

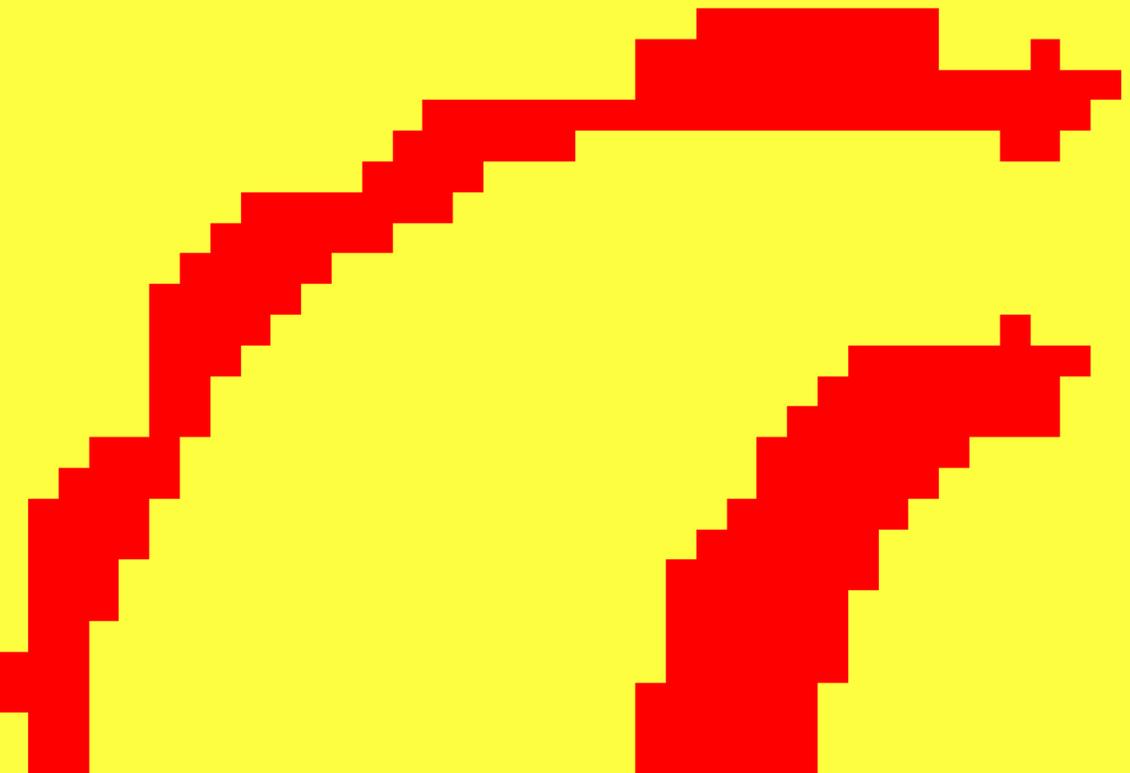
Ethan

Tales

Cooper by A. Fear

Future of

FRIGHTFALL



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The Serenity Massacre

October 31, 2202

I'm not afraid of you.

101...The Serenity Ma55acre

“Love can be cut, but more often it cuts, deeper than the gravest of wounds, and with the finest monofilament edge.”

- Anonymous, *The Last Resurrection of Cyberspace*

O. Nau5ea and Needler

There was so much blood, it made his head swim, his eyes water.

But that didn't matter. No, what mattered was *her*, and the fact that she hadn't arrived. Like she was supposed to be. According to the plan. Without her here to see the chaos created in her honor, it would all be for nothing. It was all wasted effort if she didn't notice him.

She had to be present for the end of it all. She had to *watch*.

Ernie shifted in his grasp. A flick of the thumb and the blade of the pulse dagger flicked out, drawing a thin line against Ernie's neck. Ernie whimpered, but somehow managed to hold in the scream that was surely trying to get out.

“Don't get fidgety, Ernie,” he said, letting irritation and anger creep into his voice, hoping they would have the desired effect. They did. Ernie went

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still enough that he was probably holding his breath.

Surveying the room, a faint wave of dizziness attempted to overtake him. He blinked tears from his eyes and resisted the urge to vomit. Usually he only felt this queasy when Serenity was near. It didn't make sense, the feeling of nausea without her in the room. As he wondered about this, the strong, feminine scent of her burst into his senses. For a moment, he thought she had entered the room silently. He spun, pulling Ernie with him, inflicting another thin cut with the pulse dagger. In the corner, one of the others let out a faint sob.

Serenity, of course, wasn't there. Her scent had been triggered by memory. He looked at the door to the classroom, half expecting her to appear there, as if summoned by his desire for her. Where was she? He blinked tears from his eyes, watched them fall to the floor, mixing with the red liquid there.

He turned his back to the door and faced the others that were left. There weren't that many, and the ones that were huddled together over at the far side of the room. They might have concerned him more, over there like they were, so far away, but the room didn't have any windows. The only exit was the door directly behind him. To leave they'd have to go through him.

Not that the door was the only way to escape the confines of the room. The blood and the bodies bore testament to that cold fact. The chunky remains of Teacher Stein made a seeping pile of cut flesh only a few feet away. Looking at the unidentifiable mess, he felt nothing. No regret. No sorrow. It was all so...unreal. He took comfort in this line of thought.

Pushing Ernie in front of him, but still holding him around the stomach, and with the hilt of the pulse dagger against Ernie's shoulder, he moved closer to the group of trembling classmates.

He picked one at random—a pretty girl crouching in front of the group—and fixed her in his gaze, using the Needler in his other hand to point at her.

“You,” he said.

The girl shook her head, as if she could deny that he was talking to her. She wasn't as pretty as Serenity (as if that were possible), but she had a nice face. One of the shoulder straps on her uniform was torn and askew. Her strawberry hair had come out of the clip she wore, clumps hanging crinkly,

yet limp against her cheeks. Specks of blood were drying on her chin. She must've been too close when the sever-whip had spoken earlier.

"You," he repeated. "Go find her."

The girl couldn't even speak. Her mouth opened, but the only thing that came out was a weak, breathy gurgle. She shook her head.

He tightened his grip on Ernie, flashing the pulse dagger.

"Go find her."

The girl's face barely registered the command.

"Go find her, or I shove this dagger through Ernie's neck."

Ernie stayed still, but whispered, "Why do you keep c—"

"Shut up!" he yelled in Ernie's ear. "Say one more word, Ernie boy, and you're as dead as Teacher Stein, you pathetic little thief. Only it'll take longer with you. And I'll enjoy it more."

Ernie's mouth closed so fast his teeth *clicked*.

Looking at the pretty girl one last time, he spoke loud and clear, his voice raised, but not yelling: "You will go find Serenity. And you will find her now. It's either that, or I stab Ernie in the throat, and you get to watch him die up close and messy. Then, I fire the Needler back up. If I do that, none of you gets out alive. Understand?"

No answer. The pretty girl was catatonic. And nobody else was volunteering. He scanned the group. Except for the pretty girl, none of them could meet his gaze. Perhaps they hadn't even heard him. Were they really that frightened?

Again, it was so unreal. Just like RS said it would be.

"Fine," he said, thinking of Serenity and the way her mouth turned up when she smiled, and those eyes that he knew were made just for him to stare into. "It doesn't really matter anyway."

He flicked the switch. The whine of the Needler filled the room.

