't it?”

“You tell me,” Skye whimpered.

“...Yeh. So I went back last night. Didn't get your message 'til after that whole fuckfest, but yeh, I was out stalkin' that bastard.” Ray leaned forward. “*And I fuckin' saw some giant thing walk out of that scrapyard.* I was fuckin' right.

And it was fast. Couldn't keep up, but I had half a mind to know where it was going.”

“The bakery.”

“Mmm. I saw it in an alley just off the street.” Ray paused for a few seconds.

“You didn't just shoot it then and there?” Skye whispered.

“Didn't like what I saw, Skye. Loops told me about this “shapeshifting” thing at Maroon or something. Didn't know what he was talking about. Didn't think it had anything to do with this.”

“No...” Skye muttered. “You mean...?”

“When I caught up to it in that alley, it was real dark. Couldn't see it clearly, but it was big enough that I knew it was who I was after. Its silhouette against the street lights was all I could see, and it kept changing and shifting. Not moving around, but... fuckin' *changing*, dude.”

Skye let out a long, drawn-out exhale.

“I'm gonna keep it real with you. This thing might be a serious fuckin' problem,” Ray finished.

“So, like... again, *why* didn't you shoot it when you had the chance?” He frowned.

“Dunno, dude. Wish I did.”

Skye whined a bit more, but decided not to push the issue. “Uh, by the way. How's Cass?”

“Fine. Probably kinda weirded out at having me there. But she was cool when I left. Front door's locked. So's your window.”

“Good. Thanks.” Skye breathed a sigh of relief.

“She's still shaken up about the whole thing. Asked me a bunch about how you were. When you were comin' home. Hey, y'all got a phone at your place?”

Skye thought for a moment. His phone was still in his room – Cassandra probably wouldn't barge in and answer it if someone called it.

“Nah, no landline or anything there,” Skye answered.

Ray grunted. “Guess you'll talk to her when you get back.”

“Yeah.” Despite his casual response, his inner turmoil was only growing. *She's alone without anyone to talk to, worried that her only immediate family – and guardian for that matter – is fucked up in a hospital with no way of knowing if he's okay...!*

“I guess it might be a bit much to ask if you could look after her til I get out?”

Ray shook his head. “No can do, bud. Sorry. Got some shit I'm committed to this mornin'. Didn't even know what hospital you were in, but got lucky since this place was along the way.”

Guess he wouldn't be able to walk me home either. “That reminds me, you got the time?” Skye asked.

Ray checked his phone. “2:10am.”

“Sunday..?”

“Yeh.”

“Damn. Thanks.” *Fuck! How long have I been stuck here?! He'd have to figure out*

something for the loan sharks as *soon* as he got home.

“Speakin' of.” Ray stood up. “I gotta bounce. Catch you online later, yeh?”

“Ah, yeah, sure thing. That was a pretty short visit.”

“Ain't got much time tonight. Wanted to check on you though. Keep you posted and all.”

“Well, I'm still glad you came!”

“No prob.” Ray peeked out from the curtains encompassing Skye's room. “How the fuck you get outta here?” he whispered.

“Follow the exit signs on the ceiling...?”

“...Yeh. Okay. Thanks.”

“A nurse could probably—” Skye began, only to realize Ray had already left.

I love that idiot.



About 20 minutes later (at least, by Skye's estimates), the doctor who'd been taking care of him popped in to give him a final checkup before informing him that he'd been discharged from the hospital. They gave him a couple of spare painkillers to take home, and told him that the shoulder brace should stay on until a follow-up appointment with his doctor.

Conveniently, it fit snugly under his favourite shirt and coat, so it wouldn't be cramping his style.

The hospital seemed fine with dropping him on the street with no special means to get home, however. He pushed the admittance doors open to be greeted with crisp early morning air,

and with a quick look around, he found an intersection telling him he was at 71-38 street – not too far from his favourite food strip, but way farther than he'd like to be from home.

He started his trek home, heading straight for the ultraloop near 67-40. The streets were eerily quiet, save for the occasional vehicle driving through the city. Even if he was only a few blocks from familiar territory, navigating Miyatama in the silent darkness was something Skye hoped he'd never be doing again.

The only illumination throughout the underside of the platform city were occasional street lamps and the flickering billboards on the sides of buildings – a familiar environment, to be sure. Maybe he was too used to his usual route-to-and-fro work and his preferred shopping outlets, but it felt like the majority of the city was very similar, if not identical in general appearance.

Only two blocks away from the station, a group of neon figures loitering on the opposite side of the road paid Skye some unwanted attention. It started with a wolf-whistle, before a synthesized voice shouted out “got any parts to spare for us, sweetie?”

Threshers.

“I wish,” Skye nonchalantly called back, lowering his voice to try and sound tougher. His response seemed to have satisfied them, as they turned back to each other and continued mumbling among themselves.

They probably already scanned me anyways. Even though threshers were a very

prevalent and dangerous gang, they weren't known for targeting unmodified humans. Skye managed to keep himself in check without freaking out too badly.

Aside from that chance encounter, his trip to the ultraloop station went uninterrupted.

Clack-clack-clack. His footsteps descending the subway stairs sounded more like stomps with how loud the echo was.

As expected, nobody was present in the waiting area, but the shuttle wasn't there either. Though, while sitting down, he noticed a nondescript homeless person in the corner of the station, sitting among a few garbage bags.

Skye exhaled and looked down into his lap. He didn't have any of his possessions on him – wallet, keys, phone, or his lighter, which would've be working wonders to calm his nerves right about then. He had no way to call anyone, not even a way to get in his own home, unless Cassandra was still awake by the time he got home.

I don't want to have to try to wake her up. I'm sure some person banging on the front door in the dead of night won't scare her half to death or anything.

Skye looked up and around the empty station, searching for something to help him pass the time. “Fare exempt route,” he whispered to himself, reading the first signs his eyes came across. “Stand back two metres from ultraloop line. Klein's Bar & Grill, 67-41 street.” Other things of note included a fire extinguisher in the

corner of the station beside a maintenance door, a pair of bright yellow advertisement signs on the far end of the tunnel, and, of course, the tramp in the corner of the room he was avoiding making eye contact with, so as to not incite a conversation.

“Wha—” Skye gasped.

He instantly locked up. The homeless man in the corner of the subway was gone, and in his place was that very same monster from before, staring at him from the darkness.

That can't be right. No way. No fucking way. He shut his eyes for a couple seconds, praying he was seeing things, hoping his mind was just playing tricks on him. *It's just stress. I'm overstressed.*

He opened his eyes, and it was still there.

“No,” he breathed. “No, no, no...” Skye continued. He stood up from his seat. “H-how? Where did you?!”

“Kyeh-heh-heh. Imagine seeing you here!” it taunted him.

Hyperventilating. Heart pounding. Skye started running backwards, keeping his eyes locked on the creature, only shifting his gaze to look for the staircase out.

“Ah, ah! I wouldn't run if I were you. See, I've already eaten tonight,” the monster explained as it slowly walked towards him.

Skye slowed his pace for a moment.

“But if you start running, I'm going to get excited, and I'm *sure* I can make room for seconds.” It flashed a wicked, hungry grin.

Skye didn't know if he could trust it. It had *just* tried to eat him just a handful of hours ago. It was walking towards him, with nobody else around, and it had that horrible smile with intent clearly displayed.

“Don't get any closer!” Skye yelled, clenching his teeth. “I'll fuck you up!” he bluffed.

“Ah, ah! Are you trying to threaten me? It wasn't very hard to put you in the palm of my hand yesterday.”

“My guard was down,” Skye explained, “and that will never happen again!”

Another hollow laugh from the monster.

“I don't want trouble, okay?” Skye pleaded. “I won't hurt you if you don't hurt me. *Okay?*”

It stood still and growled. “Why don't you sit down so we can talk about your friend who *shot* me.” It held out its hands towards the nearest bench.

Skye gulped. There truly wasn't any escape from this situation, was there...? The staircase was only a few metres away, but that thing would catch up to him in an instant... and if he tried to scream, it would surely silence him before anyone came. There was no telling when the shuttle would arrive, either...

The monster finally took its gaze off Skye for a moment as it walked over to the relatively tiny bench and sat down. “I'm waiting,” it growled.

“F-fine... okay...” he submitted, cautiously walking over to the same bench. “Just... please don't hurt me...”

No response.

As Skye stepped past the monster to the other side of the bench, he braced himself to be grabbed and tossed into the air in an instant, as if he was walking towards his execution.

But he sat down beside the horrible creature without any such incident.

Skye lowered his head and tucked his hands between his legs. “Here I am, talking with a giant monster that tried to kill me yesterday. It doesn't feel like this is real anymore. Why aren't I shitting my pants right now?”

“You should be.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Skye's head was swimming, and his whole body felt just the slightest bit numb. He was genuinely surprised he wasn't crying. “I've all but accepted my fate at this point.”

“That's why I like you. You're fun.”

Skye felt a strange sense of relief upon hearing those words. If it liked him, maybe it really didn't plan on ending his life then and there.

“Human. Tell me your name,” it barked.

“...Skye. And... you?”

“*Me?*”

“Do you have a name?”

“My name... is Zev. And it's *MY* name!” Zev snarled, lurching forward in their seat. “Not that... *Red...*”

Skye flinched as Zev exploded with sudden fury. “Sorry, sorry...!”

Zev stared forward, growling for a few long, drawn-out breaths.

“U-u-um... what did you want to talk about?” Skye asked, peering over at Zev through the corner of his eyes.

“Ah, ah. Your *friend* shot me.”

“Did he...? Um, because... if I may say... you don't look injured.” Skye never really had a chance to see if Zev was hurt at all, but they certainly weren't acting as if they were suffering from multiple bullet wounds.

“Guns can't hurt me. It's the principle behind it. I don't like being *shot*, human.”

“R-right... I understand.”

“I'm here to exact revenge.” Zev looked down at Skye with that familiar, hungry smile.

Skye shuddered, ready to jump to his feet the moment Zev moved another muscle. “Y-you... you said you weren't hungry!”

“Kyeh-heh-heh! I'm not going to eat you. What I want is *information*. Your friend has a date with my stomach, and you're going help me arrange it.”

That was the tipping point for Skye. He could feel the tears welling up in his eyes and his lips starting to quiver. The mental image of Zev killing Ray – or, any of his friends – was too much to bear, and he could hardly contain his emotions.

But he sucked it up the best he could. There was no telling how Zev would react to an

outburst of any kind, and that fear pushed him to keep it together.

“Don't... hurt... Ray. Please, I... I couldn't send him to his death...!” he whimpered between breaths, focusing all his effort on keeping himself intact. He knew Ray could hold himself in a fight by all means, but there was no telling what Zev was capable of. If Ray's gunfire had almost no effect...

Zev slowly turned to face Skye. “Ray? Ray... very good. Now, *tell me about Ray.*”

“I... I can't! Go sniff him out yourself...!” Skye quickly fell from terrified to dejected.

“Revenge makes you humans even more delicious. I want to *savour* it. I want to know *WHO* my next meal is. So tell me, Skye, about your friend Ray.” Zev brought their face down closer to Skye, and they didn't sound especially pleased.

...Humans? Wait... does Zev not know that Ray is a robot? Did he not see Ray last night?! A last-ditch plan hatched in Skye's head at that very moment.

Skye sniffled. “He... plans on meeting me tonight. On the street outside my home. You already know where that is.” He shut his eyes and grimaced.

“Kyeh-heh-heh-heh. *Good.* Go on...”

“He has... short brown hair, light skin... and he usually wears a blue coat and green shirt. And he's always got a gun.”

Zev smiled again. This time, it was a face of satisfaction rather than carnal hunger. “Ah,

good. As for you... tell me what happens, Skye, if your friend is not there.”

“...You'll eat me instead.” Skye looked away.

“Tell me what happens if I find out you have been *lying to me*.”

“S-same... thing...?”

Zev leaned down mere inches from Skye's ear. “I know where you work. And I know where you live. You will never escape.”

Skye didn't dare budge. He tried his best to hide his shaking limbs. “Yeah,” he peeped.

“Any funny business... and *you're* back on the menu.”

With nigh perfect timing, Skye could hear the ultraloop coming down the tunnel.

“Th-that's my ride,” Skye said, hoping to get some sort of permission from Zev to leave.

“Going so soon? I'm hurt,” Zev laughed, finally leaning away from Skye's head.

The ultraloop came to a very quick stop at the underground station.

“Leave, then,” Zev commanded.

Skye instantly stood up and power-walked over to the shuttle, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to make sure Zev wasn't following him. The giant creature hadn't moved – it was just grinning wildly at him.

Skye walked down the centre aisle of the shuttle, getting as much distance as possible from the ultraloop's doors. As said doors closed, Skye flopped onto one of the seats, ensuring he didn't bump his sore shoulder.

Relief allowed him some room to breathe, while tension and fear kept his body rigid. His eyes were stuck wide open and his stress took the form of tears rolling down his cheeks.

There were only a couple other people on the shuttle that morning, both of whom were preoccupied with their phones on distant seats. Skye was thankful – he didn't want anybody to see him in such a state.

The ultraloop began accelerating.

14 – Tipping Point

Knock knock knock. Skye prayed Cassandra was still awake.

Putting his ear against the door, he heard some quiet sounds from within the building.

Then, suddenly, they stopped.

“Skye?” a small voice asked from inside.

“Yeah,” he answered. “It’s me.”

The door creaked open just a couple inches. Cassandra’s face was all that was visible inside the dark home.

“H... hey...” he said, unsure of how to hold himself.

“You’re okay!” Cass exclaimed with a smile on her face, opening the door for Skye to enter.

He walked forward, still zombified from his encounter. His face was blank, and his movements were stiff.

“Skye...?” she repeated, closing the door and locking it. “Are you okay?”

Skye turned back to her for a moment before he stepped forward, barely keeping his balance, and hugged her. Within seconds, he was crying his eyes out, bawling and sobbing on his sister’s shoulder.

“Skye! It’s... it’s going to be okay! They patched you up at the hospital, right? It’s okay...!” she said, giving her best effort to comfort him.

No it’s not! Everything’s going to shit! I almost died, and now... and now...!

“I'm sorry! I'm so sorry...!” he yowled, unable to think of anything else to say.

Cassandra, too, had begun sobbing. “It's okay now, Skye! You didn't do anything wrong!”

Bullshit! I put you in such a dangerous situation in this cesspool city for what?! Fear of accepting my dad's offer due to some bloated sense of pride? Obsession with my own projects?! Now we're dealing with loan sharks, and... and that horrid fucking monster! You have no idea what I've done to you!

“It's all my fault! I'm so fucking sorry Cass...!” Skye wailed.

“What's... what's going on?” Cassandra stammered, tightening her embrace.

How could I ever tell you what's happening?! You would never forgive me. You'd hate me!

“I... I-I... I'm so shit at all this...” Skye sputtered. He released his hug and leaned back against the kitchen wall, sliding down to the floor. He tilted his head up to the ceiling and let his tears continue flowing.

“Take your time...” Cassandra sat beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. From the corner of Skye's eye, he could clearly see she was terrified.

Skye bawled for a good 10 minutes before he began calming down to the point of being able to speak again. Cassandra remained with him, mostly silent, occasionally rubbing his shoulder.

Skye still wasn't sure what he was going to say. He couldn't form a coherent sentence in his head.

“This is all my fault,” he whimpered.

“What is...?”

“This whole situation! Lower Miyatama is no place for someone like you... like, I mean...!” He paused to catch his breath. “I want you to have a great childhood, you know? And this place, where you can't even go outside without some sort of protection or supervision... that's fucked up! You're supposed to have a life, hanging out with friends, having fun... but this place is so fucked that you're stuck in a house all your life? Sure, Kaori is great, you still get a proper education, but, like... this isn't fair to you at all! And now I'm in big trouble with these loan people, and...!”

Skye caught himself before he mentioned Zev. No matter how clean he was coming with Cass, he could not mention Zev.

“Dad arranged a place for us in Era,” he continued. “It's only going to be available for another month. And... I never brought myself to return his call. I just... I just couldn't! Not after what he did... but we could have been out of here months ago!” Skye buried his face in his hands.

“It's... it's really okay here, you know?” Cassandra began as she wiped her eyes. “Sure, I wish you were around a bit more, but I know you have to work, and that's fine! You get me lots of yummy food anyways,” she continued, forcing a little smile.

Her contentment in Lower Miyatama was at least a small testament to how well Skye's efforts to give her a comfy life had paid off.

“But you could have so much more! I—”

Skye couldn't think of what else to say. He just continued weeping.

“I'm not mad, Skye! And it's not like it's your fault we're living here.”

“But I could have talked to dad already... none of this would have happened...!”

“You said it's available for another month still, right?” Cassandra reassured him.

“Yeah... that's right, I think.”

“Well then it's not too late!”

Hearing those words calmed Skye down just a touch. *It's not too late. It's not too late. Breathe, Skye.* He cracked a tiny smile, thinking about the possibilities of living in Era.

“We could be living that life right now. I'm so selfish, Cass... if I could've just... got over myself and picked up the phone...”

“It's not your fault, Skye... I mean it! Just because he left us for his job doesn't mean it's your fault.”

“Yeah... I guess.” Skye wiped his eyes. “But at least he still tried to get us a place. And I shut him out because I was still pissed off...”

“Well...” Cassandra hesitated. “I don't blame you, okay? I'm not exactly happy with him either...”

As much as he tried to rebut his sister's reassurances during his meltdown, Skye couldn't deny that she had good points.