1. Angel and Smile

She smiled at him, and he was lost to her. Completely under her spell. Completely in love. Or so the story goes.

For Trey Sine, it went exactly like that.

She was up there, standing at the top of the entryway steps, morning sun still low and casting white halo highlights on her hair. Short, puffy gusts picked at her hair and threw it around her face, across her eyes. If there were such things as angels, then Trey believed that one had fallen to earth and was looking around as if she were as lost as the rest of them.

Trey held his breath (quite involuntarily), but when she brushed her hair back behind her ear with slender fingers, looked directly down at him and smiled, it all came out in a whoosh.

How far he was standing from her, he couldn't tell. It seemed like he was a million miles away, yet at the same time, it could've been mere centimeters. Something in his stomach went funny, and the urge to vomit was suddenly strong—not that spewing out breakfast was an option. Certainly not on his first day at a new school. And certainly not in front of the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen, whoever she was.

Trey smiled back, but maybe it came out as some sort of crooked grimace because her smile faded, and her eyes went hesitant. When she turned away a second later, the world seemed like a colder place.

Adjusting his glasses and wondering if *she* liked boys with glasses, Trey made his way into the building, following the ebb and flow of the stream of students.

The classroom complex of Trinitary School for the Eternally Blessed swallowed Trey and the rest of the students like a slobbering beast ravenous for its next meal.

2. Trey and Serenity

The classroom that Trey would visit on a daily basis for the entirety of his stay at Trinitary School was as modern as could be. Hyperplastic ceiling, floor, and wall surfaces instantly adjusted to the optimal learning colors for the members of the class. As students entered, Trey watched as the surfaces hue-shifted to account for minor changes in color preferences. AI-injected chair-and-desk units rose seamlessly from the floor, molding contours to the bodies of the students.

Trey picked a desk, sat in it, and looked around while the desk reconfigured itself to conform with his buttocks. He leaned back and the desk extended up, providing firm support against his spine. He played his fingers across the smooth interface surface that curved around in front of him. Trey didn't understand the data that began to flow across the surface, so he deactivated the interface. He noted a small indentation in the upper right of the desk. He reached down, pulled his data sphere off his belt, and rested it in the indentation. The data sphere settled, then lit up, indicating that it was active and ready for interaction. Idly, he felt the matrix interface unit at the base of his skull, wondering how much of that day's learning would require him to plug into his data sphere and access the local network node.

But really, these were idle actions and idle thoughts. His mind was still occupied with the girl on the steps. He wondered what she was like. He wondered who she was, where she was from. He wondered what her name was.

Trey had arrived early, but the room was beginning to fill. A pulsing indicator on his desk told him that there were only a few minutes left before the start of class.

Tardiness wasn't tolerated at Trinitary School. At least that's what Trey's grandparents had said before they dropped him off two days ago.

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They had told him many other things, other rules and regulations and behavioral expectations. Trey had listened with all the attention of a 13-year-old boy being dropped off at a school far away where he wouldn't be much of a bother anymore. Six months ago, when they had entered his room to tell him what they'd decided, he'd known immediately what they were doing with him. Trey was a smart boy, and he'd figured this had been coming for a long time. He didn't know quite how he felt about it, but he'd resigned himself to its inevitability. Later that night, with a sudden rainstorm beating against the window over his bed, Trey wondered what his parents would think about what his grandparents were doing.

Well, he didn't wonder long. After all, his parents were ten years cold in the earth.

Sitting there in an AI-enhanced chair that felt like it had been designed for him, Trey swallowed hard and checked his emotions, made sure he wasn't going to do something embarrassing—like start to cry.

Almost all the desks were occupied. Trey got the impression that some of the other students were looking at him. He ducked his head a little and looked around, hoping his lowered head hid his eye movements. Nobody was looking his way, but he couldn't shake the feeling that somebody was staring. Nervously, he ran a hand through his hair, hoping he wasn't messing it up—at least no more than it already was. He pushed his glasses up higher on the ridge of his nose and exhaled, glad that the uneasy feeling in his stomach was gone. The girl on the steps had sure been nice to look at, but the feeling in his stomach had been unexpected and unpleasant. Was this how it was going to be with girls? This...sickness? He didn't know how the older boys could stand it. They had to be getting something out of the deal. Trey wondered what it was.

Thirty seconds to go before class started. That was when the girl from the steps walked in. She surveyed the room with the detachment of a predatory bird. Only her face betrayed a passive sadness that Trey found strangely alluring. Just looking at her caused the queasiness to rise. Still, he didn't look away.

Then (surely guided by some deity's hand), she crossed the front of the classroom, walked down the aisle and sat at the desk directly in front of Trey. As she was walking, Trey's mouth had actually dropped open in disbelief. When she sat down, it was with an almost violent determination. The

suddenness of her movement caused her hair (which hung down to her waist in a waterfall of blonde) to fling around, catching Trey in the face just as he was taking a breath. Though his tongue and lips felt like they might have been lacerated, the full-on, bold scent of young girl hit him like a fist to the face. Her hair smelled and tasted clean. There was some undercurrent of perfume there too. It was tangy and sweet, making his nose tingle and his mouth water.

Somehow he managed not to flinch, cry out, whimper, or otherwise bring attention to the fact that he'd just experienced the most direct pretty-girl-contact of his entire life. Vomiting was a distinct possibility.

Trey sat back in his chair and wiped his mouth with his hand, brushing away the feel of her hair there, but not the aftertaste. Her smell certainly wasn't going to dissipate anytime soon—her proximity was a guarantee of that. Dazed, partially hypnotized, Trey couldn't take his eyes off the shimmering mane of hair that streamed over the back of her chair.

He was still staring at it when a skinny, balding man entered and walked to the front of the room. He was wearing a formal black suit that stood out in contrast to the shifting colors of the room. Around one ear, he'd clipped a MIU. In one hand he carried a book (Trey recognized it because his grandparents had one, and he'd snuck it away once), and in the other a silver cane.

“Welcome to your first day at Trinitary School,” the man said. “I am Teacher Stein.”

The class absorbed this, but didn't visibly or audibly respond. The Teacher could've done an inventory of connected data spheres, but instead, he systematically traversed the classroom and listened as the students told him their names.

When he reached the pretty girl that Trey was irrevocably and apocalyptically infatuated with, his smile was a little more genuine than it had been for any of the others. At least, that's the way it seemed to Trey, who sat there, watching and already beginning to foster an irrational dislike for Teacher Stein.

The pretty girl's voice was low and a little scratchy, but filled to the brim with an innocent sultriness that was completely inappropriate for a girl her age. Trey actually shivered when he heard her name on her lips.

He found himself mouthing her name. Even when Teacher Stein had to

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ask Trey his name multiple times, he couldn't stop thinking of her name and how it had sounded when she said it.

Serenity.

3. Meal and Coven

The eating area was common to all the students of Trinitary School. Trey walked into the cacophony of sound and movement and smell after three hours of class, and was glad for the distraction. Serenity had occupied his vision and thoughts the entire period. Trey was smart enough to know that her sitting in front of him was going to a problem, both on a personal and an academic level. Not that he was complaining. He was soaring on the images running through his mind—Images common to 13-year-old boys who find themselves experiencing the dizzying effects of the opposite sex for the first time.

The eating room wasn't arranged in any discernable pattern. Tables and padded chairs were set in the middle of the room, but students arranged them at whim, pushing tables together to accommodate larger groups of friends, or separating the smaller tables from others for privacy. The entire left side of the room was occupied by a massive conveyor surface that shot out of one wall, ran the length of the room, then turned back into that same wall. Meals on trays floated on cushions of air. Students lined up and grabbed trays. Trey got in line behind two young girls. Both had wavy, shoulder-length black hair. They were holding hands as they waited. They were already wearing their school uniforms. None of the students in Trey's class had been wearing uniforms, and Trey hadn't been given one yet. Maybe that was because his classmates were older than these two.

The girl on the right turned her head toward her friend. Trey got a glimpse of eyes with gold irises, a short, cute nose, and a thoroughly mischievous grin that he couldn't be sure wasn't aimed right at him. The girl on the left inclined her head as the other girl whispered in her ear, cupping her hands so that nobody could read her lips. The girl listened, then paused only a second before turning to Trey and fixing him with eyes so blue that

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they redefined the color. A flip of her head sent hair flying in a comical imitation of some amorous invitation.

Her voice was like a child's toy. "You're new here." Trey didn't get a chance to answer (and he wasn't even sure it had been a question anyway) before the girl continued. "I like older boys. Wanna come to my room later?"

Trey could only have been more speechless if Serenity were to have chosen that moment to walk over and shove her tongue in his mouth. He tried to comprehend the girl's offer, tried to make some token sound that would convey his utter confusion. He failed.

"Too bad," the girl said before turning back around and descending into musical giggles with her friend (twin sister actually, Trey realized later).

Trey fumbled for his meal and stepped out of line, their syncopated laughter still echoing behind him. He quickly scanned the room for an empty seat. There were plenty, but only a few were at empty tables, which was the only place he was going to feel comfortable at that moment. He found a small table with two chairs at it. Setting his tray down, he took one chair and set it at another table. Then, he sat down. He skipped the meal blessing liturgy that was customary at Trinity School and ate.

It only took a few seconds for Trey to realize that he had an unobstructed view of Serenity eating her own meal a few tables away. She was lifting food to her mouth with one hand and tapping on a small touch-screen datapad with the other. Trey wondered what the datapad was for. She wasn't alone, but neither did she wasn't conversing with the students sitting around her either. That changed when a three-girl cluster zipped past Trey, heading straight for Serenity. She switched the datapad off, covering the screen with her hand. She looked up from her meal as the three sat down. Serenity wasn't smiling, but that didn't stop the three girls from engaging her in conversation.

Two male students were at a table a few feet from Trey. One of them pointed to the four girls. "Guess the coven's trying to recruit a new member."

"You just wish they'd recruit you," the other student replied, laughing.

"That wouldn't be so bad."

"You can have them," said the student with tangled green hair and freckles. "Me, I'm thinking about the newbie they're trying to recruit. She's

the eyebuzz.”

“You’re jacked if you think you could even get her to talk to you.”

Green-Hair-with-Freckles laughed. “Not gonna stop me from trying. I’m a persistent little glitch.”

Trey had heard enough. He stood and left the meal room, but not before he made sure that the face of Mr. Green-Hair-with-Freckles was firmly imprinted in his memory.

4. InviSibility and Hu5k

Trey's infatuation with Serenity continued unabated through the next several weeks. Sitting behind her during class was a constant distraction, and it was difficult to concentrate with her female presence broadcasting itself to every nerve in his body. But somehow (divine grace, Trinitary School ministers may have suggested) he managed to maintain passable academic performance.

He'd tried to talk to her on several occasions, but was defeated at every attempt. The first time was exactly one week after he'd first seen her. He knew that every morning she would be at the entry to the classroom complex, so he'd set his data sphere to wake him up early, then sat at the top of the entryway steps, waiting for her. He'd hoped it would seem accidental, that she would arrive from the dwellings and find a cute male student with glasses standing where she normally did. She'd wonder for a second who exactly he was, but then she'd remember that he was that quiet boy who sat behind her everyday. And when she saw him close, she'd be able to see that he was different from all the other guys in class. This mysterious boy before her looked kind and thoughtful. He wasn't the type to take her for granted, that was for sure. He would treat her how she wanted to be treated—how she was *supposed* to be treated. If she were to kiss him, eventually, he wouldn't try to shove his tongue into her mouth. He wouldn't try to feel her up (unless she wanted him to) like all the other boys who seemed to have only one thing on their mind, even though they were barely old enough to do anything about that one thing.

Oh yeah, this boy named Trey was different. Roger, ground control, this one's a keeper. Think I'll stay awhile before heading back your way. See you on the flip side. This is Serenity, over and out.

Trey wished for something along these lines at, but couldn't quite get it.

Oh, he saw her approaching her usual location at the top of the steps (where he was waiting), but she never made it. The coven intercepted her before she could even get close. They swarmed her like ravenous sea vipers feeding on a dead whale. Serenity never had a chance to notice him. Trey sighed and went inside, comforting himself with the knowledge that he'd at least be closer to her in class.

Still, several weeks of failure weren't enough to discourage him. Persistence was the key; he was confident of this.

The second time he was close enough to talk to her, he almost ran into her as she was coming out of the girl's lavatory. He had been adjusting the data sphere on his belt. Distracted, he came within centimeters of colliding with her back. Without giving any indication that she knew somebody was behind her, she had accelerated and avoided contact, completely oblivious. Other students in the hall at the time had noticed. Trey felt a sting of anger as they snickered behind him.

There were other times, but each story remained strangely similar: something always prevented him from interacting with her. Cuter, older boys stepped in front of him. Her friends (or those he assumed to be her friends) whisked her away. She was always surrounded at meal times. During exercise periods, she was always placed on an opposite team. She was always paired with other students during laboratory experiments. One would think that some random encounter was bound to occur. After all, he did sit directly behind her for five hours every day. Despite this, the encounter Trey wished for did not occur. Trey began to wonder if he was invisible to her (and only her).

Though it would've been convenient, he couldn't bring himself to initiate anything during class. It would've been so easy to just tap her on the shoulder. *Excuse me, I just wanted to tell you that you're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen.* That would get the process started at least, but Trey couldn't do it. It seemed like cheating. Too glitched easy.

Instead, he waited. And plotted. And suffered.

The Trinitary School cyberspace node was his main source of comfort. In the evenings, after classes, he went back to his room, jacked into the local network node and spent hours with his body lying on his bed and his mind wandering through datascape.

Even though it had been back online for five years, they said that cyber-

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space was never going to be what it had been before it fell. It took two years for them to get it back up, and five years later, it still didn't work like it was supposed to. Nobody could explain the new behavior any more than they could explain the reason for its two-year hiatus. Trey hadn't seen cyberspace before the Fall because his grandparents hadn't approved of fitting a boy that young with a MIU, so he hadn't really known all he had been missing. He had done a little research on what cyberspace was like before it went offline and had been both fascinated and horrified by what he had discovered. Back then, cyberspace had been a lethal place. After they brought it back up, there had been a lengthy period of quiet (serenity, if you will), and Trey had snuck away and had a MIU installed. Ever since cyberspace had come back online, violence in the system had begun to rise again. It was inevitable. It was nature. Trey was careful about where he went, what he did, and how visible he made himself.