“You're really sure not upset with me, Cass?” he asked.

“No way!” She leaned over and looked into Skye's eyes, beaming with hopeful energy.

Skye smiled, wiping his face off with his sleeve. “Thanks, Cass.” He had to make a conscious effort to focus on what she'd told him. “We still have time... it's not over.”

“See! That's right.”

He drew a long breath of air. “I don't know how you do it, what with your constant happiness. Thank you so much...”

“I'm just glad you're okay,” she responded.

He took some time to slowly inhale, then exhale. The floor was getting rather uncomfortable, but he didn't have the energy to get himself up. Hanging out with his sister – the eternal optimist – never failed to soothe his soul; he could endure the floor a while longer.

“I bet there are lots of cosplay conventions in Era,” he said, aiming at Cassandra's fascination with dress-up. “You could be that witch character you love.”

“Yeah!! You could come too!”

“Yep. I think you're still a bit too young to go to a convention on your own.”

“I *guess*. But that means you have to cosplay too.”

Skye forced a chuckle. “I don't know if I'd be great at that.” Only then had he noticed he wasn't crying anymore.

“You could cosplay as her friend!”

“Isn't her friend *also* a girl, though?”

“Yeah, but her outfit's really pretty!”

Skye chortled and looked away. *There's no way I could pull that off. I'm not pretty enough.*

“Mmm... if you don't mind, Cass, I think I should rest for a bit. My head is still a bit sore,” Skye mumbled. “Did you sleep yet?”

“I didn't. I was waiting for you.”

Skye grinned. “Well, it's way the hell past your bedtime. And I gotta hit the hay. All these thoughts are making me dizzy right now.”

Cassandra stood up. “Will you be okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I just need to collect myself.”

“Okay... I'll go brush my teeth and go to bed.” She started walking off down the hallway.

“Thanks, Cass... sweet dreams.”

Even after a few more minutes passed by, Skye couldn't muster the energy to get up. His eyes burned from all the crying; shutting them felt too nice and relaxing to even consider opening them again. He rested his head against the wall, drooping his arms atop his lap.

The floor still wasn't exactly comfortable, but he was able to ignore it for the time being, focusing on other things instead. At the very least, he had peace of mind about Cassandra. She was safe at the moment, thus, he deserved a bit of shut-eye.

His thoughts slowly drifted off..

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Skye's butt was sore. *Maybe that wasn't such a good idea after all.*

He slowly stood up, inhaling through his teeth at the pain in his tailbone.

*Definitely don't do that again,* he reminded himself.

Hobbling through the hallway towards his room, he noticed Cassandra's door was still closed, and she wasn't anywhere to be seen in the kitchenette or living room.

*I don't blame you. Sleep in, Cass.* He wasn't sure what time it was yet, but Cassandra didn't have any lessons with Kaori that day. Skye figured some extra sleep would do her good after his meltdown.

Returning to his room after an intense near-death experience felt strange – as if Skye was somewhere he shouldn't be.

His bed was mostly made, save for the quilt Ray had dragged outside to bundle him in on the pavement. It was folded at the end of the bed, still soiled.

*Guess I'll be using my coat as a blanket for a while.*

Everything else was still just as he left it. His phone laid beside his mess of electronics dedicated to researching madeakelor, his favourite lighter sat just beside it on the corner of the desk, the curtains were closed, and his computer was off. Although, Skye couldn't remember if it was off before Zev happened, or if Ray turned it off.

He pulled back the curtain just enough to confirm the window was shut and locked (which it was).

He rolled his chair out from under his desk and flopped back in the seat. His first instinct was to message his friends for some quick comfort, but he just leaned back in his chair, his head craned up at the ceiling.

*Smile, Skye. Come on. Force it out just for a sec.*

Despite his best efforts, he couldn't do it.

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Skye's call to Velvet Crumble to discuss what happened went fairly well. His boss was willing to cut him some slack seeing as he just got out of the hospital, and he was cleared to have tomorrow off.

The bad news is it was already just past 4:30pm – he'd slept on the floor *way* longer than he anticipated. Skye still wasn't sure if he could talk to his friends about some of his more pressing matters, but they were at least able to give him some small distractions before he tried figuring out how to proceed.

He gathered the energy to open his computer's chat program. He rested his hands on the keyboard, staring blankly at the screen.

“i think i need to quit my job.” Skye typed to Saviour_Blue and fucktowntyrant (whose status was set to “away”).

“Really?” Wrench replied within seconds.

“yea.”

“What's up? Did the monster come back?”

“uh, yeah, lmao. i think i've had enough near death encounters in the last week to last a

lifetime. Ray literally saved my life yesterday. that same monster was seconds from eating me and ray came and shot it.”

“Oh... shit. Are you okay?”

“it gave me a small concussion and dislocated shoulder. i just got out of the hospital. and i don't think i can do this shit anymore.” Skye was unsure if telling his friends about his encounter with Zev in the subway was a good idea.

“I see... if you quit your job, how will you support yourself?”

“idk. moving out of miyatama is a good first step.”

“Ah.”

He knew Wrench wouldn't be too thrilled to hear their pal might be moving away, but there was no way his current situation was sustainable. He had to look after himself.

A few moments later, Ray's status changed to “online” and he started typing.

“skye was hanging a foot above that cunt's open mouth when i popped its ass and it dropped skye on the ground” Ray explained. “had to call an ambulance, it was harsh”

“Damn...! I'm really sorry. I just hope you're safe, at least?” Wrench wrote.

“safe is not a word that accurately describes me right now.” Skye paused for a moment. “but i am in my house, wounds treated, doors and windows locked. honestly? i should get myself a gun at this point.”

There was a period of silence before Ray began typing again.

“come over tomorrow”

Skye knew what that meant. “i don't think i have the disposable income for one right now.”

“mfer i would rather u owe me than u be 6 feet under. if u get killed im digging up ur grave and beating the shit outta ur fkn corpse. come over tomorrow and upgrade the steak ur gettin me to a pub night on u and call it even k”

“well...” Skye typed. His experiences with being in debt to people were already subpar at best, but he knew Ray well enough to trust him.

“okay,” Skye continued, “i can't promise you when i can take you for a night out, but i will, all right?”

“yep” Ray answered. “be home all day tomorrow so come over whenever”

Not like I don't already have experience possessing illegal crap, he told himself, thinking back to his madeakelor project. But am I seriously about to buy a gun off my friend?!

“and those loan sharks—” Skye typed, but deleted before sending it. If he started talking about the sharks, he'd have to talk about Zev.

I don't even have the money to pay those sharks. Maybe Zev is a blessing in disguise. I manipulated an alien monster to eat one of the sharks to buy me some more time... and save Ray's hide. Maybe that's why I'm feeling so numb. This is insane.

He groaned. His thoughts shifted over to his supposed meeting with “Ray” that night. It

was a shot in the dark – there was no way of telling if that shark would be outside his home on the street in the same spot as his last encounter, or if he'd even be wearing the attire Skye described to Zev.

Should I call them to have us meet there?

No way. That'd set me up to look like I was the one who laid the trap.

Should I try to wait around outside and maybe lure them to the spot...? No, stupid idea.

Maybe I could use Zev as some sort of power play. Get all intimidating, tell them I'll kill the rest of you sharks if you keep coming for me. Skye laughed. As if I have the balls for that. They'd probably just shoot me in the face then and there.

He was tempted to message the actual Ray to see if he might be interested in helping act as some sort of lookout, but he was already doing so much for Skye – he wouldn't feel comfortable asking for even more.

He looked over to his desk where the madeakelor project lay unfinished. His custom lighter was sitting on the far corner; he grabbed it in a hurry and cupped it in his hands, slowly flicking it off and on, staring at the tall, bright flame.

He took a deep breath.

I'll wait... and if the shark isn't here by 5:30pm or so, I'll call them. Act like something came up and I'll get the money to them tomorrow. That will probably get someone to come.

Skye didn't recall giving Zev an exact time for the meeting with "Ray" either. The number of unknowns made it a difficult game to play.

...And how am I going to deal with the aftermath if this actually works? That shady loan company isn't just one person. They'd know something was up.

In a perfect world... Cass and I would be long gone by the time they realized their henchman was dead. But... I don't even know if that place dad had for us is still around.

Skye stopped flicking his lighter and looked over at his phone. He stared at it for a good half minute, pondering all the ways the call to his father could go wrong.

No, no more fucking anxious baby Skye. I need to do this. No hesitating anymore. Just fucking do it.

Without thinking, he put the lighter down and picked up the phone. His contact list still had his dad's work number on it, so he pressed the button to speed-dial it.

He held it up to his ear, heart racing, preparing for the worst.

...Ring...

He heard a chirpy, female voice.

"Thank you for calling Maroon Corporation's Era branch. Your call may be recorded for quality assurance purposes."

Ah. Yeah.

"Tired of business class space travel? Sign up for Maroon's Shipyard Sweepstakes for a

chance to win your very own two-passenger Griffin-class HLC craft for personal excursions all over the galaxy!”

Skye dropped his phone on his lap and rolled his eyes. He wished he could give Maroon's management a piece of his mind for running advertisements before letting him get on with his call.

Eventually, he put the phone back up to his ear when he heard the automated voice explaining the main menu. The menu brought him over to “contact an agent,” asking him which branch he wanted, which department, if he knew the extension of who he was trying to contact (he'd forgotten what his dad's extension was), eventually leading him to a generic customer service representative.

Skye asked to be directed to Reo Devereaux's work phone, and then he waited once again.

Ring...

...Ring...

His heart pounded with every chime of the phone. He started hoping his dad wasn't around and he could just leave a message.

...Ring...

...Ring...

...Ring...

“Hello!” Reo's voice greeted Skye.

“Uh, hey dad—“

“You've reached the office of Reo Devereaux. Sorry I missed your call – leave your name and number and I'll get back to you ASAP.”

“Ah,” Skye sighed.
The phone played a long beep.
He focused his mind and began talking.

15 – To Manipulate a Monster

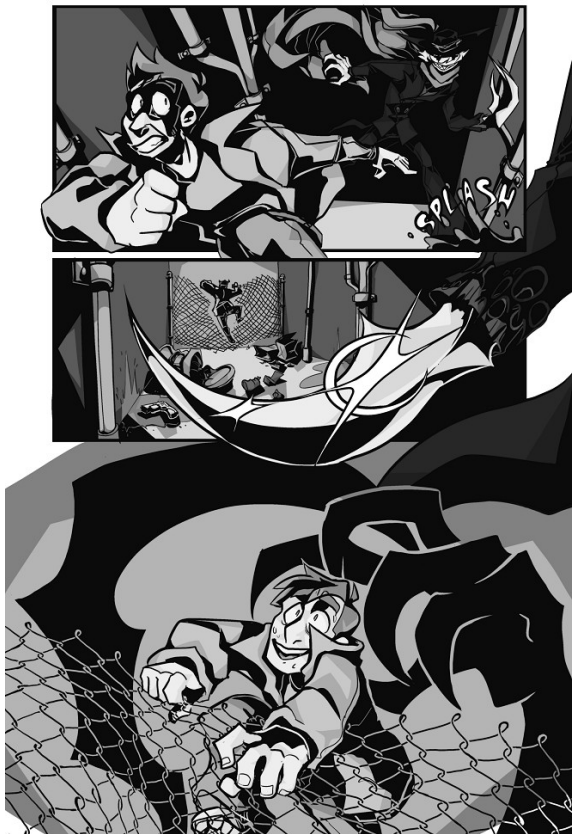
“Um... hey dad. It's Skye. I'm sorry it took me so long to get back to you. Returning your call, I mean.”



“I know it's been a while since we talked about it, but I was wondering if that place in Era was still available? Cassandra and I have been thinking about it lately.”



“Miyatama's okay, but... we both think it would be better if we moved somewhere better. Sure, money might be a little tighter, but I think we can make it work with some effort.”



“We've... we've been good though! Things have been... nice. We haven't grown tired of each other one bit. You know, the whole living 24/7 with someone else thing, heh heh. We eat a lot of pad thai. Cass loves it.”



“But, uh... call me back when you get off work? Or, well, whenever you have some free time. Thanks.”

“Um... love you.”

16 – That Lady from Before

Wrench – Sunday, 10:20pm.

Wrench restlessly tapped their foot on the shiny, tiled floor.

The staff at Miyatama's Mental Health Association had recently adopted a habit of oversanitizing everything, leaving the place with a sickly scent of ammonia, even in the waiting room beside the drafty glass doors. With the recent news of more and more missing people and random cadavers lying about the street following the volon incident at Maroon, Wrench figured the janitors were somewhat on edge.

Wrench figured everyone was, really. Checking local news outlets and social media pages flooded them with a cesspool of fearmongering and wildly sensationalized articles about impending doom and apocalypse. Thankfully, Wrench had lots of practice with keeping their wandering thoughts in check – something regular therapy had helped them with.

The Association was also probably either understaffed or mismanaged, since Wrench's wait times to see their counsellor always ranged from 30 minutes to an hour, emergency meeting or not. They considered just coming later than their scheduled time, but they knew that the instant they pulled something like that, their counsellor would be as punctual as ever.

In the meantime, they were content leaning back in their seat, bouncing their leg on the floor to expel some of that excess energy.

Wrench's therapist was a fairly decent person that clicked rather well with them, despite the annoying wait times. However, they couldn't shake a feeling of unease this visit. Unsure why, they put it down to anxiety rearing its ugly head.

That's why I'm here, I guess.

They'd brought their phone with them, but forgot their headset at home. Not particularly fond of openly blasting music in a waiting room, they opted to pass the time with some quiet mobile games instead.

Sudoku was an easy pick.



Wrench frowned at their phone, totally stumped. *I guess they mean it when they say "expert mode."*

They started a new game one difficulty level lower than before. "*Intermediate mode*" was far more manageable.

Meanwhile, a woman opened the door and walked into the waiting room. Curious, Wrench looked at her from the corner of their eye, ready to look away the instant she even hinted at returning her gaze.

She stood around in the middle of the room, looking quite lost.

...Wait, is that?

Wrench opened their mouth to speak, but wasn't sure what to say. The robotic receptionist at the far end of the hall stared at her with equal confusion.

The lady ultimately decided to walk down the room and speak with the robot.

Wrench took the opportunity to look her over. *The hair... and that outfit? That's totally her!* They still weren't sure what to say, but they weren't going to squander such a chance encounter.

Their foot-tapping intensified as their mind raced, trying to come up with something to say to spark a conversation. Part of them wanted to message Skye to ask for advice, but by the time he got back to Wrench, the woman would probably be long gone.

It's just one person, dude. You've been practicing this. Come on, let's go.

The lady eventually said her goodbyes to the receptionist after a short chat, and she started walking back to the entrance.

Just before she passed by Wrench, they held up their hand towards her. “Uh, hey! Are you the lady I ran into at the club?”

She looked at Wrench inquisitively for a few long, silent seconds. Suddenly, she seemed surprised.

“Oh! Oh, yes, I think so! Funny seeing you here.”

“What a coincidence. Um... are you here for counselling too?”

“Oh, no. I'm looking for someone. I figured this place might have some leads, but no dice so far.” The woman sat down on a chair opposite Wrench, brushing her hair away from her face.

Hmm. She's kinda pretty.

“Right... you said earlier you were looking for psychology labs?” Wrench asked.

“Ah! Y-yeah... that was a slip of the tongue, I think. I mean, I *would* like to know where I could find a lab like that, but my goal right now is to scour these therapy offices for clues.” She unbuttoned her coat and removed it, setting it on her lap.

“Are you looking for a particular therapist?”

“Not quite... I don't think, at least. He was in charge of a psychology department in... somewhere I worked.”

“Ah, yeah. What's his name? I-if you don't mind a stranger prying into your business. Gosh, I'm sorry for bombarding you with questions like this, haha.” A cold sweat of embarrassment crept up Wrench's back as they realized how nosy they'd been.

The lady giggled. “It's no problem. His name is Carson Lowe. No relation. He was a coworker of mine until we were both... *let go*, I suppose.”

Her delivery of “let go” struck Wrench as unusual, but they refrained from commenting on it. They'd already been snoopy enough.

Instead, they settled with a simple “ohh, okay,” which led to a stifling, awkward silence.

Fuck. I was doing so well.

“I can't say I've heard of any Lowes before,” Wrench continued, breaking the quiet atmosphere. “I-I have some friends, though. I just met the boyfriend of one of my best buds, and

apparently he works in Maroon's employee resources department. He's probably got some connections. Mmmaybe I could ask him about it.”

“Ah! Uh.” The lady clenched her teeth, looking rather nervous. “Between you and me, Maroon kind of freaks me out. Especially after the breakout.”

Wrench hummed in acknowledgment, slowly nodding their head. “Yeah. I get that. Another one of my friends works the night shift at a bakery... and there's been a monster appearing there, stalking him, and it even tried to eat him. He's okay, but... eh. I... don't really know. Maybe it's a volon?” Wrench shrugged.

The woman seemed shocked.

“S-sorry! I shouldn't be talking about such grim stuff like this.” Wrench waved their hand in the air beside them.

“No no, it's okay! It's just... that... yeah. It sounds like a volon from what I know about them. Not that I know much, I've just been watching the news.” Janice clasped her hands together atop her coat.

Another hum and nod from Wrench.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question?” the lady asked.

“Sure.”

“What do you think about volons...?”