His matrix husk was a near-perfect replica of Sam Scare, heroic protagonist of the three-years-defunct matrix-flik *Sam Scare, Space Pirate from the Moons of Pluto!* Trey had obsessed over the show back then, even though his grandparents had told him he was too old to be watching such things (yes, they had finally come to grips with the fact that his MIU was a permanent part of him). Trey had spent quite a bit of time making sure his husk was accurate. Despite the juvenile theme, he had been extremely proud of his work. This being the case, he hadn't seen the need to change it upon arriving at Trinitary School. Nobody would know it was him, and if they did, they wouldn't care. So, the husk remained.

In cyberspace, he did all the normal things a 13-year-old boy did when connected to the world's largest and most powerful network. He played games. He watched flicks. He searched for information on topics he was interested in (weapons, space exploration, sex). He sent encrypted messages to complete strangers.

Oh, and he stalked Serenity.

Cracking the Trinitary School network was beyond his cyberspace manipulation abilities, but there was a staggering amount of information that Trinitary School made available about its students. He found out that she was 13-years-old, just like him. She was from the city of Jakkak, which was located at the east side of the former Free States. Serenity was a long way from home. He knew her parents' names. He knew she didn't have any

brothers or sisters. Trey knew her height, her weight, her skin pigment hue, her birthmark location, and her MIU type (Genecore HyperWitch, Model 2.3.7d, revision 67). He knew she was allergic to loveroot. He knew she had a regressive vitamin C deficiency, which forced her to take supplements with every meal. He knew she was free from terminal illnesses and that her immunizations were current. He knew she was a virgin.

That this last fact was a matter of public record should've been a shock to him. Instead, it simply caused his mind to swirl with emotions and images that he couldn't quite understand. He knew a little about sex (thank you, cyberspace), but his mind got all jumbled up when he found himself thinking about Serenity in that context.

The days passed in cycles of waking, academics, eating, sleeping, and cyberspace. And through each phase of this cycle, thoughts of Serenity plagued Trey. It took Trey four weeks from the start of the school year to decide what to do about her.

5. Me55age and Re5ponse

[BEGIN]

TO: Serenity <serenity2451637.tseb>

FROM: Sam Scare <samscare.[UNKNOWN]>

SUBJECT: N/A

MESSAGE ID: xxxx0000067.tseb

I don't know how to begin, so I'm just going to say what I have to say and let you respond. This way, if you reject me, you won't know who I am. That should be less awkward (for both of us).

I think you're the prettiest girl I have ever seen. Every time I see you, I lose touch with reality. I would like to talk to you, but I'm not good at talking to girls as pretty as you (or any girl).

I think that you might like me if you got to know me. What do you think? I'm a very nice person. I'm not like others you may have met.

I will leave you alone if you want me to, but I'm really a nice person. Message me back if you want to talk sometime. Even though the origin is masked, your message will get to me.

- SS

WARNING!! THIS MESSAGE WAS RECEIVED BY CYBERNODE.TSEB WITH SENDER ORIGIN SHIELDED. PLEASE REPORT ANY HARASSMENT OR ABUSE TO SAFE.TSEB. TOUCH HERE TO FILE A REPORT.

THIS MESSAGE SCANNED FOR MALICIOUS DIGI-CODE BY WITCHUNTER 6.7, PERPETUAL COPY-RIGHT BY YAKIMATO CORPORATION.
[END]

[BEGIN]

TO: Sam Scare <samscare.[UNKNOWN]>
FROM: Serenity <serenity2451637.tseb>
SUBJECT: I'm curious
MESSAGE ID: xxxx0000035.tseb

I don't know what to say. I'm gonna go ahead and admit that your message freaked me out at first. I'm not sure why I read your message at all. I normally trash them. This time I didn't.

I think I'm glad I didn't.

Thank you for saying I'm pretty. That's nice. You sound okay, but I can't really be sure. Tell me a little more about yourself, and maybe I'll feel more comfortable.

- *Serenity*
@}-,-'---

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THIS MESSAGE SCANNED FOR MALICIOUS DIGI-
CODE BY WITCHUNTER 6.7, PERPETUAL COPY-
RIGHT BY YAKIMATO CORPORATION.
[END]

6. Channel and Meeting

Trey's fingers trembled. Even in cyberspace, his matrix husk was vibrating as if its nervous system was afflicted with some paroxysm.

She hadn't rejected him!

Trey jacked out, the image of Serenity's message still burning brightly as an afterimage behind his closed eyelids. The image his mind formed of her face burned even brighter.

It was so unreal, he wondered if he was still connected to cyberspace. Unconsciously, his fingers felt for his MIU socket. Empty, of course.

He almost replied back to her right then and there, but he managed to resist. No, it was better to go slow with this. He didn't want to scare her off. Making a wrong move could drive her away

He didn't sleep much that night—his mind and his heart and his hormones were coursing through his body too fast for that. It was simple: he was in love, and it felt good...felt *perfect*.

The next few days were like that. He sent her a message, and she responded. Only one message a day for both of them though. Trey sent his in the morning, before classes, sending it early enough that she would be able to read it before class, but not respond. Sitting behind her during the day took on a new level of pleasure/pain. Hour after hour he wanted to grab her shoulder, turn her around to face him, and tell her the secret he knew she wanted to know: Sam Scare's secret identity. He was able to resist that urge though. He knew it wouldn't be good for him to offer that. She had to ask him. That's the only way this was going to work out in the long-term. After the last class period and evening meal, he would go back to his room and study while waiting for her message. His daily academic performance may have suffered, but if it did, Trey didn't notice. When her message for the day finally came, his studies meant little to him the rest of the evening.

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He would read her words. In cyberspace, he had the vocalizer program read her messages using her voice (which the local node was able to synthesize using an audio sample from the Trinitary School public records). Hearing her talk to him was infinitely better than simply reading her messages.

Yes, things were going very well. Cosmically better than he could have hoped for. Taking it slow, that was the key to her heart.

Serenity, however, had other plans. Trey read her last message to him—the second of that evening.

[BEGIN]

TO: Sam Scare <samscare.[UNKNOWN]>

FROM: Serenity <serenity2451637.tseb>

SUBJECT: Can I ask you a question?

MESSAGE ID: xxxx0000056.tseb

ATTACHMENTS: [3]

Hey, it's me again. I know I just sent you a message, but I forgot to ask you something. Over the past few days, you've told me a lot about yourself. I need to know more, and I don't want to wait a day between your answers. I want to talk real-time with you. Right now. We'll do text only. No husks. I'm not sure I can talk to a cartoon character anyway.

I've attached my husk name, the channel I'll be listening on, and the entrycode. I'll handle the encryption on my end.

I'm waiting for you.

- *Serenity*

@}-, -` - -

ATTACHMENT LIST:

FILE [1]: blondegirl67.husk

FILE [2]: house.of.serenity.channel.tseb

FILE [3]: entrycode.text

THIS MESSAGE SCANNED FOR MALICIOUS DIGI-
CODE BY WITCHHUNTER 6.7, PERPETUAL COPY-
RIGHT BY YAKIMATO CORPORATION.

[END]

Trembling. His realspace body was into it too. Unexpected. This was unexpected. This was fast, maybe too fast, but exciting at the same time.

Jacking out of cyberspace, Trey tried to still his shaking body. She was waiting for him, and he was here, trembling like a timid little girl. That wasn't going to work. Here he was, getting what he wanted, and all he could do was lay there and quiver.

Trey jacked back in, his mind sending commands to the interface with the speed of thought. He added Serenity's husk to his list of entities allowed to communicate with him. He brought up a list of open channels and found that there were six visible to him:

KINGDOM OF THE QUEEN [67]

EXTREME SIMULATIONS [2]

WIREWITCH LOVERS [2]

HOUSE OF SERENITY [1]

DAREGAME [2]

MEDITATION SANCTUARY [1,189]

He opened up HOUSE OF SERENITY and was immediately prompted for the entry code. He was about to drop the code into the prompt when he realized that he had almost entered without shielding. In realspace, he took a deep breath, his heart pounding heavily in his chest.

He could've messed things up real good there.

Entering into that channel without shielding would've allowed her to trace his connection path. The simplest of queries would've led her directly to his room and his personal Trinitary School access ID.

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Glitch, that was close.

Trey activated the custom shielding code he'd designed, then placed the entry code file into the hovering window. The window disappeared and was replaced with another.

: WELCOME TO THE HOUSE OF SERENITY!

: CHANNEL STATUS: PRIVATE

: HUSKS IN CHANNEL: [2]

blondegirl67> Hey, you got my message!

Sam Scare> Hello.

blondegirl67> I'm was afraid you might not come. I'm glad you did.

Sam Scare> I'm glad you asked.

blondegirl67> Hey, this is the next logical step for us isn't it?

Sam Scare> I guess so. Does this mean you're not afraid of me anymore?

blondegirl67> Not anymore. I just didn't know you before. I feel better about you now. Why, are you afraid of me?

Sam Scare> I'm not afraid of you.

blondegirl67> Maybe you should be.

Sam Scare> Why is that?

blondegirl67> Because I'm evil.

Sam Scare> You're not evil! How can you say that? Nobody as beautiful as you are can be evil.

blondegirl67> Thank you. That's nice of you to say. But really, You don't know me. I'm not as nice as you might think.

Sam Scare> I doubt that. I think you're nicer than I think.

blondegirl67> Funny. You're making me laugh. My roommate is probably wondering who I'm talking to.

Sam Scare> Tell her you're talking to a cartoon.

blondegirl67> Again, you're funny. That's one thing I like about you.

Sam Scare> I like that you like that about me.

blondegirl67> And what about me?

Sam Scare> What about you?

blondegirl67> Do you like me?

Sam Scare> Yes.

blondegirl67> How much?

Sam Scare> Much. I can't stop thinking about you.

blondegirl67> Good.

Sam Scare> What are you thinking?

blondegirl67> I think we should meet.

Sam Scare> ...

blondegirl67> Okay, now what are *you* thinking?

Sam Scare> That I want to meet you too. I just didn't expect you to want the same thing this early.

blondegirl67> A girl can change her mind whenever she wants. That's one thing you need to learn about us.

Sam Scare> You're probably right.

blondegirl67> That's another thing you need to learn. The girl is always right.

Sam Scare> Okay.

blondegirl67> How far would you go to meet with me?

Sam Scare> Do you mean how far would I travel to meet you, or what I would do in order to meet you?

blondegirl67> I mean: What would you be willing to do in order to meet with me? I know you're a student here at Trinity School, and I know you've seen me. Seeing me or meeting me isn't the goal here. We need to meet with each other.

Sam Scare> I'm dying to have you meet up with me.

blondegirl67> It probably won't come to that.

Sam Scare> ???

blondegirl67> Meaning, you probably won't have to die to meet me.

Sam Scare> Now you're the one being funny.

blondegirl67> Thanks. You're full of compliments. I'm hoping you can keep that up when I see you in real-space.

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Sam Scare> When do you want to meet?

blondegirl67> Tomorrow.

Sam Scare> I'd like that. Where and when?

blondegirl67> Tell you what. Let me check my schedule and I'll message you the time and place. I need to make sure that Teacher Stein doesn't have any extra assignments for me tomorrow.

Sam Scare> He gives you extra work?

blondegirl67> Yes. It a pile of j'aa too, but the beginning of the semester was bad for me. I didn't do well. Now I have to do some extra work to make things up. The parents wouldn't be happy if I didn't pass all my classes.

Sam Scare> I hope he doesn't have too much for you.

blondegirl67> Me too. Even if he does, I'll see what I can do to convince him that I have plans and that I'll have to take the work back to my room.

Sam Scare> Wait.

blondegirl67> What?

Sam Scare> You do this extra work in the classroom, after class?

blondegirl67> No, I work in Teacher Stein's office.

Sam Scare> Oh.

blondegirl67> Why? Is something wrong with that?

Sam Scare> Um, probably not. I guess it's okay.

blondegirl67> Cosmic. I'm gonna jack out now. I'll message you before I go to sleep.

Sam Scare> I'm looking forward to it.

blondegirl67> Hey, I meant what I said in my message to you earlier. I need to know more about you. I just figured it'd be even faster if we just went ahead and met in realspace.

Sam Scare> Tomorrow will be a good day, won't it.

blondegirl67> Yes. I think so. Okay, I can feel my roommate tugging on my foot. She wants something. I'm jacking out. I'll see you tomorrow.

Sam Scare> Wait, I want to tell you something before you go.

: BLONDEGIRL67 HAS LEFT THE CHANNEL.

: ORIGINATOR OF CHANNEL HAS LEFT. CHANNEL WILL AUTOMATICALLY CLOSE IN THREE SECONDS.

: SAM SCARE HAS LEFT THE CHANNEL.

: CHANNEL HOUSE OF SERENITY IS NOW CLOSED.

: GOODBYE

7. Blood and Note

Alone, standing there, the next day, the stem of the blue neo-flower broken between his thumb and index finger, Trey knew that he had made a big mistake. Trinitary School sprawled behind him, half a kilometer away. He was still on Trinitary School property. At the edge of the athletic fields, the modern (yet ornate) security fence stood only ten meters in front of him.

Here was where she'd said to meet him. He knew he'd had that part right. Actually, he'd had all of it right. Here's where she'd wanted him to be. And here he was. It was two hours past the time she had said they'd meet.

Question being: Where was Serenity?

Answer being: Trey didn't know glitch.

And oh look at that, he'd poked a hole in his thumb on a neo-flower thorn. Blood welled up in a dark crimson bubble before running down across his palm. One could imagine a genetically engineered flower would pose less of a threat to human skin, but apparently the flower's designers hadn't thought along those lines. His mind registered the pain, but just barely. He sensed the slickness spreading. He squeezed, and the stem snapped in half again.

Glitch, how could it have come to this so fast?

There was a small piece of paper on the ground. He had seen it mere moments after he arrived. His mind had shot him an alert-o-gram at that point, warning him that she wasn't coming. He'd looked at the note every other minute for two hours, but refused to pick it up because yes, she was coming. She'd just been delayed. That's all. Teacher Stein kept her late after all, and she hadn't been able to get away. But as soon as she did, she'd head straight for him. Then they'd have their rendezvous, just like they both wanted. Just like they'd planned.

He discarded the neo-flower and picked up the note (he knew that's

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what it was, and that it was meant for him) with his injured hand. The note was immediately stained with a large red splotch of his blood. The paper was folded in half twice, so he unfolded it twice, and read:

Sam Scare, or whoever the hell you are,

i know i said i wanted to meet you, but i've changed my mind. DON'T contact me again.

this is the way it has to be. goodbye.

- S

After reading that, what could Trey do except stand there for another couple hours hurting and bleeding and crying?

Well, he crumpled up the note and ate it. That's what.