“Uh, well... that's a good question.” Wrench paused, then laughed. “A couple nights ago I actually saw the monster stalking Skye's – er, my friend's – workplace. And, laugh all you

like, but my first thought was “wow, I should get its phone number.””

They both shared another chuckle.

Wrench cleared their throat. “But, in all seriousness... I don't know. If they weren't bent on killing people, I'd be hanging out with them 24/7. That *one little caveat* is kind of a deal breaker though. Same with genofexians, too, though; I hope they get to integrate with our society. That would be so cool. Hope our government doesn't screw them over or anything...”

“You're a fan of aliens, I take it?” she asked.

“That obvious, huh?”

“Well, you've been smiling ever since you mentioned wanting to get the monster's phone number.”

“O-oh, gosh.” Wrench buried their face in their hands. “I'm... I'm so sorry. I tend to ramble on about things like that.”

“You're not rambling, don't worry. I've been traveling a lot lately, and this is the first time I've had a proper conversation with somebody since I came to Miyatama. So, in all reality, this is very refreshing for me.”

Wrench unburied their face. “Honestly? Same here. Glad I could provide that for you too. But, uh, hey... I never caught your name.”

“Janice! It's a pleasure to meet you.” Janice extended her hand, before quickly retracting it. “Oh, sorry, u-um. I'm supposed to be avoiding physical contact with people. It slips my mind often.”

Wrench raised their eyebrows, even more intrigued about her now. “No worries. I’m not a big fan of handshakes to begin with, so that works for me.” They forced another quick laugh.

“Ahh, goodness, I’m glad. I-if you don’t mind, may I ask you one more question? It’s about your friend.” Janice asked.

“Oh?”

“That monster that you and your friend saw, do you remember what it looked like?”

“Hmm...” Wrench recalled the video Skye had sent them. “It was *really* tall. Like twice the size of a human. Uhh... it had white skin, cross eyes – like, its eyes were big black crosses, not that it was cross-eyed. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah... yeah, I know. Please continue!” Janice listened intently.

“It had a huge toothy smile, unkempt grey hair, black coat and pants, and a pair of purple scarves.”

Janice covered her mouth for a moment. “No way. I... know... who that is.”

“You mean it’s got a name?”

“Yeah... n-not all of them do, but that one in particular does. I happen know *that particular volon.*”

“Well, uh, what’s its name, then?”

Janice leaned forward and held a hand up beside her mouth. “It calls itself Zev.”

“Zev.” Wrench raised their eyebrows. “I’ll have to tell my friend.”

“Okay, this might sound like a weird request, but... do you think you could tell me where you saw Zev? You said it was a bakery?”

“Yeah, that's right. I suppose I could do that... forgive me for saying, but I don't think you should go looking for Zev. It put my friend in the hospital after trying to eat him.”

Janice inhaled through her teeth. “Goodness, I'm so sorry. Zev is... yeah. Dangerous. I've got a bit of history with them, you could say. I'm confident I can get through to them, and hopefully get them off your friend's case.”

“You really think you could do that?” Wrench asked, wide-eyed.

Janice nodded. “I really do.”

“Well, I don't actually know where the bakery is, but I could ask my friend after my counselling session and get back to you about it! Maybe we can exchange phone numbers to stay in touch?”

“Sounds good!”

Wrench stood up, pointing to the seat beside Janice. “May I?”

“Yes, of course.”

They took a seat beside Janice. Wrench pulled out their phone and looked around in the settings to remember what their number was, and Janice promptly typed it into her contact list.

“How did you do that?” Janice asked. “I'm not so good with phones.”

“Oh, from the main screen, tap on the settings icon,” they explained, waiting for Janice to catch up. While guiding her through the menus,

Wrench couldn't help but notice a widget in the upper corner of her phone screen had the owner's name listed as "Ashley."

Huh. Maybe changing identity? I know what that's like.

After some more menu navigating, Janice's phone number was displayed on screen, and Wrench added it to their contacts.

"Perfect." Wrench smiled, standing up. "Would you be available for a call in a couple of hours?" They stepped over to their old seat and sat back down.

"Yes, absolutely!"

"Awesome." Wrench wondered about her. A lone woman walking the streets of Lower Miyatama, seemingly familiar with volons, looking for a certain psychologist? "Are you going to be safe out there?" they asked.

"Ah? How so?"

Her response took Wrench aback. "Uh... Lower Miyatama doesn't tend to be the safest place on hallow. Especially now that volons are lurking around, yanking people into the shadows, never to be seen again."

"That's... right." She giggled and shook her head. "I don't know how that slipped my mind. I haven't even been in Miyatama for a week, so I guess it just hasn't sunk in yet."

"Ahh, fair, fair." *There's something up with you, Janice. What it is, I don't know. But I'm damn well curious.*

"I should probably get going, though." Janice stood up. "Got lots of places to ask around

at, but it was nice meeting you! I promise I'll be safe."

"Good, and likewise! I suppose I'll be talking with you later."

"Yes! I look forward to your call. Take care. Hopefully counselling treats you well!" She walked over to the entrance.

"Thanks! Be careful out there."

Janice glanced back at Wrench. "Thank you, will do!" She pushed the glass door open and walked outside.

As soon as Wrench was sure Janice wasn't in eyesight anymore, they covered their mouth, barely hiding their excitement.

That went really well? Did I seriously just hold a full conversation, on my own, with a stranger? And we even exchanged phone numbers?! Oh my fucking god.

Wrench couldn't help but curl their lips into an eager smile. They pulled out their phone, rapidly typing a message to their friend group.

"Guys? I just had a full conversation with a stranger, 1 on 1, for maybe 10 minutes and I didn't freak out. And you'll never guess who it was. Ray remember that girl I encountered at the club a few days ago? IT WAS HER AND I GOT HER PHONE NUMBER TOO LOL"

Neither Skye nor Ray replied straight away, so they rested their phone on their lap, still wiggling with excitement.

I can't wait to tell my therapist. Oh my gosh. I'm seriously improving. This is great!

Another thought popped into their head, prompting Wrench to pick up their phone again. “Also, Skye, that monster? It's named Zev apparently. That woman actually knows it. And she's trying to find it. Maybe we could set something up???”

Skye began typing. “are you serious” he replied. “you met someone who knows about Zev? can we meet up, like, NOW? i'm serious”

“Yeah, I don't know what her schedule is like (her name is Janice btw) but I told her I'd call her as soon as I get the address of the bakery you work at. Since Zev tends to Be There a lot.”

“velvet crumble at 69-41 street. let's get this going dude”

“nice,” Ray suddenly joined the conversation.

“can you let me know when you've called her and asked about a meetup?” Skye asked. “i really fucking need anything i can get at this point. like asap.”

“Of course, I'll call her after my therapy session. I'm in the waiting room now so it'll probably be just under a couple hours.”

“thank you so much wrench, i'm free tomorrow so if you can arrange something? i'm completely available, aside from popping over to ray's place sometime”

“Yeah, I'll see when she's available. But, like, anytime dude. If you want to talk about things and let me hold your hair back while you puke, I'm all ears. I just want you to feel better.”

“i really appreciate you wrench. i don't know if I can manage talking about shit over text right now but when we get together i don't mind talking about stuff”

“Cool, it's a date. Or, er, after we figure out when. Then it'll be a date.”

Skye sent a kissing face emoji.

“gaylords” Ray commented.

“you are literally dating a guy” Skye retorted.

“ya but ur gay”

Wrench chortled and continued typing. “I'm still so pumped that I managed a conversation with a stranger like that!! Sorry for changing the subject but damn! I'm feeling so proud.”

“nice, maybe it was because you met her before at the club?” Skye suggested.

“That could be true! Whatever the case is, I'm big hype right now.”

A door opened down at the far end of the waiting room, opposite the robotic receptionist. Out stepped a rather plump woman with comfy, casual clothes, and a head of curly hair.

“Kylie Spencer?” She asked the waiting room (more specifically, she asked Wrench – they were the only one there).

“Hey,” Wrench quietly answered, pocketing their phone and giving her a wave. They stood up and walked over to their therapist.

“Come on in,” she invited Wrench into her office.

17 – Meeting

“So? What can I do for you tonight?” Wrench’s counsellor asked. “It’s not often I get called for emergency meetings in the dead of night, even less frequently am I available for it. You’re in Lady Luck’s good graces, it seems.”

Wrench smiled, thinking about their encounter with Janice. “Heh. Yeah, I suppose so. A-and, sorry for calling you out like this. I know this is inconvenient for you.”

“Oh, nonsense! I promise, if I was busy or had other things to attend to, we wouldn’t be here tonight. But I don’t have too much time, so we should make the most of it while we can.”

“Okay... well.” Wrench adjusted their posture and cleared their throat. “I’m worried sick. One of my friends... I think something’s seriously wrong with him. He’s one of my only friends in Miyatama, and he’s one of my best buds. Normally he’s kind of skittish, kinda like me, I suppose,” they chuckled, pausing to take a breath. “But he’s been acting really weird lately. Y-you know the Maroon breakout?”

Their therapist hummed and nodded.

“Yeah... with the volons and everything. My friend is being stalked by one at his workplace. He got it on video and I watched it. And I’m scared for his life.”

Wrench took a long, deep breath, looking down into their lap.

“I try to act normal around him because I don’t want to make him more anxious or anything.

I want to try to be a positive influence, you know? But we haven't seen each other in weeks – we've only communicated via text. And, well, I guess this is kind of ironic, but in the waiting room, I was messaging him... long story short, we might be getting together tomorrow. Which is perfect! Because... my main reason for coming here was to ask if you knew of any, like... resources I could give him. Or something like that. Maybe something that could help protect him?"

The lady nodded, waiting to make sure Wrench had finished. "May I ask your friend's name?"

"His name is Skye."

"Do you know if Skye has contacted the police about this person stalking him?"

"I—" Wrench cut themselves off. "Just... just to make sure. What we say here is confidential, right?"

"Unless you pose an immediate danger to yourself or somebody else, everything here is between you and me." She gave Wrench a warm grin.

Wrench returned her smile. "I think I'm good then. I ask because Skye doesn't trust the police, or authorities, at all. And I don't know if it really matters, but he and I are close mutual friends with a wanted criminal. I don't think he would want to bring any sort of law enforcement around... just in case." They gave their therapist another grin – a more forced and concerned one, this time. "I know, probably bad company and all, but... that's for another time."

“Not a problem – we can talk about that in another session, if you'd like. But with regards to Skye, I don't think there's much in the way of *protection* I can offer here in Miyatama, aside from confiding with the police. There are some other programs you could share with him, mostly in the mental health category, if you think that would help.”

“Yeah, for sure! I mean... maybe it won't solve his current problem, but maybe it could help clear his head a bit and figure out how to get through it.”

Wrench wondered what Skye was doing, praying their friend was hanging in there. They waited patiently as their therapist shuffled around their curved desk, looking for a card with numbers to call – mainly, police, various mental health groups, and a crisis hotline. Wrench knew it was a long-shot coming to her for help, but they couldn't help but feel a touch disappointed.

The two briefly talked about how Wrench had been doing lately, giving them an opportunity to boast about their latest social victory with Janice, but other than that, they weren't particularly invested in talking about much else, giving rather short answers to benign questions like, “what have you been up to?” and, “have you been taking your medications?” Eventually, Wrench decided not to overstay their welcome, and the two concluded their session together.



Although the impromptu counselling wasn't exactly as productive as Wrench hoped, it

did help calm their nerves just slightly, even with that unexpected meeting with Janice. For the first time in many years, they were happy they had a one-on-one encounter with a stranger.

But concerns for their friend were still on the forefront of their mind. Before making that call to arrange a meetup with Janice, they'd make sure to drop a line to Skye just to double check on him.

Wrench's walk home was quiet and peaceful. They approached a sullen, rusty garage – a familiar place called home. Walking beside the building past the big garage door, a smaller person-sized door led them inside to an equally depressing living area. The cramped room was fairly dirty, containing only a table, TV, gaming console, and bed, and another door in the corner led to an even smaller washroom.

They kicked off their shoes and flopped down on their bed, dialing Skye's number.

Ring-ring. To their surprise, Skye actually picked up.

“Sup,” Skye mumbled.

“Hey dude... how're you doing?”

“Pretty shit. But I'm alive, I guess.”

“Damn, well... I'm at least glad to hear that you're surviving. But I wanted to ask you what time would be best for meeting up with Janice and me? I'm about to go to bed so maybe we can do it tomorrow?”

Skye sighed. “All right. Tomorrow morning at my place? I plan on going to Ray's

pretty early, so let's say 9am. I'll be home by then.”

“Cool. I'll call Janice and see if that works for her. Can you be online for a bit so I can just text you to confirm the time works? I'd rather not make 50 calls tonight.”

“Yeah, sure. Thanks so much for setting this up.”

“No prob. I'll give Jan a call now. Hang in there, okay? We'll get you through this.”

“Yeah. See you on text.”

“See ya.”

Wrench hung up and speed-dialed their new friend's phone number. It rang once, twice, three times before they heard someone pick up on the other end.

“...Hello? This is Janice,” she said.

“Hey Janice, it's Wrench.”

“...Wrench?”

The air became extremely awkward the moment Wrench realized they'd never given Janice their name. A terrible, creeping embarrassment crawled its way through their body, their face wincing in total humiliation.

“Um, the... the person you met at that place? The therapy place,” Wrench stammered, “I... I just realized I never gave you my name. Oh my god, I'm so sorry! Uh... c-call me Wrench?”

Another short delay before Janice replied. “Oh! That's right! I never did get your name, silly me! Wrench – got it.”

Glad she's at least nice enough to not tease me for it. “So, hey, uh,” they stuttered once

again, trying to focus on why they were even calling in the first place. “I talked with my friend Skye, and he told me the bakery is on 69-41 street. He wants to know if you would like to meet up at his home so we can all get together; he got really eager when he heard you knew about Zev.”

“Yeah, I’m interested! When would you like to meet up?”

Wrench told Janice the 9am time – which worked for her – as well as Skye’s address. With the plan set up, Wrench used their fatigue as an excuse to end the call without any more small talk, and they both said their goodbyes.

They then tossed the phone on their bed, rolled over, and shouted into the pillow.

I was doing so fucking well, oh my god... how could I forget to give her my name?!

They took a couple minutes to moan into the pillow, trying to reassure themselves that it wasn’t a big deal, but their anxiety was running rampant through their head over it.

God... come on, dude, relax. She wasn't even bothered by it. You'll feel better after some sleep. But before sleep, Wrench messaged Skye and told him 9am was a go, to which he responded with a thumbs up emoticon.

With everything sorted out, Wrench set an alarm for 7:30am, disrobed, and curled up under the covers.



Wrench would’ve preferred a bit more sleep, but the apprehension for the day’s events

woke them up just as well. After getting dressed, sipping down a cup of coffee, and grabbing their taser, they made haste to Skye's home, finding themselves at the tail end of the half-hour walk before long. They dearly hoped both Janice and Skye would be waiting there on time.

Turning the corner to Skye's street, Wrench spotted a lady in a black tank-top sitting on a bench opposite of Skye's place. A few paces later and they identified her as Janice.

“Hey!” Wrench called out.

Janice looked over and waved. “Hi, Wrench!”

Wrench mirrored the gesture as they approached the side of the bench.

“I wasn't sure if this was the right place or not, so I thought I'd wait until one of you showed up,” she continued.

“Ah, fair enough. So Skye hasn't arrived yet?”

“I don't think so. A few people passed by, but nobody entered or left the buildings here.”

“I see, I see.” Wrench paused, gulping down a pang of anxiety. “Uh, I'll go knock and see if he's here.”

“Mind if I come?” Janice asked, standing up.

“Sure, let's go.”

Wrench guided her over to Skye's front door and gave it a few knocks, shuffling around in place as the seconds passed by without a response. They knocked again a couple moments later, which garnered a reply.

“Who is it?” a child replied from inside.

“Ah, hey Cass, it's Wrench. Skye's friend. We were supposed to meet up this morning when he got home. I have a friend here with me too.”

The door clicked and slowly opened as Cassandra peeked out. “Hi Wrench! Do you want to come in?”

“Yeah! This is Janice, by the way. We met recently and she wants to meet Skye too.”

“Hi Janice.”

“Hello!” Janice beamed.

The two walked inside and Cassandra locked the door behind them.

“Is Skye home?” Wrench asked.

“No, he said he'd be back soon though.”

“Right.”

Come on, man, this isn't the day to be late...

Wrench turned to Janice. “He's out visiting a friend this morning, and he said he'd be back by 9am.” They checked their phone – 9:10am.

Janice nodded. “Okay.”

Cassandra left to go back to her room.

The lingering silence officially became awkward at the 9:15 mark. Still no sign of Skye, and given his latest circumstances, Wrench became uneasy – both out of concern for their friend, and a touch of anxiety about sitting in a one-on-one situation with someone they didn't know particularly well.

Come on, get a grip, you've talked to her multiple times before. You're practically friends now.

“Um... I'm sorry for making you wait like this,” Wrench spoke. “Skye should have been here by now.”

Janice hummed in acknowledgment. “Do you think he's okay?” she asked, looking as worried as Wrench felt.

“I don't know... i-is it okay if I message Ray? He was the person Skye was visiting.”

“Of course, go for it.”

Wrench pulled out their phone, opening up the messaging program, frantically typing to the three-way group chat between Skye and Ray. Skye was offline, Ray was online.

“@all Hey, where's Skye?”

A few seconds later, Ray started typing. “he left like 20 mins ago, is he not home”

“No, he's not,” Wrench replied.