8. Solace and Spryte

Utterly dejected, Trey returned to his room. Not bothering to attend to his punctured thumb, he jacked in. He activated his husk shielding and burrowed a tunnel through the gleaming barrier that was the Trinitary School node's external wall. A flick of the mind and an orgy of naked bodies were scrolling off to one side. They didn't have the effect he thought they would though. Instead of serving as a distraction, they just made him feel worse, a little more dejected and sick, a little more rejected. Another flick of the mind and the undulating highway of flesh disappeared. He closed his mind's eye and just let himself exist in blackness for a few minutes.

This is the way it has to be. Goodbye.

It didn't make any sense. She had seemed so responsive, so aggressive, the night before. What had changed her mind? Did she talk to her roommate? Or had she simply been toying with him all along?

Glitch, that was it.

She hadn't ever been interested. So she'd had some fun. She'd dangled herself as bait, and he'd bitten deep, swallowed the hook. She'd only asked him to meet because...wait, why had she asked him to meet her?

Trey opened his mind's eyes wide when he figured it out. God, how could he have been so stupid? It had been a trap, and he'd fallen for it. Why had she wanted to meet way out there, where there wasn't going to be anybody around? She didn't know him, and yet she'd told him to meet her away from everybody. That wasn't smart. That wasn't safe. It was a good way to end up raped and killed, or harvested. A girl as smart as she was would never have suggested a secluded place to meet with a complete stranger—even if that stranger was a fellow student. No, if Serenity had really wanted to meet him, it would've been in the crowded places: the classroom, the meal hall, the gathering auditorium, the sanctuary. Some-

place safer.

Despite his best efforts, Trey found tears in his eyes. Disoriented, he couldn't tell if he was crying in realspace, or if his husk was just manifesting his emotions. Since nobody was watching, he let himself cry awhile. He found that, at the end of it, he was as infatuated with Serenity as he ever was. Sure he was hurt, sure she had rejected him, but that was only because she didn't really know him. That was something he could change. It couldn't be right away; he'd have to give her some time. Besides, he needed time to think of a new approach. It was obvious his anonymous messages hadn't been effective, but he was suddenly confident he could attract her true attentions if he tried hard enough. He knew he was breaking his promise to leave her alone if she wanted him to, but right then, that wasn't important. She obviously didn't know how right they were for each other, so he'd have to make her see how she was misjudging him. She didn't really know him, so assuming he was somebody she wanted nothing to do with was a bit premature wasn't it?

Flashing back into the Trinitary School node, he scanned the open channels.

KINGDOM OF THE QUEEN [45]
SSEX NINJAZ [3]
EXTREME SIMULATIONS [2]
WIREWITCH LOVERS [2]
RS GETS YOU WHAT YOU WANT/NEED [1]
DAREGAME [2]
MEDITATION SANCTUARY [2,607]

He was still reading the list when a tune sounded in his ear. It was a short sequence of notes, light and childish. Somebody was requesting visual contact. Trey wondered who it could be, and hadn't acknowledged the request, when a matrix husk materialized in front of him. Trey floundered at his shield code while a room appeared around him. What the glitch? The shield code was running full strength. In fact, it hadn't even registered an intrusion! This wasn't possible.

And yet, there he was, in a room that looked like it was designed by a child no older than four. There wasn't a straight line to be seen. The walls,

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ceiling, and floors were slashed with eye-bursting colors of neon pink, solar flare yellow, toxic goo green, and a shade of red that Trey's mind could only classify as "burst capillary." An oversized, misshapen table with two chairs (also misshapen) sat in the direct center of the room. There were no doors and no windows. On each wall there hung a single picture, but each looked as if somebody had emptied their stomach onto the canvas. Running a ring around the room, pushed up against the walls, were carelessly colored containers with closed lids. Trey's mind told him that if he scrunched up, he'd probably be able to fit inside one, but just barely.

Trey's virtual eyes began to ache from looking at the décor. Light was coming from somewhere, but not from any visible source. Actually, it seemed as if the light were coming from everywhere. Everything was too bright, too washed out.

No other way to put it, the husk in front of Trey was a three-foot black bunny.

One ear had teeth marks and was half the height of the other.

It was wearing a glowing halo.

Leathery wings sprouted from its back.

Oh, and it had a laser gun for one front paw.

It looked at him with cold black eyes like it was waiting for him to say something. Unfortunately, Trey was stunned into silence. He was having trouble gathering the presence of mind to run a self-repair program on his shield code. How had this husk broken through?

The bunny began to sing:

Raynbow Spryte is your friend!

Oh, fiddly faddly foo!

He's an angel, but not angelic.

He's a demon, but not demonic.

Ok, so he's a little demon with the scorchie.

Oh, fiddly faddly foo!

Whaddy want?

Whaddy need?

Just tell him,

*But don't ask him,
About his ear,
Or Mr. Left Paw Laser speaks.
How unlucky.
Oh, fiddly faddly foo!*

The bunny stopped singing, the sound of the last note refusing to die. Instead, the echo bounced around the room, building in intensity before dying a minute or two later. The tune had been simplistic and repetitive. Trey suspected it'd be running through his head the rest of the day.

Cosmic glitch, his code had been solid. The self-repair program came back having done nothing on account of having nothing to do.

“What do you want?” the bunny asked, shifting awkwardly on its laser gun leg.

“How did you get through my shield?” Trey asked.

“I asked first,” the bunny said. Trey saw that its front teeth were wide and pointed and sharp.

Trey sighed. “Fine, I want to know how you got through my shield. How did you bring me here?”

Impossible as it was, the bunny looked hurt. It turned its head to one side, so one eye was staring straight at Trey. The eye narrowed. “Ridiculous! Nobody comes to Raynbow Spryte without wanting something. Usually, it's a weapon. But not you! And now you're accusing me! Maybe you should leave.”

“Are you saying you didn't bring me here?” Trey asked.

“The only reason to visit me is if you want something. That's why you came to me.”

“But I didn't—”

“You're here. You want something. What is it?”

Trey considered his options. He could argue with this husk for a long time, but that wasn't going to accomplish much. Maybe he should stay and learn more. As Trey thought, the bunny began to fidget, but continued to regard him with that single black eye.

“What are you?” Trey asked.

The bunny's ears flattened. “Getting angry. That's what. Go back to looking at naked girls, buckaroo. Get out.”

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“Wait!” Trey said. “I take that back. There is something I want.”

The angel/demon bunny said nothing.

“I want *her*.”

Raynbow Spryte cursed, shaking its head, its leathery wings shaking with the movement. “A girl? You want a girl? You’re better off with the virtual ones. They don’t cause as much pain. Anyway, I don’t deal in flesh. Just information.”

Trey almost took a step closer in an attempt to implore Raynbow Spryte, but thought better of it. “I don’t want you to get her for me. I want you to help me get her.”

Raynbow Spryte rose up on his (Trey thought of the bunny as a “he” for some reason) rear legs and pointed the paw that wasn’t a laser at Trey. “You don’t want to ask me to do that. You might get what you want.”

Trey thought of Serenity’s face and smile and body, and smell. He felt a little nauseous. “I’ll do anything.”

“You don’t want to say that to me either. You might regret it.”

“No, I swear it. I’d do anything to make her mine.”

Raynbow Spryte went back down on all-fours (or, if the laser leg didn’t count, all-threes). “You don’t really mean that. You don’t know the cost.”

Trey felt he did, and he was willing to pay it. “I love her, and she should love me back. She’s mine. I want her. Help me.”