“fuck. well hes armed so ud think hed be ok”

“Ray, can you come over? Can you try to find Skye along the way?”

Ray's answer took a few moments to come through. “only cause i know hes in deep shit rn but if i find him and hes fine im smashing ur ass”

“Whatever, fine, just please hurry.” At the very least, Wrench was relieved they didn't have to fight him over the issue. They turned their phone screen off and tucked it back in their pocket.

A pair of gentle footsteps approached from the hallway. “Skye not home yet?” Cassandra asked.

“Uhh,” Wrench hesitated, glancing between Janice and Cass. “Not yet, sorry. He should be here soon, I think.”

Cassandra was visibly disappointed. “Let me know when he gets here, okay?”

“For sure.”

The atmosphere in the room sunk with each passing minute. Janice remained in her seat, mostly staring at her lap, while Wrench started pacing by the front door, occasionally letting out some deep exhales. It would've been terribly awkward if it wasn't for stress replacing every other emotion in the room. Even Wrench's anxiety had taken a back seat.

A mere three minutes passed before they took out their phone again. “Ray, do you have any idea where he'd be?” they typed.

Ray took his sweet time to say absolutely nothing, leaving Wrench to ponder and worry.

“Um... yeah. This should've just been a straightforward thing,” they said to Janice. “I'm asking Ray if he knows where Skye could be.”

“Good idea, hopefully he does.”

Ray finally came through with a response. “while back i scouted skyes bakery and theres a junkyard behind it i thought zev could of used to hide out when going after skye, if something did happen to skye and it was zev id check there. idk about the loan sharks tho”

If Zev got to Skye, I don't think he'd be around to find anymore. Wrench's lips quivered into a frown at the thought. *Damnit, I wish I'd have asked Skye more about those sharks and where they operate...*

“Something isn't right. Skye should have been here by now. I need to go and look for him,” Wrench declared. “Uh, Janice... would you like to come— No, wait—” they stopped themselves, realizing Cassandra would be home alone.

But surely Cass would be fine on her own for a few hours, right? My friend could be in serious trouble, and Skye goes to work with her at home all the time, so...

“Sorry, I just— my head is just screwed right now.” Wrench continued. “I, uh... Ray told me he thinks Zev's 'home' could be a junkyard near the bakery Skye works at, and— and it's the only place I know to look. Do you want to come with me?”

Janice seemed a little taken aback by how flustered Wrench was, but she replied with a confident, “yes, of course.”

“Thank you so much, Janice.” Wrench took a long, deep breath.

Janice nodded. “It's okay. If we can find Zev *and* save your friend, well... that's feeding two birds with one scone.”

“Yeah...” *Save.* Wrench didn't like that word. They turned to the hallway, facing Cassandra's room before calling her back out to the living area.

“Coming!” She ran out of her room and approached Wrench. “Yeah?”

“We're going to look for Skye, since he should've been back by now. We're just going to make sure he's okay. So, um, make sure to lock the door behind us, okay? And don't open it unless it's me, Skye, or Janice,” they explained, pointing to Janice with their thumb.

“Okay. Is everything all right...?” She could obviously read the mood in the room.

“I... don't really know.” Wrench scratched the back of their head. “But we'll find out and let you know when we come back.”

“Okay... be careful.”

“We will.”

Janice and Wrench walked out the front door together; Wrench patted down the side of their coat, ensuring they knew exactly where their taser was, just in case. One more time, they pulled out their phone and messaged Ray.

“Can you meet us at the subway? I have a friend with me, she's chill.”

“ur totally gettin it on with that girl from before arent u,” Ray teased. “nice. also k if i dont find him on the way ill be there”

“Good. Thanks.”

18 – Toying Around

Skylar – Monday?, ??:??

A sharp, stinging pain ebbed from Skylar's head and back. With a raspy groan, he gently lifted himself off the hard surface beneath him, prompting further waves of pain to jolt through his skull. He clasped the side of his head with a single hand and slowly opened his eyes, coming to his senses.

The pattering of rain against metal was all he could hear, and a conglomeration of scrap metal greeted his eyes – he seemed to be lying within the cavity of a mountain of steel, surrounding him on all sides. He had just enough room to sit up and move his limbs, but he couldn't stand up. A few feet in front of him was an opening to the outside, just wide enough that he could crawl through it.

What the fuck? Where am I? Did I get kidnapped?!

Skylar patted himself down – his coat was missing. He didn't have his phone, but the pistol was still discreetly tucked under the right side of his waistband and shirt.

...The hell? If I got kidnapped... why would they let me keep my gun, but not my phone? Oh god, what the fuck is going on?

Skylar leaned forward and began crawling on all fours towards the only exit, to which the scrap metal responded with a cacophony of creaks. He hesitated with each sound that emanated around him, and yet, no captor rushed

over to deal with him now that he was very audibly awake.

His heart raced as he peeked his face through the gap, his head throbbing with every pulse. He looked around, surveying the area from roughly a metre above the muddy ground.

Piles of brown and grey hues – it was a dilapidated, murky scrapyard.

It suddenly clicked. Chills raced through his body. This was *Zev's* doing.

Skye frantically looked around side to side, up and around, but didn't see any towering monsters.

Hide? Run? Do I...?!

He clambered out of the opening in the junk pile, falling face first into the sloppy ground. Scrambling back up to his feet, he got a better look at the immediate area: it was an open, circular area, encompassed by heaps of metal, with a pair of pathways branching to the left and right at the far end of the area.

With no landmarks to navigate with, he relied on instinct – *get as far away from here as possible*. He desperately fumbled with his waistband and pulled out his gun, mentally preparing himself to pull the trigger at a moment's notice.

With only two directions to go, Skye ran toward the left path. It was getting harder to discern sounds; not only was his head splitting, but the rain's intensity was picking up. The white noise of water on metal played tricks on his mind, telling him that every which way, his doom was

surely just a step away. He repeatedly checked from side to side, glancing behind his back, only looking forward every couple of seconds to see where he was going. He stumbled more than once on the slippery ground, barely keeping his footing.

For a moment, he considered screaming for help, but quickly realized how terrible of an idea that was. Drenched in rainwater and mud, he pressed forward through the straight path between the scrap mountains.

Then, unmistakable, just audible through the rain. *That laugh.*

“Kyeh-heh-heh!”

Skye reeled around, clutching the pistol with both hands. Nobody in sight in any direction, not even on top of the metal hills.

Where the fuck are you?! Skye resisted yelling it aloud, in the off chance Zev *wasn't* laughing at him.

He backed up towards a nearby wall of scrap, keeping a keen eye out for that monster. Skye KNEW he heard that laugh. His eyes widened as paranoia crept further into his mind, his gaze jolting in every direction.

A rusty limb quickly shot out from beside him, tightly grasping both his wrists together with a huge hand.

Skye screamed, futilely tugging his arms back to free himself, fixing his gaze on where the limb was coming from. But before he could get a clear look, the hand lifted him into the air by his

wrists, leaving him dangling above the ground with his relocated shoulder searing in pain.

The metal began shifting around in both form and colour, slowly revealing a familiar, terrifying creature.

“H-HELP! HELP ME!” Skye belted out, squirming around helplessly. He rapidly pulled the trigger on the pistol, but no gunshot came out.

“You make this too easy,” Zev mocked him, flashing an enormous grin.

“PLEASE– PLEASE DON'T!”

Zev ignored Skye's wailing, instead looking up at the gun he was still clinging onto. With their free hand, the volon plucked the gun from Skye's hands, tossed it into their mouth, and swallowed it with a single gulp.

“Ah, ah! I wouldn't want you hurting yourself with that,” said Zev.

Fully expecting to be next on the menu, Skye clenched his eyes shut and continued screaming for mercy, his struggling getting weaker by the moment. But as the moments passed, he remained whole and intact – he opened his eyes to see Zev was taking him back to where he'd just escaped from. The volon held Skye off to the side, low enough to the ground to where his feet dragged through the sludge below.

“I thought I would have some fun with you first, human. You do not disappoint.”

“Z-Zev, please! Please don't eat me!” Skye cried out. “Why are you doing this?! I didn't do anything to you!”

“You're wrong. But you should be *thankful*, human. *I'm not going to eat you.*”

Skye felt no relief upon hearing those words – he only worried more about what other fate Zev had in store for him.

“I have been watching you, human. And I have learned things. 'Ray' was a fun little morsel, yes,” Zev continued. “He *also* had a gun. It didn't help him either. And he ran, just like you. Quite alike. But now, we both know that wasn't Ray.”

The monster paused for a moment. “Hey, Ray. How's it going?” Zev mimicked Skye's voice uncomfortably well. “Ah, ah, that's when I realized you *tricked* me.”

“W-wait, I–”

“And then, I found out. Ah, that's right. *You have a sister.* That is why I am not eating you.”

Upon reaching the scrap alcove Skye had just crawled out of minutes ago, Zev lifted him up and stuffed him inside, back first, carelessly bashing and scraping him on the rough edges of the metal waste.

Skye shouted in both terror and pain, awkwardly shifting around to a vaguely less painful position as soon as the volon released him.

Zev leaned down and looked into the opening, staring at Skye.

“I'm eating *her* instead.”

Until that point, Skye wasn't sure if he'd been crying or not. Now, he certainly was, broken by those four words. His face furlled into a horrified glower.

“N-n-no! Oh god, no, god, please no! Zev, *please* don't! I'll do fucking anything! Leave her be!”

“Ah, ah, do not worry,” Zev jeered, “I'm not cruel, see. Once your sister is resting in my gut, I will bring you a memento for you to remember her by. How about her shoes? I never liked the taste. Yes, that will do. Kyeheh-heh-heh.”

“ZEV, PLEASE! Leave her alone! Fucking take me instead! She hasn't done anything to you!” More tears rolled down Skye's cheeks.

Zev stood up and took a couple paces back, looking at Skye with an inquisitive stare. “I was right to pick you. You really are fun. Kyeheh-heh-heh!”

“I'll do fucking anything, Zev, please!” Skye's cries of desperation turned into whimpers as he choked back more tears. “Please... anything... she's innocent...!”

“You had your chance,” Zev snarled. “Now you will see what happens when you trick me.” The volon reached for something on the outside of the scrap mound, bringing it over to the opening of the alcove. It was an old, discarded machine part of some sort, big enough to seal Skye inside. Zev shoved it into the opening, ramming it against the metal surrounding it until it was firmly lodged in place.

“Goodbye, human. I will see you soon with gifts in hand.”

Through the gaps in the junk, Skye saw the volon turn and take its first steps away from him.

“No! STOP!” Skye cried, but Zev continued ignoring him. “FUCK!” he screamed, choking back tears. “ZEV, STOP! PLEASE!”

No reaction from the monster whatsoever. Zev just kept walking, and they soon turned the corner past another mountain of metal, leaving Skye's sight.

Pushing through the pain, he scrambled on all fours towards the plugged opening, positioning his feet against the metal behind him and pushing on the machine part in front of him with as much force as he could muster. Yet it didn't budge.

“Come on, you son of a bitch!” he cried out. He slammed his fists against the debris, all while cussing at the top of his lungs.

The junk moved just slightly. An ember of hope flared up inside him. He continued ramming the metal blocking him in.

Bit by bit, the chunk of steel between him and freedom was moving the tiniest bit with each push, and after enough repeated shoves—

—the debris fell out from the pile, triggering a landslide of scrap to fall down and entomb Skye even more.

“NO... *NO!!*” he yelled.

He wasn't hit by any of the falling junk, but he couldn't even see the outside world anymore.

He tried slamming his fists against the new chunks of metal. Absolutely no movement.

“FUUUUCK!!”

With that, Skye's life was over.

Cassandra was minutes away from being devoured by a wretched monster, and he was completely powerless to do anything about it. After that, said monster would come back and probably eat him. If not, the loan sharks would find him and kill him. There was no calling for help without his phone, and his only means of self-defence was in Zev's stomach.

He wailed and cried as loud as he could until his throat ran dry. He feebly threw his fists at the scrap one, two, three more times.

No movement.

No hope.

It was over.

19 – JUNKYARD OR DIE

Wrench – Monday, 10:09am.

Wrench and Janice stood just outside the stairwell leading to the ultraloop station. They looked rather awkward and out of place standing still among the steadily growing stream of people going about their day, just a handful of blocks from Velvet Crumble. Furthermore, Janice was still just in a tank-top and jeans; she'd mentioned she liked the rain during the ultraloop ride, but Wrench couldn't fathom how she wasn't freezing yet.

“I'm gonna ask Ray where he is,” Wrench said.

“All right,” Janice replied.

“How close are you?” Wrench typed to the three-way chat. Still no sign of Skye online, but Ray came online seconds after Wrench sent their message.

“fuckign threshers on m y ass” Ray answered, typing very quickly. “go first meet u l8r”

“Shit...” Wrench mumbled, turning to Janice. “Gangsters are giving Ray a hard time. He wants us to go on ahead without him.”

“Ah.” Janice looked quite pensive upon hearing the news. “Is he going to be okay?”

“I'm not *too* worried. Ray's dealt with them before and turned out fine. But... if Zev really is behind Skye's absence, do you think we could, like, you know... take him on? Just the two of us?”

“In an altercation, no, but... I have history with them. If I can get Zev talking, we might be able to avoid a fight altogether.”

“You think so?” Wrench scratched their head, withholding their burning question about what exactly the history between those two was.

“Yeah.”

“Mmkay. Well, let's go.” Wrench put their phone away and led the way towards the bakery.

Even if there weren't many other options left, they still apprehensive about putting their faith in someone they met just a day ago. They considered calling the police about the situation, but if there wasn't anything wrong with Skye, Wrench would certainly get in trouble for wasting government resources.

Worst case scenario, they had their taser, but if it would even affect a creature as big as Zev was yet to be seen.

However, just after crossing a busy intersection, a nearby electronic sign caught their attention, reading:

>> CIVIL EMERGENCY <<

IF YOU KNOW OR OBSERVE ANYONE WITH ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING SYMPTOMS:

-CROSS-SHAPED PUPILS

-DISCOLOURED PATCHES OF SKIN

-MALFORMED LIMBS

YOU MAY BE IN IMMEDIATE DANGER

CALL 0002-8866-MARVCF

A TEAM WILL BE DISPATCHED TO ASSIST YOU

Yeah, maybe a bit late?! Wrench thought. The sign only served to intensify their worries about Skye, but upon seeing the phone number, their next course of action became crystal clear.

“Janice! Are you seeing this? Cross pupils and ghostly skin, do you think it's referring to Zev?” Wrench figured Janice would share their excitement, but instead, she was petrified, staring at the sign like she'd just been punched in the gut.

“...Janice?” Wrench leaned over in front of her vision, wondering what was wrong.

“U-uh, sorry, just... just a bit distracted by this.” She dismissed her odd reaction with a hand wave, averting her gaze. “It, yeah... it does sound like it, but... I-I don't think you should call that number.”

“What? Why not?”

“Let's keep going – I'll explain as we go.”

“Um, sure. Let me take the number down just in case.”

“A-all right.” After giving Wrench a few seconds to record the number in their phone, Janice continued while they walked onward. “MARVCF at the end of that number, right? That's a number for the Maroon corporation. I used to work there. Not only is MAR an obvious tell, but VCF is a facility controlled by Maroon.”

Wrench remembered something from their time with Gyroloop. “VCF – that's Victor Capital Foundry, isn't it!”

“Ah– yees?” Janice confirmed, tilting her head. “How do you know...?”

“It's kind of a long story,” Wrench lied, not interested in snitching on Gyro. “What about it though?”

“Maroon is *bad* news. When I worked there, they practically imprisoned me. They wouldn't let me leave, they paid me nothing except food, my 'dorm' was like a prison cell. I did everything I could to get away from there, and I eventually did, but... I'm terrified of them trying to take me back.”

“What?! That's fucked!”

“Yeah. If you need to call them, just... give me a warning so I can *not* be here when they come.”

Wrench slowly nodded. “All right, fair.” They'd at least wait until knowing Zev was definitely involved, otherwise their thoughts returned to the same fear of getting into trouble for wasting powerful peoples' time.

Another intersection crossed and a few dozen paces later, Wrench saw the building.

“That's the bakery,” they said, pointing to Velvet Crumble's bright storefront sign. “Ray said the junkyard was behind it. Let's try down here,” they continued, pointing to the unkempt alleyway leading far behind Skye's workplace.

As they closed in on their destination, the two sped up to a brisk pace, anxious to get to that yard, looking for any signs of it. The rainfall was on the brink of becoming a storm, to the point

where their coat was barely keeping them dry, but the only thing on their mind was finding Skye.

Continuing straight down the remainder of the divide between buildings, the right side soon opened up to a wide-open junkyard sunk into the ground, filled with spires and mountains of discarded metal and machinery. It was quite dilapidated and abandoned, with little sign of life.

“This must be it!” Wrench exclaimed.

Janice took a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

The fence once surrounding the yard had plenty of gaps and missing sections, allowing easy passage into the area. The two slipped by the fence and descended the slope slowly and carefully, as the ground was becoming muddy from the torrential rainfall.

“The least those High Miyatama dicks could do is not piss on us so hard when it rains,” Wrench grumbled aloud, extending their arms out to either side, trying to keep their balance. Upon reaching the bottom of the slope, Wrench hopped onto a flat metal plate, extending a hand to help Janice down.

She hesitated to accept their offer, but ultimately took Wrench's hand, letting go the instant they were both on solid ground.

They both proceeded onward into the maze-like passages of the yard; with no clear direction to start with, Wrench called out, “hello!” listening closely for any kind of response.

“Anybody here?” Janice followed suit.

A few moments later... nothing. At least, Wrench didn't think so – the wind and rain made

it difficult to hear clearly, and they *almost* thought something or someone had said something back.

“Did you hear that?” Janice asked.

“I’m not sure. Did *you* hear something?”

“Hey!” Janice yelled again, holding her hands around her mouth. “Is anybody here? Skye?!”

Keeping their eyes and ears open for an answer, they wandered into a spacious junction connecting several passages formed between towering junk walls.

“...*Yeah! I’m here!*”

Was that Skye?! Wrench’s eyes widened. It was impossible to tell where his voice was coming from in the storm, so they shouted again. “Hey! Where are you?!”

“*I’m impressed, really!*”

“...What?” Wrench muttered. “Skye!” they yelled once more.

“*Janice... how you managed to find me again, I don’t know! Ah, ah, I’m impressed!*”

“Wrench, that’s not Skye!” Janice exclaimed, putting a hand on Wrench’s shoulder. “That’s Zev! No doubt about it!”

“W-where is he?!” Wrench quickly looked around – nobody in the nearby passages, but then they turned around and looked up; sitting atop the scrap wall just behind them was the very creature plaguing Skye, smiling down at them.

“Janice! Above us!” Wrench pointed to Zev, taking rapid steps back to get out of pouncing range. Janice did the same, prompting Zev to jump down from the junk pile.

“Kyeh-heh-heh! *Janice*. I didn't take you for a persistence hunter. The humans must be affecting you! Have you come to talk me out of my dietary habits? Or have you come to deliver me food?” Zev slowly shifted their gaze from Janice to Wrench as they finished their sentence.

Wrench slowly a hand under their coat, reaching for their taser. “Where's Skye?!” they growled.

And where are the hell you, Ray?!

“What a brave human. Ah, Skye is alive. He is only *second* on the menu. First... is his sister.”

“What?! Why? What did she do?!”

“Skye TRICKED me, human!” Zev screamed, lurching forward towards Wrench, who instinctively took a few steps back.

“I want nothing more than to devour that little morsel, but – ah, ah, I want him to *suffer* first. So I decided I would have *two* meals instead of one.”

“Listen, Zev, please!” Janice stepped forward, in front of Wrench. “Whether or not Skye tricked you, we have bigger problems! *Maroon is coming after us!* They've declared a civil emergency over the onslaught of volons in Miyatama, and they're sending out strike teams to kill us, or worse, take us back to that prison. And... I-I need your help to get back at them for it!”

Zev clenched their teeth in an irritated frown, and their left hand started trembling and

contorting. “You need *my* help. Is that what the human is for? A bribe?”

Chills lanced through Wrench's spine. For a moment, they wondered if Janice had set them up.

“No!” Janice exclaimed. “We just want to know where Skye is so we can forget all this and focus on what matters! When we broke out from Maroon, do you remember that big truck? Those were other volons who want the same thing as us – to stop Maroon from enslaving volons! If we worked together... you could... get revenge on those people that imprisoned us!” Janice's confidence faltered for a moment during her last sentence.

Temporarily ignoring Janice's revelations, and still unsure whether their taser would be effective, Wrench took the opportunity to glance around while Zev was laser-focused on Janice. Just to the left, they spotted a precarious heap of junk metal suspended against a wall of scrap, held together by what looked like a single narrow pipe sticking out of the wall. It was only about six or seven paces away.

Janice... please... keep Zev distracted!

“To fight enslavement,” Zev hissed, “you want me to be enslaved again?”

“No, that's not it. You can be free to do what you want! Free to... um... hunt people...! But you can have people to help back you up if you ever get in trouble, like if Maroon catches you!”

Wrench moved their left foot ever so slowly to the side, testing to see if Zev would notice, but they exhibited no reaction.

“Ah, ah, that is an interesting offer.” Zev leaned down closer to Janice's face. “Why *now*, Janice? You did not want me to eat humans before. Now you do not mind. What changed?”

“There are people in Maroon I'd like to find, too. I'd forgotten what it's like to be outside that prison, and... well... I've changed my mind about some things.”

“You're remembering what it's like to hunger,” Zev quipped. “That is why you are here. You're remembering how to be a *volon*.”

Wrench couldn't ignore it this time.

Janice is a volon.

Their new friend was one of those creatures everyone feared, and even if Janice wasn't intent on killing them, Wrench couldn't shake the realization that they were now alone with *two* volons.

They hesitantly continued their cautious side-steps towards the exposed pipe, constantly glancing between Zev and the pipe, using all their power to remain silent.

Come on! Just a bit more!

The towering volon cackled as it leaned back up, belting out that hideous *kyeh-heh-heh*. “Now I understand! I was right. You want to return to your real nature. You want revenge on that... *REDMOND*—!”

Zev suddenly wailed that name – Redmond – in a fit of anger. Between clenched

teeth, they panted and huffed with their gaze still locked on Janice, drool oozing from between their teeth.

Wrench put their hands on the pipe, wiggling it to see how loose it was, causing the heaps of metal above to shift.

“...You want REVENGE as much as I do,” Zev continued as their posture gradually slouched over and turned animalistic. “And to win me over... to get me to join you...”

Zev's head slowly turned over to face Wrench, who instantly froze up.

“You brought me a peace offering,” Zev paused. “I did think Skye was getting off too easy. *Two meals...? Make that three.*” Zev began taking a step towards Wrench with both hands outstretched.

“Zev, STOP!” Janice yelled, jumping between the two.

Wrench's eyes widened, breaths intensifying.

Zev effortlessly batted Janice off to the side, licking their lips, creeping towards Wrench.

Letting out a loud yelp, Wrench yanked on the pipe with all their strength, destabilizing the chunks of metal balancing above, causing heaps of scrap to cascade down. They stumbled away from the avalanche, witnessing a flash of fear on Zev's face before Wrench was cut off from both volons by the newly-formed hill of junk.

A fell shriek pierced through the air; Wrench prayed it wasn't Janice. Taking a couple quick breaths to calm themselves down, they

grabbed their taser and surveyed their new surroundings: behind them was a long, curved passage, bordered by insurmountable heaps of metal.

That was it – no other options.

Wrench pulled out their phone and started running, desperately opening the messaging program.

“JUNKYARD NOW OR WE DIE”
Wrench typed to the group chat.

20 – Zev

Every noise made Wrench jump. Distant creaking, growls, and groans, with the occasional scrape and clunk of metal from behind them. Their sense of hearing was actively betraying them.

Wrench just kept running. The passage curved subtly to the left, until it eventually led to a junction of two perpendicular passages. Left would bring them closer to the chaos, right would probably take them closer to one of the scrapyards many exits.

Terror encouraged them to bolt down the right passage as soon as possible, but loyalty to their friends urged them left.

Wrench cautiously peered down the left passage. A massive silhouette, slouched over in a feral posture, stood roughly ten metres away, looking in each direction.

Wrench darted back behind the scrap wall, gripping their taser hard enough to turn their knuckles white.

“Friend, I’m so happy you came to rescue me!” a mockery of Skye’s voice emanated from Zev. “Now that you’re here, let’s go home together and put this all behind us!”

Wrench clenched their teeth with quivering lips, praying Skye was still alive and that Zev hadn’t somehow absorbed his traits via consumption.

They backed away from the intersection, walking back far enough into the corridor they’d

just run down so as to not be visible from the intersection. They pulled out their phone again, opening the group chat, frequently glancing between the screen and the far end of the corridor they just backed up from.

Ray had replied “omw” about two minutes prior.

“ZEV IS HUNTING ME” Wrench typed.
“IM GOING TO DIE”

“*Human~!*” Zev sang, still imitating Skye's voice. “I can SMELL you, human. *Come back here.* We're friends, right?”

Peering down the corridor towards the exit, Wrench saw a huge figure creeping closer.

No, no no no—

Praying Zev hadn't seen them, Wrench pocketed their devices and bolted back towards the dead end. The pile of metal that'd formed from their avalanche gambit wasn't as colossal as the other mountains of junk.

If I could just—!

They had no choice. Wrench ran up to the scrap pile, taking their first step onto some broken machine part. Frantically looking for handholds sticking out of the steel amalgam, they lifted themselves up and began climbing the scrap.

Now hyperventilating, Wrench struggled to focus on their movements. Panic made their hands shake, and the drenched surfaces made grip difficult. But with death approaching from behind, they forced themselves up as fast as they could.

“Kyeh-heh-hah!” rang out from behind them. “Escaping?!”

Wrench looked back to see Zev now in clear view, staring up at them.

“Fuck!” Wrench screamed, recklessly scrambling up the final chunks of scrap, causing small bits of metal to fall down the pile. They lifted themselves up onto the husk of an abandoned car at the top of the pile and looked back.

A huge, white hand with horribly misshapen fingers gripped onto the chassis they stood on, mere seconds after Wrench got on top, inches away from their feet. Right behind the hand was Zev's snarling face.

Wrench bolted to the other end of the chassis and reached under their coat, turning back to Zev. They pulled out their taser, aimed, and fired at Zev's hand before the beast could pull itself up.

The darts impaled Zev's hand, which clenched tight onto the chassis as electricity crackled along the wires. A horrid, gargling yowl filled the air, coming from the creature below.

It's working, it's working!

The car's framework began tilting towards Zev as they fell backward down the metal hill, pulling the chassis with it.

Wrench stumbled back off the car just as it began tumbling away, grunting in pain as they landed on the corner of some metal at the top of the pile. Still gripping the taser's trigger, Wrench lifted themselves up as the weapon reached its limit and the electricity automatically stopped. They hastily ejected the cartridge and turned away from

Zev, preparing themselves to climb down the opposite side of the scrap.

“Janice!” Wrench shouted. Before beginning their descent, they glanced around for any sign of either Janice or Ray. In the distance, they spotted a human-sized silhouette by the entrance where Wrench and Janice had entered.

“Ray?! Ray!!” In the off chance it *was* their saviour, Wrench haphazardly raced down the pile, getting as far away from Zev as they could before the monster recovered.

“*RaaaAAAY-!*” Zev screeched from afar, reverting to their ordinary, monstrous voice.

“Oh god, help!!” Wrench yelled as they reached the bottom of the pile and jumped onto the muddy ground, wincing from the pain in their back. They started sprinting through the puddles in the general direction of the distant silhouette.

It felt like the yard had changed layout since entering; granted, they had blocked off one of the passages, but the labyrinthine alleys were increasingly hard to navigate in such a frenzy. Turning a corner to the left, Wrench bolted down a straight corridor leading to a four-way intersection. They paused in the middle of the junction, looking down each passage.

A tall, hulking figure wearing a long grey coat was jogging down the rightmost corridor, and the two cat ears on the silhouette's head betrayed their identity.

“Ray!” Wrench shouted in relief. “Ray!”

"YOU DID NOT TELL ME RAY IS HERE," Zev roared in the distance, cleaving through the storm's white noise.

Ray turned around and spotted Wrench. They both ran towards each other, mud splashing everywhere from their heavy footsteps.

Wrench grabbed onto Ray's shoulders and leaned against the machine, desperately catching their breath.

"Fuck's going on?" Ray asked, looking down at Wrench.

"Skye is here, Zev and Janice are here too, an avalanche of junk crashed down on us, I don't know where the others are—"

"Breathe," Ray commanded, lifting Wrench's arms off his body.

Wrench took a couple more drawn-out breaths. "Zev took Skye here and he's in this yard somewhere! Janice and I got separated; I-I don't know where Janice is, I think I might've hurt her with the avalanche! And Zev tried to get me but I caused the avalanche to stop him, I shot him with the taser but he's still coming, and—"

"Listen to me. Chill." Letting go of Wrench's arms, Ray pulled out a machine gun from beneath his coat, holding it with both hands, ready to take aim. "Got you covered. That shit-face is dead."

"Thank god, Ray, oh my god, thank you!" Wrench panted. "I have no idea where the others are; this place is fucked!"

"Stick by me. Eyes and ears peeled," Ray instructed. "Show me where you came from."

“I WANT TO TALK TO YOU, RAY,”
Zev shrieked.

“F-follow the screaming monster!”
Wrench whimpered.

“Watch our six,” Ray ordered. Aiming his machine gun from the hip, he slowly began marching down the route Wrench came from moments ago.

“Janice, where are you?!” Wrench cried out, keeping a keen eye peeled behind Ray. But at that moment, a terrible realization crossed their mind. “Ray, Ray! If you see Janice, don't shoot her!”

Ray scanned the area before replying. “No shit,” he grumbled.

“Just... just don't, okay?”

“Explain later. Focus now.”

Creeping past the intersection the two met at, Wrench piped up one more time. “Should we stay here? Maybe lure Zev?” they rambled. “Or should we keep—”

“Shut up,” Ray barked.

“*Wrench!*” Janice yelled from somewhere in the scrap maze, close enough that she was just audible through the storm. “Get out of here! Zev is too dangerous!”

Not if Ray has anything to say about it. Wrench didn't respond – they merely listened for any sign of the approaching breast. The duo had slowed to a crawl in the middle of a fairly wide lane, curving to the right in front of them, opening up to a circular clearing behind them. Ray faced the corner, Wrench watched the opening.

Seconds later – plain as day – Zev skulked into view from the left side of the clearing and turned their head towards Wrench. The monster instantly broke into a charge with their hands outstretched, tongue hanging from the beast's mouth.

“BEHIND US! ZEV!” Wrench screamed, bumping into Ray's back.

Ray swung around, accidentally knocking Wrench into the mud, and took aim.

Wrench covered their ears and looked away. “RAY, SHOOT!” they yelled.

No gunfire. Just a distant battle cry and then *squelch*. Wrench looked up at Zev – something had impaled the giant volon from the side, and they quickly realized it was Janice.

More specifically, it was her arm, shifted into a long, spear-like form.

“*Janice,*” Zev hissed, utterly stunned, struggling to move with her arm through their abdomen. “*What have you–*”

“Janice! Get back! Now!” Wrench screamed, standing back up.

She yanked her arm out from Zev's body, splattering herself with white blood. She staggered backward, looking equally as shocked as Zev.

With his firearm aimed at Zev, Ray pulled the trigger, spooling up the machine gun until a deafening flurry of gunfire filled the air.

Wrench covered their ears again and watched through the corner of their eyes as bullets tore through Zev's body.

The monster staggered back and convulsed with each round fired into their body, sending splatters of alien blood across the ground behind them. Zev's flesh tried to regenerate, but Ray kept firing, destroying their body faster than they could repair themselves.

Zev let loose a gurgly, fell howl as they reeled back from the onslaught of bullets. Chunks of their body began losing cohesion – one arm dismembered, a leg now too – until their body fell to the ground and continued breaking down.

Ray kept firing.

The mass of alien flesh, riddled with holes and utterly broken, separated and split into smaller pieces. What was once Zev took on a more fluid form – their black and purple clothes melted into the white blood of a volon, until the beast was no more than chunks and puddles of pale viscera.

Click. The machine gun stopped firing, smoke rising from the barrel.

“Fuckin' bitch,” Ray jabbed.

21 – Skye

Completely soaked and covered in mud, Wrench stared at the murder scene, heart pounding, head spinning. For several seconds, nobody said anything. All three of them simply stared in awe at Zev's remains.

Fuck! Ray actually killed him! What if the cops come, what if someone heard it, how will we find Skye, what if—

Ray was the first one to take action. He walked up to the pile of viscera – prompting Wrench to cautiously follow behind – and kicked a chunk of sloppy white flesh, knocking out a few yellowed teeth from the horrid mass.

“Fuck with my crew, I'll do it again.” Ray turned to Janice. “You one of them fuckin' things?”

“Yo, she's cool, she's cool!” Wrench ran over to Janice, who slowly raised her hands at Ray's question.

“Yeah! I-I'm cool; I'm not like Zev, I swear!” she answered, shifting her arm back into a more human-like form.

“Don't pull any weird alien shit. Help us find Skye,” Ray ordered.

“R-right!” Janice nodded.

The three properly began their search for Skye. The group split up: Ray grabbed Wrench and insisted they came with him, leaving Janice to her own devices. Wrench wanted to argue, but there were other things far more pressing on the forefront of everybody's mind.

“*SKYE!*” Ray yelled, using the most of his robotic nature to scream his friend's name louder than an average human. Wrench and Janice both echoed Ray's calls; the storm continued fighting against them, drowning out their shouts, making the search all the more difficult.

Skye... please be okay! If you're gone, I... I...

They continued walking through the yard, exploring twisted passage and open space alike, until Janice's calls were hardly audible through the rain. Minute upon minute passed, amplifying the anxiety coursing through Wrench's head; every time they yelled out their friend's name and heard no response, Skye's hypothetical demise became more rooted in reality. They could feel their face tensing up as tears threatened to leak from their eyes, but they managed to catch their errant thoughts just in time – *Skye's not gone. He's not gone. Don't freak out. Calm down.*

Fueled by stress, Wrench continued bellowing for Skye, until they heard something answer back.

Their heart skipped a beat. Someone else was calling out – Wrench's emotions bounced between hopeless and optimistic as they realized it was just Janice, but she was saying something *different.*

“Hey! Hello?!” she called out.

Wrench strained to hear her. They tugged on Ray's coat, gesturing for him to listen too.

“I can hear you! Where are you?!” Janice continued.

Ray and Wrench both immediately dashed back through the scrapyards, retracing their path through the maze to find their way to Janice.