For the second time, Raynbow Spryte sighed, muttering under his breath something about having a weakness for the pathetic ones. Trey winced, but waited expectantly. After a moment, the answer came: “Sorry, kiddo, I can’t help you.”

Trey felt a frightening amount of fury beginning to well up inside him. Part of it was fed by his earlier rejection, but the rest of it was borne of pure stubbornness. He was frustrated at his shield code being broken. He was angry that he’d been pulled here against his will. And the arrogant glitch behind this disturbingly designed husk wasn’t cooperating! “You can help me, can’t you? You’ve just decided you’re not going to.”

Raynbow Spryte smiled. “Figure that out all by yourself, or did you have help from the Queen of Cyberspace?”

Trey had no clue what Raynbow Spryte was talking about. “I can’t make you help me, but can you at least tell me why you won’t?”

“I could.”

“But again, you’re not going to.”

A fanged bunny smile was Trey’s only answer.

“Glitch that,” Trey said. “How do I leave?”

“The same way you came in,” Raynbow Spryte said, turning his back to Trey, revealing a cute puffball tail.

Trey scanned the room again. No windows. No doors. He knew then that he was being glitched with.

“Hey, bunny,” Trey called. “What happened to your left paw? Were they out of hooks?”

Raynbow Spryte jerked and froze as if somebody had just lased a hole in his little bunny brain. “What...did...you...just...ask...me?” came a voice that morphed into a darkly musical growl.

“I mean,” Trey continued, “it’s a little stupid.”

Raynbow Spryte spun so fast that Trey couldn’t track him. He took several steps back, but the bunny charged. As it did, it increased in size. By the time Trey was backed up against the wall, scared and ready to let his bladder loose in realspace, his vision was filled with furriness and fanginess. He didn’t want to, but he whimpered. He was dismayed to find that spittle was dripping from the corner of his mouth and running down his chin. He would’ve wiped at it, but both of his hands were clawing at the all-too-solid wall behind him. He reached for his MIU cord in realspace, but found that his arms wouldn’t move. He was trapped.

A helpless prisoner in the lair of the mad bunny Raynbow Spryte.

“I wasn’t going to help you, but you just changed my mind!” Raynbow Spryte growled, filling Trey’s nostrils with the smell of carrots and lettuce. “I’m going to give you exactly what you want. I was trying to protect the system. It’d be better if none of you ever found out. Even the Queen, that meddlesome witch, would agree with me on that point. The more of you that find out, the more of you there are to glitch with the system. Eventually, it’s going to break.”

“W-W-What’s going to break?” Trey summoned to his lips.

Raynbow Spryte smiled, this time wider than any other. Trey could see just how sharp those teeth were. They looked sharp enough that mere gravity and their weight would be enough to send them all the way through his arm or leg. “Trinitary School of course.”

“What do you mean? It can’t break!”

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“Of course it can. It’s just a simulation.”

9. SyStem and Pa55word5

“It’s all running in cyberspace,” Rainbow Spryte said. “All of it. The buildings, the teachers, the students. You’re jacked in—not on your bed in the housing complex like you think, but somewhere else. Probably at home with your grandparents in a spare room, or maybe even a closet, where you’ll take up less space during your time in the simulation.”

“It’s not possible. You’re lying.”

“It is. I’m not.”

Trey continued to shake his head. Rainbow Spryte began to shrink, returning to his original (and actually, more disturbing) size. “We can’t jack in that long,” Trey said, finally finding a voice that wasn’t stammering or cracking.

“Call me RS,” the bunny said, back to four-feet in height and turning away. “And you’re right. An extended cyberspace jack is a bad idea. That’s why they developed a faster version. Think of it as the virtual version of hyperspace. Instead of moving through space, you’re moving through information. You’re brain is interfacing with the matrix at speeds never before attempted. That’s what makes Trinary School so unique, not to mention expensive. Your entire stay here will only take about a week of realspace time.”

“But how did—”

“—your grandparents get you into the simulation without your knowledge? Jacked you in while you were sleeping. Drugged you. Hit you over the head. What the glitch does it matter? You’re here. That’s the truth. Are you really going to ask me all these stupid questions? You came here because you wanted something. Now that I’m going to give it to you, I’m not inclined to answer every insignificant question you want answered. That’s not what I’m here for.”

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“You’re here to give me what I want,” Trey said.

“Yes, I’m going to do that, regardless of whether that’s why I’m here or not.”

“But if it’s a simulation, then why does it matter? She’s not real.” Trey simply wanted to see how Raynbow Spryte would respond. Regardless of whether she was real or not, his desire for Serenity was undiminished.

Raynbow Spryte rolled his eyes, then winked (that’s what it looked like to Trey at least). “You’re stuck in the simulation, and there’s nothing you can do to change that. She’s real enough for now. Does it really matter to you anyway?”

“No. I love her, I promise. Please help me.”

Trey saw that little puffball of a tail twitch. Raynbow Spryte was enjoying this!

Raynbow Spryte tilted his head toward the table and chairs. Trey walked over and sat down. In realspace, his stomach growled.

Raynbow Spryte rested his soft bunny head on the edge of the table across from Trey. “The system is reactive and does respond to your actions. As you learn, the system provides new and more challenging interactions. However, at its core, the simulation is like any other system—it has its weaknesses. It can be...altered.”

“How?”

“One way is for you to act in a way that the system may not be able to completely account for. Putting a weapon to your head and pulling the trigger would be a good example. By definition, this would terminate the simulation. It would also be very painful. While it would not kill you in realspace, you would become a mindblank, so I’d recommend not doing that.”

“What are the other ways?”

“There are three passwords. Each password has a stronger effect on the system. The first password will allow you to enter verbal commands to the system. The second password is the same as the first, only it works on a lower level than the first; in effect, it reprograms the system. Changes made with the second password are permanent and are only replaced when the system learns new behaviors.”

“And the third?”

“The third one shuts the entire simulation off. Complete shutdown.”

“A single word can do that?”

“Yes. If you say it, you will be forcibly ejected from the simulation. You’ll wake up wherever your body is. You’ll have the worst headache of your life, but you’ll be out. Oh, and you won’t be permitted back in. Sort of an early withdraw.”

Trey still didn’t know if he believed all this, but he decided to play along. After all, even if it wasn’t real, it was distracting. Serenity still occupied his thoughts—there was no changing that—but this conversation (as bizarre as it might be) had a focusing effect.

“So,” Trey said, trying to sound like an adult, probably failing, “with these passwords, I can make Serenity love me?”

Raynbow Spryte’s eyes narrowed. “You’re young and you’re stupid if you think you can *make* her love you.”

Trey looked away, hurt, unable to meet the bunny’s stare. “What am I supposed to do then?” he muttered.

“Look at me.”

Trey did.

“Good. I hate it when people don’t look at me when they talk.”

“Sorry.”

“Lesson learned. Forget it. Now, about the object of your youthful lusts. You don’t want to use the passwords to make her love you. It might work, but if you want a little girl-slave to fool around with, you’re better off with a flesh-flik. No, with Serenity, you want to use the passwords in such a way that she comes to love you of her own free will—or at least this simulation’s version of it.”

Pull the plug.

Halt the simulation.

Raynbow Spryte had said something important there.

And Trey had picked up on it. He grabbed the edge of the table and leaned forward. “How did you know her name?”