“Wrench! I think I found Skye!” Her voice became clearer with every tread through the sludge underfoot.

Then, seconds later, they heard a fourth voice.

“*Heelp!*” the raspy, worn-down voice cried out. It was so gravelly that Wrench couldn't identify it at first, but when they heard another cry for “help!” as they drew ever closer, Wrench knew who it was.

“It's Skye!” Wrench exclaimed. “He's here!”

A few hectic seconds of calling back and forth passed until Wrench spotted Janice, leading the charge over to her. She was busy grabbing pieces of scrap off the pile and tossing them aside.

“Skye! We're here!” Wrench shouted.

“He's in here!” Janice said, pointing to the metal she was trying to dislodge.

“Get me out, hurry, please! Oh god, oh god, Cassandra!” Skye pleaded from within the mountain.

As Janice hefted another piece of junk off the pile, Skye finally became visible in an opening inside the mound of metal, his expression the weariest Wrench had ever seen.

Wrench ran over beside Janice, helping her remove pieces from the pile to free Skye. But when Ray trudged over, Skye was visibly frightened.

“Ray, be careful, please! If this thing collapses on me—!”

“Yeh.” With his bulky, robotic build, Ray easily lifted huge pieces of debris away from the opening much faster than Janice or Wrench could. Soon after, Skye had a decently sized opening to escape.

“Can you get out?” Wrench asked.

Skye grimaced as he pushed himself through the opening in the junk, grunting in pain. Wrench prepared himself to help Skye out, grabbing onto his hands until he'd successfully squirmed out and put his feet on the ground.

Wrench clung to Skye, squeezing him in a tight embrace.

Skye shook them off, grabbing onto the sides of Wrench's head.

“Where's Cassandra?” Skye yowled, glaring at Wrench with bloodshot eyes. “Where is she?!”

“Sh-she's at home!” Wrench stammered.

“No, no!” Skye whimpered. He let go of Wrench and put his hands on his head. “Cassandra! You've killed her! She's dead!” he wailed, tottering past his friends.

“Skye! Zev is dead! She's safe!” Wrench pleaded with him.

Skye turned around with an incredulous, wide-eyed face, his quivering lips slowly curling into a confused smile. “What?” he mumbled.

“Ray mowed him down, he's nothing but blood and guts! Cassandra's gonna be okay!” Wrench continued, matching Skye's uneasy grin.

Ray opened part of his coat, revealing the gun he'd killed Zev with.

Skye began laughing – slowly, at first – which grew into a maniacal cackle, then was interrupted by a hoarse coughing fit. He doubled over, shivering, clutching his abdomen.

Wrench and Ray walked over to him; Wrench asked if Skye wanted their muddy coat, to which he replied with a nod and, “please.” Ray, stoic as ever, simply watched as Wrench gave Skye a proper hug.

“Can you walk?” Ray asked.

“I think so.” Skye glanced down at his feet.

“Then let's get outta here.”

Now that the group had a moment of relative peace and they knew Skye was okay, they focused on navigating their way out of the scrapyard.

“Fuck happened?” Ray asked as soon as the group got a semblance of their bearings.

“Zev... it *must've* been Zev,” Skye began as the crew continued walking. “I-I was coming back from your place... and I don't know. That son of a bitch must've knocked me out or something. My memory after leaving your place is hazy... but I woke up in this place, Zev buried me in the scrap, chased me when I got out, told me that instead of eating me... he was gonna...”

Skye sniffled and sobbed before he could finish his sentence. “Zev was gonna eat Cassandra to get back at me for tricking him!”

“Geez,” Janice mumbled. Wrench followed up with another reaction of, “shit, dude.”

“And then he stuffed me back under that pile, and I couldn't get out, and I was fucked – totally fucked!” Skye couldn't stop the tears at that point. He wiped his eyes with the sleeve of the coat Wrench gave him, which only ended up smearing mud across his face, but he didn't seem to care at that particular moment.

Wrench walked beside Skye and put an arm over his shoulder as they walked, also apathetic about the dirty coat.

“My head's pounding... my shoulder is throbbing... and I still have debt collectors coming after me – w-wait, what day is it?”

“I think it's Monday today.” Janice spoke up.

Skye took a few shaky breaths. “I got Zev to kill one of the loan sharks. I tricked him and he found out... that's why Zev was gonna go after Cass – he found out I fooled him. So I don't know if those debt collectors are gonna come after me or what anymore!” Skye buried his face in his hands. “They wanted payment by Sunday...”

“Fuck 'em,” Ray butted in. “I'll shred those cunts if they touch you.”

“I-I... I'm so sorry... I'm such a fucking burden to you guys!” Skye whimpered. “I'd be dead like three times over if it wasn't for you!”

“My advice? Get the fuck outta here,” Ray declared. “You're too straight-edge for this place. Don't need *me* to tell you Miyatama's gonna end up killing you.”

The group reached the slope Wrench and Janice had entered from. The path they'd initially used was now impossible to climb due to the mud, but after skirting around the bottom of the slope, they found a gravelly section of the hill with another gap in the chain-link fence to climb through.

“My phone... I lost it,” Skye continued, finally setting foot on solid pavement. “It was in my coat. I left a message for my dad – he said he knew of a place I could go in Era city... so I've been trying to get in contact.”

“Dude, high roller status,” Wrench teased upon hearing Era's name dropped, hoping to improve the mood.

“Why the fuck you still here, then?” Ray inquired, perhaps unnecessarily gruff.

“I... I don't know! I have this passion project at home that's, well... more or less illegal...” His tone suggested guilt over the thought. “A-and I just don't like my dad! He ditched me and my sister to pursue his work, and I wanted to prove that I could be a better parent than he could! Cassandra deserves that much...”

The group remained silent for a few seconds before Wrench spoke up with a simple, “yeah, I get you.”

“Do you need to borrow a phone?” Janice asked. “You could use mine to call your dad if you need.”

“Ah... thank you – you're Janice, right?” Skye realized he hadn't properly met her yet.

“Yep!”

“Okay. Well... if that's really okay with you, maybe later after we get home. Again, thank you.”

“It's nothing!” Janice smiled.

Upon reaching the main street – the road with Velvet Crumble – the group got the occasional concerned look from passersby. A hulking robot, two filthy humans covered in mud, and a volon in disguise; not exactly an ordinary group of citizens. For once, Wrench didn't care much about the stares from strangers. Skye was their utmost priority, and having both their lives threatened by Zev minutes prior helped put Wrench's social anxiety into perspective.

The storm wasn't nearly as deafening now that it wasn't constantly battering hills of steel in each direction, and the surrounding buildings gave a decent buffer to the wind. However, it brought a concern to Wrench's mind – *did anyone hear Ray's gunfire? The wind and rain was loud, but surely not that loud. Granted, gunfire's common enough that people don't always call it in...* Wrench vowed to plead ignorance if they did get stopped.

“I'm really sorry to get you involved in this, Janice,” Skye said. “I swear, I'm not *always* this fucked up.”

“It's okay. I wanted to find Zev anyways, for personal reasons. I just wish things had ended differently. I guess it had to be done,” Janice's voice turned into a murmur by the last sentence.

Minutes passed, and the crew soon advanced into the ultraloop station. It was fairly

busy now that the late morning hustle and bustle had kicked into gear, and the waiting area didn't have any seats available, but there were still a few walls to rest against, away from the busiest pathways. Wrench and Skye sat down against the wall, while Ray and Janice opted to remain standing.

“I hope the ultraloop janitors don't hate us for the mud,” Wrench joked.



The ride was uneventful. By all means, that was a good thing.

The crowds had thinned out almost completely by the time they exited on the stop near Skye's home, leaving the group by their lonesome.

“Thank god... I just need to know Cassandra's safe,” Skye spoke up.

“I'm certain she's okay,” Wrench reassured him. “She was fine when we left, and we dealt with Zev before any harm could come to her.”

“Yeah... you're right. I'm still just kinda freaked out.”

Ray led everyone down the final stretch of street, moments until Skye could confirm Cassandra's safety with his own eyes. The robot turned the corner, giving way for Skye to run home—

Ray suddenly stepped back behind the corner, extending a hand to block Skye's advance.

“*Fuck,*” he muttered.

“What? What's wrong?” Skye asked, fear returning to his face.

Ray didn't respond. Instead, he pulled out his machine gun from under his coat and reloaded it.

22 – Full Circle

Skye – Monday, 11:11am

“Ray, what the fuck's going on?” Skye tried to brush his way past Ray again, but the hulking robot stopped him.

“Quiet,” Ray growled. “You got company.”

“Fuck, oh fuck,” Skye murmured, putting his hands on his head. “It's the debt collectors, isn't it?”

“They're packin' heat, chillin' outside your place. You be the judge.”

“Hey!” a masculine voice called out from around the street corner. “Who's yappin' over there?”

Two pale-skinned men, dressed in black suits, turned the corner with smarmy grins plastered on their faces. Just behind them, a thresher walked out from behind the corner, sporting the gang's iconic black and red insectoid armour, holding a matching assault rifle at the ready.

Skye quickly recognized the men as two of the loan sharks coming after him.

Fuck! Have these creditors been working with the threshers this whole time? Skye shuddered.

The leader of the sharks' crew, wearing a bright cyan tie, stepped forward.

“Oho-o-oo, shit. Would you look at that. Is that the shakedown kid rolling with the big bad Ray? Looks like you've seen better days.” The

sharks chuckled to themselves while the thresher remained silent.

Ray readied his weapon, aiming at the opposing crew. The thresher responded by raising their gun as well.

With Cassandra inside only a few dozen paces away, and his friends right beside him, Skye took a step forward. He raised his hands towards the two gunmen, shouting, “hey, stop! Chill! Fucking relax! Put the guns down!” His breaths hissed through clenched teeth and his face was that of a man at the end of his rope.

“Don't shoot!” he continued. “I don't want any *fucking* bullets flying, okay?! What the hell do you want? You wanted money *yesterday*, right? Well I've been a bit fucking incapacitated, so I need a *bit* more time!”

The shark considered Skye's words, eventually nodding in approval. “Well, with your friend pointing that thing at us, maybe circumstances have changed. Maybe we were a bit *overzealous* with you. See, we're getting tired of pissing around with some guy down on his luck, but the bottom line is *we haven't received what's due to us*. Not only that, but one of our guys just up and vanished yesterday after coming to sort you out. You know anything about that? You got *anything* for us, kid? 'Cause threshy boy here ain't too pleased with any of this.” He gestured to the armoured gangster behind him.

With his friends – especially Ray – beside him, Skye found even more of his courage.

“Sorry, I’ve been busy getting *fucked* an inch from my life for the last 24 hours!” Skye belted out, confidently exaggerating his circumstances. “I don’t know shit about your guy!”

“He seriously doesn’t know anything,” Wrench backed him up. “We just pulled him out of a death trap because some *other* dickhead wanted him dead.”

“Dickhead? Hey. Chill with the insults. We’re cool, we’re civil. I don’t want either of these metal-skulls getting any more pissed off.” The collector looked back to Skye. “I’d rather not have to make a mess in such a cozy part of town, don’t you agree?”

“Yeah, no, I don’t want a mess,” Skye answered.

“So how about this, kid. You still owe us 79,000 srakna. You’ve got two minutes to make threshy happy, or we’re going to continue having a problem, and we might not be so nice next time. Deal?”

“Okay, just—” With the situation on a hair trigger, Skye pursed his lips and fervently racked his brain for some kind of solution. He flat out didn’t have the money, but was there anything else he could pay them off with? Gadgets, tech, electronics...?

Then it hit him. The idea forced a wince across his face, but he couldn’t ignore the fact that he *did* have something valuable.

His obsession, his fixation: the “madeakelor” signal tracking project that he’d

created with part of the borrowed money. A pit slowly grew in his stomach as he came to terms with the fact that he had nothing else of value for the collectors. At least, nothing worth 79 grand.

Skye glanced over to Wrench, who was sheepishly holding a small wad of cash in the air.

Their leader spoke up again. “Yeeaah, I don't think that's going to cut it, bud.”

“N-no, I got this, it's cool, it's cool,” Skye stammered, raising a hand to Wrench. “I... have something you might like. Um... you're a thresher, so you like technology and stuff right?”

The armoured goon gave Skye a very slow nod.

“I've got something in my home. Something I've been working on. I-if you like what you see, then... maybe... m-maybe you can take it as compensation.” Every word stung on its way out, but he couldn't think up any other solution.

After a few seconds of consideration, the thresher put their hands on each of the collectors' shoulders, guiding them both to the side. The pair of sharks held their arms out towards Skye's apartment as if to welcome him to his own home. Reluctantly, Skye began walking forward with his friends in tow.

He approached the door with the thresher walking uncomfortably close beside him, with the others hardly a pace behind. Realizing he didn't have his keys – they'd gone missing with his coat – Skye leaned close to the door.

“Cassandra?” he said.

“Coming!” her voice answered from inside.

“Um, wait, Cass! Can you do me a big favour?”

“Yeah?” Her voice increased in volume as she approached the door.

“Don't open the door! Just... just unlock it, and then can you go to your room for a few minutes? And close your bedroom door?”

“...Okay? What's going on?”

“I'll explain later. I just really need you to do this for me, okay?”

“Is everything all right?”

“I-it will be, I promise, I'll explain everything later. Please, Cass.”

“Okay,” she finished, matching the unease in Skye's voice.

The door lock clicked, and Skye put his hand on the doorknob, waiting a few moments for Cassandra to shut herself in her room.

“Didn't know you had family,” one of the collectors remarked. “Could've made this a lot easier.”

Skye scowled at the door, resisting the urge to give the scumbag a piece of his mind. Shortly after, he slowly turned the handle, stepping foot inside his suite. Glancing back, he saw the sharks were blocking his friends from entering.

“C'mon, guys, we don't need to crowd him in there, do we?” one of them remarked.

“They come inside,” Skye growled, peering over at his friends, who looked equally as pissed.

“Kid, you're seriously not in a place to be pushing it.”

Skye glanced at Ray's gun for a quick dose of courage. “This is my own fucking home, and I want some assurance that I'm not going to get shot in here. We're not going fuck around. *I just want some protection.*”

The shark leader scowled. “If it's going to get your ass moving faster, whatever. Hurry the fuck up. My patience is running real fucking thin with you.”

Everyone cautiously shuffled inside, with the collectors entering before Skye's friends could get in. Janice and Wrench's faces were a mixture of discomfort and anger, gazes darting between members of the opposing party. The sharks stood in front of the kitchen appliances opposite the door, while Wrench and Janice stood beside the door, without a word, stiff as a plank.

Ray marched over to Skye, turning his head to face the thresher, who continued standing irritatingly close to Skye just a few paces from the kitchenette.

“Go. Show me,” the thresher barked with a highly synthesized, masculine voice.

“Go with the gun-toters,” the tie-wearing collector began, “we'll stay here and keep your friends in check.”

Power tripping cunts.

Skye slowly walked forward, guiding Ray and the thresher to his room. Pushing his door open, he made way for the gangster to go to his desk and inspect his project.

The thug looked over Skye's black market hardware, carefully picking up individual pieces, presumably scanning each part with his visor.

It was painfully hard to stand still with all the adrenaline pumping through his body. *If he doesn't like it and starts blasting... oh god...*

"Where'd you get this?" the gangster inquired.

"Um... I made it, I guess. I got the exa-router from a contact in the city. It kinda tracks radio signals. There's something covering all of Miyatama—"

"Madeakelor."

"Y-yeah."

"Exa-router, huh."

"That's right."

The thresher stared at the electronics for a few long seconds. "Tell me who sold it to you."

"...Just some guy who went by the name Wire Tailor. I met him on the western edge of the city."

"*No kidding,*" the thresher hummed in a curious tone.

"Is that... good?" Skye asked.

"Yeah. Real good."

The answer perplexed Skye, but he had little time to dwell on it.

The goon pointed across the room, over near the bed where a pair of cardboard boxes sat on the floor. "Pack it up for me," he demanded.

Skye sighed. Even with Ray there, he was unwilling to argue with the person holding a gun in their hands. He walked over and picked up one of the boxes, dumped its contents of papers and pens on his bed, and brought it back to the desk to start packing.

His passion project, gone in mere moments. He involuntarily sniffled a few times before putting the last of the electronics into the box.

"Thanks for the birthday gift," the thresher gloated.

"A-are we good then? No more debt?"

"Unless this is shit, then yeah, I'd rather not see your face again."

"How can I be sure you won't come back?" Skye pleaded.

"You can't." He began walking out of Skye's room. Ray followed him close behind.

Some mumbling emanated from the kitchen for a few seconds.

"Well, I'd say it's been a pleasure doing business with the kid," one of the collectors spoke up, "but it really hasn't. Let's hope none of us ever meet again."

Skye just stared at the empty desk. He waited until the footsteps exiting his home were no longer audible until he pried his gaze away from the table, joining his friends outside his room.

Ray walked out the front door, keeping distance from the thugs, but keeping a close eye on them nonetheless. Skye watched as he stood on the sidewalk for almost a whole minute, posing menacingly with his machine gun. Eventually, he walked back inside, shutting and locking the door.

Skye sat down on one of the dining room chairs, resting his forehead in his palm, taking a pair of long, deep breaths. Wrench took off their shoes and sat down on a chair beside him, Ray stood next to the front door with his firearm tucked under his coat, and Janice was standing by the edge of the living room with a fist against her mouth.

“Geez,” she mumbled, looking over Skye and Wrench.

“I’m just... I’m just so glad you’re alive, Skye,” Wrench sniveled. “But... all this is over now, right?”

“I think so.” Skye was choked up, straining to get each word out.

“Skye?” Cassandra peeped from her room. “Can I come out?”

“Y-yeah,” he stuttered.

Out stepped Cass, looking all manners of confused. “Skye... what happened? What’s going on? Are we safe?”

Skye nodded slowly. “We’re safe,” he whispered. “I need a shower. Then I’ll tell you everything.”

Cassandra walked over and hugged him.

23 – Mayhem's End

Skye – Monday, 11:31am.

We're okay. We lived, Skye reminded himself. *How the fuck did we live after all that?*

He wished the hot water washing over him would never stop. Tilting his head down, he watched the brown, soapy water spiral into the drain, refreshing his mind and cleansing himself of the week's events.

If only.

He checked himself over, noticing multiple bruises where he'd been bashed around by Zev. His whole body – especially his shoulder – was sore, but the hot water helped alleviate some of the pain.

Alas, he couldn't dawdle; Wrench was even more caked in mud and filth than he was, and he'd agreed to let his friend use the shower after he was done.



Skye stepped out of the washroom in a clean change of clothes, flagging down Wrench from the hallway.

“You need some duds?” Skye asked, looking over Wrench's mucky clothes.

“Nah, I'll change when I'm home.”

“You sure?”

“Well, I have work tomorrow. It'll probably be a couple days before I can get them back to you.”

“That's cool with me.”

“...Thanks, dude.”

Skye went and grabbed some clothes for his friend before showing them where the shampoo and towels were. He left Wrench and walked out to the living room, meeting up with Ray and Janice, who were both watching something on TV. Cassandra must have hid in her room.

“So... how many steaks and party nights do I owe you now?” Skye asked Ray, finishing with a sheepish grin.

“Like, five. Of each.”

“Oh, shit.” He assumed Ray was kidding, but that was a discussion for another time. “Ah, can I get you guys anything? A snack or something?”

Ray declined, but when Janice asked what Skye had, she eagerly accepted the offer of a granola bar.

“Thank you so much!” Happiness gleamed from her face over the trivial act of hospitality.

“It's the least I could do. I mean, you guys just saved my ass...”

Skye sat beside Ray on the sofa, and seconds later, the robot put a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Just quit gettin' into trouble,” Ray grunted.

Skye forced out a quick chuckle. “I plan on it. Sorry for everything, dude.”

“Yeh.”

He looked at the TV – it was blaring an announcement about a civil emergency, warning

about people with cross-shaped pupils, discoloured skin, and malformed limbs. Apparently, if you saw anyone with those traits, you were in immediate danger and should call a certain phone number to get assistance.

“Immediate danger? No shit,” Skye commented.

The other two were oddly quiet, still looking at the screen.

“Still got that gun?” Ray asked.

Skye hit the side of his thigh, mouthing the words, “in front of Janice?”

“She ain't gonna talk.”

Janice looked over and met eyes with Skye for a moment.

“What do you mean?” Skye followed up.

“*She ain't gonna talk,*” Ray repeated, emphasizing each word.

“Is everything okay?” Skye asked, glancing between the two, wondering if Ray had been intimidating her.

“I... think?” Janice replied.

She looked more confused than threatened, so Skye decided to quit prodding. “Not like it matters anymore. Zev ate it.”

“Fuck's sake,” Ray grumbled.

Skye shrugged, frowning at him. “Not much I could do about it while I'm dangling in the air with my hands bound.”

Ray grunted some more.

“...I know I already said it, but I can't thank you guys enough. I would've been completely fucked without your help.”

Janice smiled. "You're welcome."

"Yeh. Need *someone* to poke fun of," Ray teased, nudging his shoulder.

Skye couldn't help but chuckle, ever thankful it wasn't his sore shoulder.

Only a few minutes later, he heard the shower turn off. A couple more minutes, and Wrench stepped out into the living room with an overdramatic frown.

"No more hot water," they whined.

Skye halfheartedly gasped. "Oh no, I'm sorry, dude."

"I'm just messing around. I usually take short showers anyway."

"Aw, good."

Wrench went and grabbed a chair from the kitchen table, tiptoeing around the wet spots on the floor from everyone's shoes, and brought it to the living room, facing everyone.

They put their hands on their hips, glancing around at everyone with a stern face. "All right guys, this is an intervention."

Janice and Skye giggled.

"It baffles me that you're already cracking jokes after all this," Skye remarked.

Wrench gave him an exaggerated smile, tilting their head to the side. "Humour helps me cope with the stress."

Skye shut his eyes, giving Wrench a solemn nod. "Gotcha. So, I guess this is the part where I tell you guys how I got into this mess, huh."

"I'm curious," Ray answered.

“Yeah, I'm into it too,” Wrench followed up.

“Sure,” Janice replied.

Skye nodded again. “Hey, Cass!” he called.

She quickly ran out to the living room. “Yeah?”

“I'm gonna explain all the stuff that's been happening. You wanted to hear, right?”

“I do.” She walked over and sat on the arm of the couch beside Skye.

With his friends sitting by in solidarity, he began recounting his entire situation from the beginning: borrowing money from shady folks, using it both to enrich his home and invest in his project, his trouble paying off the collectors, the encounter and following nightmare with Zev, and the entirety of that morning's insane events. In the interest of not causing needless panic, he opted not to mention Zev's plan to eat Cassandra.

Although Skye's friends knew most of the story already, they didn't know all the minute details. On the other hand, Cassandra was bewildered at the mention of Zev, almost seeming to have trouble believing it.

Skye went to show her the video from the bakery, but realized his phone was still gone along with his coat.

“I got you covered,” Wrench announced, heroically pulling out their phone. They crouched over by Cass and Skye, scrolling through the three-way group chat to find the moment Skye

had sent BAKERY_HELL.vid, and then played it for Cassandra.

After watching, she turned to Skye. “And... you're telling me that thing was stalking you? And it sent you to the hospital? And kidnapped you? And... it's dead now?”

“Yeah. More or less...” Skye replied, scratching the back of his neck.

“That's... that's...” She paused with her mouth open, as if she was struggling to find the right words. “That's horrifying! Skye, you could have died! I wish you'd have told me..!”

Skye gave her a guilty smile and rested his palm against his temple. “I– yeah. I'm really, really sorry. I just wanted you to have a comfy life and not worry about my struggles, and I especially didn't want you to be scared of Zev too. *Maybe* keeping these things secret isn't the way to go about it...”

“No kidding!” Cass leaned over and embraced him. “I'm just happy you're okay...”

Wrench and Ray echoed her thoughts with nods and affirmative hums.

“I hope you can forgive me.” Skye wrapped an arm over her shoulder.

“I do! Like I said... I'm just glad you're not hurt.”

“God, I could cry.”

“Don't,” Ray barked.

“Oh, whatever, boss.” Skye laughed. “God forbid I shed a tear after all this shit.”

“Yeh, better not, softie.”

Skye was tempted to retort by calling him a hardie, but that didn't sound quite right. Some moments after enjoying the comfortable moment, a thought sprung into his mind.

“Oh, would I be able to borrow someone's phone?” he spoke up again. “I need to make an important call about that place in Era.”

Janice and Wrench both offered, but seeing as Wrench was closer, Janice let them give their phone to Skye.

“Thanks, guys. I'll be like five minutes.” Skye stood up and ambled his way over to his room, closing the door behind him.

The confusing sensation of walking back into his personal space after another near death experience rattled his mind – even more so than when he'd returned from the hospital. Weird thoughts continuously spun around in his head: *how am I here? Should I even be here? Shouldn't I be dead? This feels so surreal...*

He paced through the room, looking over his belongings, repeatedly eyeing the distinct lack of his project. At the very least, he was glad the thresher didn't take his computer too – *maybe it wasn't good enough for him.*

“Come on, focus, Skye,” he told himself, biting his lip and shaking his head. This wasn't a call he wanted to make, but one he *needed* to make.

Yes, dad left us for his work, Skye mused, but he's offering us a way out of this hell. I can't keep holding grudges like this.

He dialed his dad's number to the best of his memory, and when he was greeted with the annoying Maroon Shipyard Sweepstakes ad, he knew he had the right one. He sat down on his bed, tapping his feet on the floor as he navigated the phone menus, eventually asking for Reo Devereaux.

His heart skipped with every ring. *Come on, dude, it's your dad, for god's sake. He still cares about you. You know that.*

And then, moments later, a click.

"Reo Devereaux speaking," his dad greeted him.

Skye hesitated for a second before responding with, "hey dad, it's Skye!"

"Oh! Hey, kid! How are you?" He quickly perked up upon hearing his son's voice.

Skye chuckled. "I've been way better. It's been *insane* lately, but I'm surviving."

"Ah, well, glad to hear you're trucking through! How's Cass?"

"She's doing well. Giving her the best life I can."

"Good, good. So, what's up?"

"Well, um... I called to find out if that place in Era is still available for us. We really need to get out of Miyatama – for both our sakes. I don't know if you got my message, since I lost my phone this morning."

"Right. It *is* still available, but only until the end of the month. That's, what, this Friday?"

"Yeah."

“Good. I can't hold it for any longer; the owners are sticklers for having their suites filled rather than bought out. They're not letting me hold it past the end of this month.”

“And it's Monday today,” Skye thought aloud. “Four days from now.” His current apartment lease was operating on a month-by-month basis, but the idea of quitting Velvet Crumble with only four days' notice wasn't particularly appealing.

And don't forget to call Kaori, Skye reminded himself.

“If you're committed to it,” Reo continued, “I can email you a copy of the lease and we can get this thing going.”

“Please do! Do you still have my email address?”

“I do! I have a few minutes here, so I'll get that sorted out for you right now.”

“Thank you so much, dad.”

“Anything for you two.”

24 – Of Humans and Others

Wrench – Wednesday, 8:30pm.

“Whoa, like... you really are one of those volons, aren't you?” Wrench began, sitting on the bed of their measly home, looking at Janice's cross-shaped pupils. “So I definitely didn't hallucinate what happened in that junkyard.”

“No hallucination. It's true.” Sitting next to Wrench, she was clearly ashamed of it, refusing further eye contact and hugging herself as she spoke.

“But you're not crazy like Zev or the other volons, like the ones that broke out of Maroon.”

“Not at all! And I don't know why, either. Why are 99% of us uncontrollable, hunger-driven creatures while a rare few of us are... *normal*? Why do I even have this identity as a woman named Janice?”

“Have you met any other 'normal' volons? Um, aside from Zev, if that even counts.”

Janice took a deep breath before answering. “Zev was always teetering on the edge of sanity. At least that was the impression I got from them. They were the first volon I met that spoke and could be reasoned with, but when we broke out of Maroon, they ran off and, clearly, followed their carnal side. I feel like I failed with them.” She paused, looking at Wrench. “Zev was improving. At least to me, they were becoming more patient and less feral.”

Wrench nodded, remaining silent.

Janice's gaze returned to her lap and she continued. "Anyways... we were rescued by a crew of other volons; 'normal' volons – there were three of them. It turns out, there are more of us in Ystets than I would've ever expected... which is, I guess, a good and bad thing..?"

"I haven't been there, but I've heard of the place," Wrench commented.

"*Don't* go there. Half its citizens are volons in disguise, a good portion of which are quite feral. Ystets would devour you."

"Sheesh." Wrench winced.

"But... the good part was meeting those other three. One is kind of... *unpleasant*. One is a bit too close to the unpleasant one for me to get to know. However, the third person is the reason I'm even here in the first place – he's a sweetheart named–"

Janice suddenly paused, mouth hanging open to speak the person's name.

"Sorry," she continued, "I... probably shouldn't give names. He probably doesn't want people knowing his identity."

"Oh. Fair."

She apologized again, brushing hair away from her face. "I'm not good at this whole secret identity thing at all. The only reason I'm even back in this crazy city was because of a couple researchers I knew in the local Maroon facility – and, well, Zev too. Those staff members were the only humans who knew what I was and still gave me a modicum of respect, and I've been clinging to the hope they're still alive."

“That's who you were looking for at the Mental Health Association, wasn't it?” Wrench asked.

“Yeah. One of them, at least. I still have no idea where he is. All I really want is to live a life where I'm not shunned for my identity.”

Oh my god, she completely gets me. “I mean... I think you're pretty sick.” A pleasant grin showed itself on Wrench's face.

“S-sick..?” Janice whimpered.

“Ah, oh, I mean, like—” Wrench put their hands on their face, “—it's like, slang for cool! I think you're awesome! Oh shit, I'm so sorry...”

They shared a very awkward moment where Janice reassured Wrench over the miscommunication, and Wrench barely resisted the urge to curl up in a ball and die. After the brief panic was over, they worked up the courage to continue their original train of thought.

“Like... you helped save my friend's life! And you can shapeshift and change form and stuff? That's *wicked* cool!”

Janice stared at them for a moment, looking very bewildered.

“You mentioned not wanting to be shunned for your identity... I really get that. And I mean, hey, you've been chatting with me – a human – for a while, right?”

“Yes..! You've been so gracious about accepting me, but you even think it's *cool*, too?”

“Um, yeah?!” Wrench's eyes lit up. “Trust me, humans and robots get a little boring

after a while. Meeting an entirely different species is a dream come true!”

“I– I don't even know what to say! Um, thanks for finding me cool?” She shrugged, and they both shared a laugh. “Nobody's ever told me that before!”

“Aww.” Wrench almost leaned in for a hug, but remembered what Janice had said about physical contact. “Uh, question. You mentioned you try to avoid touching people. Is that because you're a volon..?”

Janice looked to the side. “Yes. At Maroon, I learned that prolonged contact with humans can cause itchiness, rashes, cracked skin, even blisters if it's long enough.”

“Oh.”

“Just another quirk that fortifies my role as something 'other.’” She rolled her eyes.

“I'm sorry to hear. At the very least, you grabbed my hand at the junkyard, and it hasn't fallen off yet.” Wrench spun their hands in the air, both of which looked perfectly healthy.

“My guess is it was such a short interaction that it didn't affect you.”

“Makes sense.” Wrench put a finger beneath their lips, hesitant to continue. “Can I ask a question about Maroon? If that's okay with you.”

“Sure.”

“The stuff you told me about being trapped and wanting to leave... was that true?”

“...Yes. But I never worked there willingly. I was literally imprisoned as part of a volon research program.”

“Yo, whaaat?” Wrench's eyes widened.

“It's true!” Janice briefly recounted her experience in the underbelly of Miyatama's Maroon facility, how she met Carson and Anders, her role as a researcher-prisoner hybrid, how she met Zev, and the Damien conspiracy resulting from their arrival. “It wasn't long after that until those other three volons broke us out.”

It was Wrench's turn to look bewildered.

“I don't know what Maroon was planning on doing with us down there, locked away like animals in cages. Seeing as they haven't admitted to anything on the news, I can't help but wonder what their intentions were.” She paused to take a deep breath. “I don't know if I *want* to know.”

“So... they're *really* coming after you, then, huh.”

“Seems so. I doubt they're going after me *specifically* though. There were dozens upon dozens of volons down there. I don't know how many of them broke out too; it was pretty messy by the time I reached the surface.”

“Sheesh. No wonder Maroon's on big time damage control...”

Janice paused, suddenly looking rather concerned. “I just have one question for you,” she murmured.

“What's that?”

“...You don't plan on calling that Maroon VCF number, do you?”

“Hell no! I mean... I think I'll keep it handy just in case another Zev happens, but I'm not calling them on you.”

Relief was written all over Janice's face. “Thank you. Thank you so much, Wrench.”

“Of course! Aliens are awesome! And with one of my best pals moving away, it's nice to make a new friend.”

“...You really *do* consider me a friend, don't you?” By the tone of her voice, she really seemed to have trouble believing it.

“Well, it's kinda hard *not* to after what happened this morning,” Wrench explained, following up with a chuckle. “You don't have to second-guess yourself on that one.”

Ring, ring; sounded like Janice was getting a call. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone.

“Oh, shoot, I have to answer this,” she explained as she stood up from her seat, walking to the door. “I'll be back in a bit!”

“Sure thing!”

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Protected from the rain by the awning above Wrench's front door, Janice answered the call.

“Hello?” she said, hoping she remembered how to use her phone correctly.

“Janice,” Glenn's voice greeted her. “How are things?”

“Great, actually! You?”

“Eh. Same old. Evading Maroon well enough?”

“So far, so good. I actually met a human and a robot who didn't kill me on the spot when they found out about me.”

“I hope you're being careful.”

“It's okay – the circumstances were crazy. Zev was even involved, but I don't think anyone else saw me. These people I met... I think they're my friends now.”

“Making interspecies friendships in Lower Miyatama? You're certainly a rare breed.”

“I know, I know. But these last two days have been incredibly weird and hectic. I'm just stepping outside of one of my new friends' houses to chat; maybe we can get into details later.”

“Sure. I trust your discretion, but that's essentially the reason I called you. Maroon is on the highest alert I've ever seen right now. I'm sure you've seen the emergency announcements they've plastered everywhere.”

“Call this number and a team will be sent to help you?” she recited with a grimace.

“Yep. Even in Ystets, I'm seeing more activity than usual. Armoured vehicles, heavily armed personnel. My advice – lay extra low for a while. Give it a week or two and see what happens.”

A worrying thought crossed Janice's mind. “Can they track us via phone calls?”

“Theoretically, yes, but I've only seen it happen when authorities already have your scent. *If* that happens, I recommend you destroy your phone, because they *will* use its GPS to find you.”



“Damn... at least they haven't found me yet.”

“Keep it that way. Is the motel treating you well?”

“It is.”

“Good.”

The two exchanged another minute's worth of small talk, briefly catching up on each others' personal lives. Afterwards, Janice excused herself in the interest of not keeping Wrench waiting. They both said their goodbyes, with Janice thanking Glenn for the check-in call.

*To think I have both Glenn and Wrench in my life now!* She was accumulating friends at record pace, but the threat of Maroon continued to befoul any feelings of hope. Eager to shake off that looming sense of dread, she returned inside to her new friend.



Janice joined Wrench back on the bed. “Apparently things with Maroon are even worse than I thought. My friend told me they're going crazy over finding us, even expanding their search to Ystets.”

*Looking for volons in Ystets?* Wrench thought. *If what she said is true, that sounds like a disaster in the making.*

“Are you gonna be okay?” Wrench asked.

“Yeah, I think so... I just need to keep an even lower profile.”

*Is... is this my moment?*

“Um... it's pretty quiet around these parts of the city,” Wrench began, looking around their

cramped living quarters. “So... like... if you don't mind the place... m-maybe you could stay here for a while.”

Janice perked up at the question, staring at Wrench, almost as if she was frozen in place. Eventually, she found her voice.

“I think I would like that,” she said with a gentle smile.

## 25 – Uprooting

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### Skye – Friday, 2:56pm.

Just like that, Skye's life had returned to the same ordinary routine that preceded the loan sharks and man-eating beast, as if nothing abnormal had happened. Despite multiple days passing since the insanity, his head still spun whenever the incidents sprung back into his head.

His job at Velvet Crumble had returned to its regular night shift schedule – at least for a few days. His boss didn't seem too impressed by the short notice, but they were still understanding because of Skye's recent hospital admittance. He'd even been given a tiny baggie of assorted pastries as a parting gift on Thursday, which he happily shared with Cassandra.

With some of the money he'd been intending to pay the collectors with, Skye purchased the cheapest burner phone he could find. 2,999 srakna was a decent price; for all Lower Miyatama's endless faults, selling affordable prepaid mobile devices was one of the city's few mercies. That, or the local phone providers just knew their underground clientele a little too well. Either way, it would make do until he got settled into Era.

He'd been using it to keep in contact with everyone, even his father, which was slowly becoming less forced with each conversation they had about the new apartment. Reo had offered to pay the first month's rent, which Skye happily accepted, given his tight finances.

The landlord didn't seem to care very much about the short notice, giving a lot of one word answers to Skye's dialogue. All he seemed to want was the keys mailed to him by the end of next week.

Skye had also asked both Wrench and Ray if they'd be able to help him pack his stuff, but they were both busy with work. *Don't blame them; I'd probably say the same thing*, he'd thought, chuckling to himself.

One of the toughest calls he'd made was to Kaori just yesterday. Before calling her, he'd brought Cassandra to his room and ensured there were tissues handy – a good decision, given how emotional the conversation was. After the greetings and small talk, Skye told Kaori that they were taking her advice and moving out of Miyatama. It was a bittersweet moment for everyone, especially Cassandra, who made good use of the tissues.

“You're one of the only good parts of this city. Thank you for everything,” Skye told Kaori before handing to phone to his sister. He wrapped an arm around the sobbing Cassandra and rested his head on top of hers, hearing lots of “love you,” “miss you,” and “for the best” from the phone.

With lots of reassurances from Skye, including, “we'll keep in touch with her,” and, “you'll meet other wonderful people like her,” Cassandra was able to keep her spirits up for moving day – that Friday.

The month of rent Reo agreed to cover gave Skye the opportunity to rent a robot moving

service with a portion of his savings. Since the trip between Miyatama and Era wasn't *too* far, he was given the generous price of 13,799 srakna for the move. The purchase came with a small crew of slender blue-cyan robots to both assist with loading boxes into their truck, and drive said truck to Era.

Cassandra was particularly enamoured by the robots. Although they hardly stopped for any breaks, one of them briefly indulged her by showing some of the cute expressions it could make on its screen-like face.

“C'mon now,” Skye reminded her, involuntarily smiling at the robot's charming display. “We've only got these helpers until the evening.”

“Okaaay.” Cassandra reluctantly continued packing up her belongings, and Skye returned to his room to do the same. Most of the movers were working in the living room and kitchen, but Skye made sure his sister had a bot to accompany her, just to be sure they'd finish on time.

Uprooting his and his sister's life on such short notice, especially without knowing exactly where they were going, was naturally quite jarring. Skye trusted his dad enough to not send him to another dump, but even the smallest reminders of Lower Miyatama's squalor was enough to reassure him.

*Anything's better than this place.*

Everything felt like it was happening so fast, but his eagerness for some peace and

relaxation in Era far outweighed his worries. *Just keep this up for another day and you'll have time to recover*, he reminded himself.

Packing everything up was much quicker than he'd originally expected, especially since the suite was furnished when he first moved in years ago. Evidently, he'd underestimated the efficiency of robots dedicated to their jobs, and everything had been packed up within an hour and a half, which included the siblings' snack break halfway through. Loading the truck took hardly 20 minutes, giving them ample time to make the trip to Era.

After everything was moved out of their suite, Skye looked around the street. The lack of his friends present in that moment threatened to make him emotional again, but a swift reminder that they'd all be hanging out virtually in within days kept his outlook positive.

*Probably a good thing there's no ceremony to see us off, anyways.*

The spacious truck had three rows of seats: two for the robots in the front and middle, and the back row for Skye and Cass. The seats were a tad stiff, and the interior smelled vaguely of automotive grease, but Skye was just glad he didn't have to do any driving.

“Destination address?” the driver chirped with its mechanical voice.

“Aurora Complex on Nimbus Boulevard, apartment 402,” Skye replied.

Thus, the vehicle whirred to life, and they left their Miyatama home for good.

About half an hour of twisting streets passed before they began seeing a rocky, jagged landscape peek out from beyond the run-down buildings bordering Lower Miyatama. Not long from then, they finally escaped the confines of the city, passing beneath an array of on-ramps leading to and fro the upper city.

The moment they escaped the permanent shade of High Miyatama's enormous platform was a sudden moment of clarity for Skye. Simply feeling the warmth of the sun on his skin was something he didn't know he missed until that moment.

“Yo...” he murmured. “You feel that sunlight, Cass?”

“Yeah! It's been so long!” She was glued to the window, pressing her cheek against the glass.

*No sunlight, always dark, claustrophobic layout... let alone everything else, there's no way in hell that was good for me. Even less so for Cass,* Skye thought, considering how his sister could barely ever leave home without putting herself in immediate danger. He couldn't help but do a little happy wiggle at the thought of getting away from those miserable conditions.

The van's windows didn't give him a ton of space to look back at the double-decker city, but beyond the rugged landscape surrounding them, he was still able to catch a glimpse of both levels of Miyatama at once. The contrast between the city's halves was ridiculously stark: Lower Miyatama was dark and decrepit even at a glance,

while High Miyatama's tall, futuristic structures shimmered in the amber sunlight. Skye was even able to spot a personal spacecraft launching from the city's better half.

“Good grief,” he thought aloud.

“Hm?” Cassandra looked over to Skye.

“Ah, nothing. Just thinking about Miyatama. I'm glad to get away from it all.”

She hummed in response. “I'm a little scared about moving, but a little excited too.”

“Yeah?” Skye pondered her words for a moment. “Me too, I think. But we'll make it work, just you watch. We made it this far, right?”

“Mhm!”

Looking around some more, he caught a good look at the enormous arch crossing over the sky – Ban Vatnia, one of the pinnacles of human innovation. An entire ring world encircling the planet, housing the cutting edge of space tech research and development. Just like the sky and the sun, it was something he hadn't seen in years, and the sight was just as awe-inspiring as the first time he'd set his gaze upon it.

*Man... I gotta take Cass there one day. What an experience that would be!* It was far too easy to get ahead of himself now that he was free from the shackles of stress and despair, but for the remainder of the trip to Era, he quietly indulged his wanderlust, passing the time with exciting thoughts of spaceships, robots, and aliens.

And then, a tree passed by. The craggy landscape slowly gave way to lush greenery and dense, towering trees. Mere minutes after passing



through the trees, buildings began replacing the trees on both side of the road.

“Welcome to Era,” the driver chirped as the truck passed by a sign reading the same thing.

“We're really here,” Skye murmured. “Look at this place, Cass!”

The architecture and signs on display were similar to Lower Miyatama's layout, but it was far less dilapidated, and the early evening sun shining down on the city gave the tall, sleek buildings a gorgeous spark of life.

*Even if this place wasn't as pretty, the sunlight would still do wonders for its beauty.*

Bright electronic billboards and neon signs were also present along the storefronts and roofs of buildings, though there were considerably fewer than in Miyatama. It made Skye eager to explore the city without it being too overwhelming.

Among the pedestrians going about their business, he couldn't help but notice several adorable robots of the same model walking about. As the truck stopped at an intersection, he managed to get a good look at one: it had a hooded, pure white humanoid body with black joints, a slender build not unlike the movers, and legs that converged into tiny points at the bottom. It sported green lights on several parts of its body, including its eyes, hood, and knees, and its featureless face – save for its bright pill-shaped eyes – radiated happiness.

“What are those robots? The white and green ones, like that one on the street there,” Skye

asked, discreetly pointing out the window with his thumb.

“Those are VESKY model robots, designed and developed by Veirr Heavy Industries,” one of the movers answered. “They are peacekeeping and surveillance robots, designed to be sociable and friendly to citizens who interact with them.”

Skye smiled, despite his mixed feelings about its nature as a surveillance machine. *No wonder they get away with constantly monitoring us when the bots are so cute.* “Are they like... police?” he continued.

“Some work in tandem with local police forces, but they are made to independently handle immediate threats of violence or aggression. VESKYs are armed with extensive laser weaponry and shielding; their lighting changes to yellow or red depending on the threat level they have currently assessed. Be sure to avoid contact with them if they are glowing yellow or red.”

“But you can meet them and, like, talk to them if they're green?”

“Most certainly. While glowing green, they are always happy to talk.”

“They're so cuuute!” Cassandra cheered, looking out her window at a different VESKY on her side of the street.

“Right?!” Skye exclaimed. *Well, if authorities are going to be watching our every move, at least they gave us the courtesy of making the cameras endearing. At least I don't have anything to hide anymore.* Convincing himself

that losing his illicit passion project was a good thing was extremely tough, but reminding himself that this was an opportunity for a fresh start slowly helped ease him into a better mindset. *I don't really want to know what a VESKY would do if it caught me with something illegal like that.*

About ten more minutes of driving through curved, calm streets brought them to a delightful boulevard with corner stores on the left, a grassy field on the right, and a huge brown and white apartment building just beyond the field.

“Is that it?” Skye asked.

“Aurora Complex is just ahead to our right,” the driver responded.

## 26 – Finale

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Skye yawned as he stepped out from his new room. *Good morning, Era.* With no threat of death hovering over him, he had one of his most restful sleeps in ages. The robot crew had helped the siblings move their belongings into the new apartment before they left at dusk, and with beds already included in the suite, Skye and Cass unpacked only the bare essentials – non-perishables, dishes, and toiletries – before they'd gone to sleep.

He looked out from the apartment's trio of floor-to-ceiling windows. His eyes were greeted with a picturesque scene as the morning sun cast a gentle orange sheen on the towering, white cityscape. Morning traffic was beginning to emerge throughout the local boulevard, with robots and humans alike going for walks in the crisp dawn air. He couldn't help but notice the surprisingly even ratio between the two races – for every human, there was at least one robot, raising his hopes of including more bots in his life down the line.

Everything he could see was in pristine condition, including his new apartment; although there were still lots of boxes to unpack, the suite itself was something out of a high-end real estate ad. White walls, grey carpets and tiles, sleek high-tech appliances, a gorgeous view, and more than enough space for both the siblings to thrive in.

He hadn't seen a proper sunrise in years down in Lower Miyatama's crowded streets,

especially with an entire city hovering above him at all times. It was beyond refreshing simply to be able to look at the sky, and for the first time in ages, he felt genuinely comfortable.

No more debt collectors. No more Zev. No longer did he have to fear for his – or Cassandra's – life. The rent was considerably higher than his squalid conditions in Miyatama, but he felt optimistic and confident after going through so much violence and tension in his old neighbourhood. If he could survive those ordeals, he could survive adding a few more srakna onto his monthly bill.

There was one major downside, though – his friends were no longer minutes away. It was a three hour round trip between Era and Miyatama, so seeing his friends on a whim would be significantly less convenient. At the very least, he still had internet access to hang out with his friends virtually.

*Maybe I could try meeting new people, too.*

And then his mind shifted to his project once again. Just when he was so close to making some sort of breakthrough with madeakelor's purpose or source or *something*, it was yanked away. He knew it was the right choice to make, but that knowledge didn't make it much easier. To ease his mind, he reminded himself that it'd be nigh unfeasible to continue working on it in Era, since its illicit nature combined with the city's rampant surveillance made for an impossible mission. He had a few other little projects to work

on – his favourite custom lighter being one of them – but he worried about what he'd spend the majority of his time on now.

He squinted his eyes shut for a second, storing those thoughts in the back of his brain for later. Those were concerns for future Skye, not present Skye. For the moment, he just wanted to bask in his new peaceful, beautiful living situation.

A door opened behind him, and he could see Cassandra walking out in the window's reflection, clad in pyjamas.

“Hey, Cass,” he greeted her.

“Good morning.” She rubbed her eyes and walked beside Skye, looking out at the gorgeous morning view with him.

“Sleep well?” Skye asked.

She hummed. “Not really. New place and all... I guess I'm just not used to it yet.”

“Aww, sorry. Yeah, it'll take a bit to get used to. But... god, I'm just so relieved. This place is so much safer and nicer than Miyatama. Things are going to be so much better now.”

“Yeah. I hated seeing you so sad and scared...”

“I'm so sorry you had to see all that. And... like I said a while ago, I'm sorry for keeping things from you. I just wanted you to feel comfortable and safe, but next time, I'll handle things better.”

“It's okay. I forgive you!” She beamed at Skye through the window's reflection, and he couldn't help but do the same.

“Thanks for being awesome, Cass.”

“You bet I am!”

The rest of the morning was just as comfy as the start. The two siblings each poured a bowl of sugary cereal to start their day, mostly devoid of conversation until the end of breakfast.

“This place is cool, but I already miss Kaori,” Cassandra mumbled.

“Ah, yeah. I do too. She's a real sweetheart. Maybe we can convince her to move out here too,” Skye joked.

“What kind of school will I have now?”

Skye rested his elbows on the table and made an exaggerated thinking face, realizing that was something he'd have to look into. Did Era have public schools? Would they have to find another private tutor? How expensive would it all be?

“I'm not sure, actually,” he answered. “We'll see what's available and weigh our options. So for now, I guess you could consider this week a mini holiday.”

“Nice!”

“But I'll need some help getting this place sorted out,” Skye continued, pointing at some of the living room's boxes with his spoon. “You're not *totally* off the hook!”

“Aww, fiiine.”

Something about the simple peace and tranquility of that moment filled Skye with glee. Breakfasts in Miyatama with his sister were usually just as cordial, but there was always a mountain of stress and fear tainting any happiness

he might've felt. Today, though, he didn't have to force a smile – it just came naturally.

There was still some lingering guilt in the back of his mind, with thoughts of “I should have talked to dad sooner,” and, “how could I let pride keep Cass in danger for so long,” lumbering through his brain, but another quick squint filed those thoughts away for future Skye. He'd have more than enough time to process those feelings in the coming weeks.

*Maybe I should look into counselling.*

“Done?” Skye asked, bringing his empty bowl and spoon over to the dishwasher.

“Yep.” Cass slid her dishes across the table for Skye to put away. “I'm going to go play for a while.”

“Sure thing. I think I'm gonna go for a walk. I'll be like half an hour, maybe?”

“Okay!”

Then a new possibility occurred to him. “Hey... do you want to come too?”

“Mmm, no thanks. I just want to relax this morning.”

“Sounds good to me.” Simply being able to give her the choice further reinforced the idea that this move was the right decision.

Cassandra then scurried off to her room.



Stepping outside the building's front door, the boulevard greeted Skye with the sight of orderly verdant shrubs on either side of the road, the smell of freshly cut grass from the field to the left, and the sensation of warmth and peace all



throughout his body. He took a long, deep breath, taking in the fragrant air surrounding Aurora Complex.

*We made it, he thought. We're free.*

## 27 – Flesh

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??? – ????, ??:??

*...Dead? No... no... not... dead...*

Not as long as undulating, interdimensional flesh remained gurgling on the surface of the human planet.

The mass of the slain fiend was still quite incapacitated. It slowly wriggled on the filthy, muddy floor, vague thoughts of identity, personality, and vengeance permeating through its bloodied tendrils, connecting itself to one another in a slow and arduous process.

It had time. No sane human would dare venture near it, so it continued its reconstitution in utter solitude. As pieces of the broken organism rejoined and remembered, its last moments surged to the forefront of its consciousness.

*A human... and her.*

Flickers of frustration throbbed through the undying creature. But something was missing. There was more than simple discontent.

*A different human... and a robot.* In an instant, seething fury overwhelmed the pile of viscera. It had been deceived, and defeated, and killed. The enemy had won, and it fled, triumphant, carelessly gloating in its victory.

That would be its last mistake.