Raynbow Spryte looked shocked for a second, then laughed the wickedest bunny laugh imaginable. It was fast and twittery and full of spit and gurgle. It shot a bolt of panic through Trey that had him reaching in realspace for his MIU cord. Again, his arms wouldn’t move.

The bunny’s laugh subsided. “I know everything that goes on in this place, Trey. Don’t worry about it. Instead, worry about Serenity. Seriously, do you want my help or not? I told you I was going to give you exactly what

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you wanted, and I am. However, since I'm the nicest bunny in cyberspace, I'm gonna give you one last chance to back out. You can leave, and finish out the simulation, or you can stay and learn what it's gonna take to get Serenity to even notice you. What's it gonna be, buckaroo?"

"I'm staying. Tell me everything."

Raynbow Spryte's eyes absorbed the light like tiny black holes, but for a second there, they seemed to gleam brighter than anything else in the room.

10. ESter and Scar

Raynbow Spryte hadn't told Trey everything, but he'd told him enough. He'd told him the first password and told him to try it out.

That's what Trey was about to do.

Teacher Stein was droning on at the front. He was wearing that same black suit he wore every day. He was holding his silver cane in the same manner he always did. He was gesturing wildly, sometimes with the hand holding the cane, almost hitting front row students several times. His external MIU jiggled on his ear as he talked. He was looking directly at Serenity and giving her smiles, as if they shared some secret knowledge between them.

He was supposed to be talking about the origins of the Eastern Unified League, but instead he'd distracted himself and the class with a long monologue about the two years when cyberspace had been offline. There were many different names for that period of time, beginning with what everybody called the Fall of Cyberspace. Some called it the Reversion. Others called it the Darkening, or the Black Binary. Teacher Stein droned on about how humanity had been on the brink during those times. That it had almost been lost. Trey didn't exactly know what that meant and felt Teacher Stein was being overly dramatic. Teacher Stein turned a page in that book he always carried. At first, Trey had thought it was an old book, but he had learned that it was published shortly after the Rise of Cyberspace (as many called it). It was called *The Last Resurrection of Cyberspace*. Its author was anonymous, but it was the definitive work on those two dark years.

Teacher Stein was rambling, expounding on how those days had been dark, almost hopeless, but that there were a few heroes who had managed to survive. Some of their names had been lost (someone had seen to that), during the Rise but others had survived. Some were humans. Some were

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both more than human and less than it at the same time—wirewitches and Technomancers. Some were called Pure. In fact, there was one Pure that had flared brighter than the rest. He or she had been at the core of it all. As with many other things that had been lost during the Rise, their fate was unknown. Sure, there were theories, but if anybody knew the truth, they weren't talking.

Trey zoned all this out. He hated history, and those two years hadn't been as exciting as Teacher Stein described them. How much fun could a person have without cyberspace? Trey knew how much: not enough.

Serenity sat in front of him. The three members of her coven—Tris, Irene, and Ester—sat in front of her and to each side. When Trey had first seen Serenity and the coven together, he would not have believed that she would have put up with them for this long. Studying them, Trey realized how inseparable the four were. Though they hadn't yet changed their hair colors to match Serenity's, they had matched hers in length and style. They started adopting her mannerisms (they still talked about a thousand percent more often than she did). They copied her walk. Trey could definitely understand their attraction to Serenity, but he wasn't sure how the bonds between the coven and their leader had developed so strongly so swiftly.

He envied it though. Lusted after it. He would have it. This he knew without a doubt. Because he had the first password.

It was *demonprayer*, and, looking at Ester (who was sitting to Serenity's right), Trey said it out loud. It hadn't felt like he'd really said it, but as if the password had formed on his lips and then been ripped away. Trey tried to ignore the strange feeling, then concentrated like Raynbow Spryte had told him to. He pictured Ester getting out of her chair and standing up.

Ester got out of her chair and stood up.

Trey couldn't see Ester's face, but she had hesitantly turned to Serenity, as if asking *What am I doing?*

Trey concentrated again.

Ester, who was the prettiest of the coven (in the overhead opinions of Trey's male classmates at least), shook off her jacket and let it fall to the floor.

Teacher Stein, still lecturing, had his back to the class as he pointed to one of the wall screens. One of the boys in the back snickered.

Not everybody in the class had noticed when Ester had stood and

dropped her jacket. It wasn't that strange of a move. The classroom was supposed to be kept at a comfortable level, but not everybody agreed as to what that temperature should be. Perhaps Ester was hot.

Trey knew better.

If the class hadn't noticed her before, that changed when she put her fingers at her shoulders, inserted two fingers down beneath the neckline, and pulled her shirt first open, then off.

A thin expanse of real live girl flesh was visible to Trey. His stomach went a little queasy and his saliva began to run in his mouth.

"What are you doing?" one of the coven hissed.

Ester shook her head, but didn't say anything. Trey hoped she was unable to speak. That was the part he had to concentrate on the hardest. So far, it looked to be working. Trey could barely believe it. Rainbow Spryte had been telling the truth!

If the reality that Trey was just participating in a simulation was supposed to be depressing, then Trey wasn't feeling it. Instead, he was elated. Rainbow Spryte was right! Soon, Serenity would be his.

Trey thought about making Ester turn around, but he could see a thick undergarment wrapped around her torso. There wouldn't be much to see.

There was disquiet in the classroom. The students were whispering among themselves. The girls were hissing. The boys were laughing and pointing.

As they did, Ester slid her hands down her sides, over her hips, then pushed her skirt down to her feet. She stepped out and kicked the lower part of her uniform away. It crumpled beside her desk in a pathetic, discarded heap.

Trey stared at Ester's pale skin. It was smooth and uninterrupted, and a lot closer than it had ever been before (even in cyberspace, he'd never been this close to a girl, unclothed or otherwise). She was young, but she was beginning to show signs of the woman she would eventually become. Her legs and arms were slender, her waist and hips forming curves that Trey found curiously alluring. Her hair free-flowed over her shoulder and down her back, contrasting with her pale skin like night against day. Her undergarments were pure white, and the promise of what they hid, though undefined, made Trey's head spin and sweat run.

At the middle of her back, Ester's skin was marred by a scar. It looked

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like she had been cut twice. The two diagonal cuts formed an X. The scar both intrigued and troubled Trey at the same time.

Serenity was moving to get up, to help her friend, but Tris (who was sitting directly in front of Serenity) beat her to it. She got to her friend just in time to stop her from undoing the metal clasp which held her torso undergarment on.

“Are you soaring?” Tris spat. “What is wrong with you?”

Ester just bowed her head. Trey realized she was crying. He hadn’t expected that, and he didn’t like what he was feeling because of it.

Tris embraced Ester, speaking soft comfort in her ear that Trey couldn’t make out.

Naturally, Teacher Stein turned around at that moment and saw a fully-clothed female student hugging a half-naked one.

Chaos ensued.

11. KlASSroom and Rival

Later, after all the shock, the yelling, and the confusion, it was evening and Trey was back in his room, jacked, unable to contain his excitement.

“It worked!” Trey said, letting the smile creep across the face of his husk.

Raynbow Spryte’s ears flattened, irritated. “Of course it worked. You used the password.”

“I didn’t believe you,” Trey admitted.

“I know. But now you do.”

“Yeah.”

“So, kiddo, what’re you gonna do next?”

Trey hadn’t actually thought about that yet. He’d been too caught up in the moment, the exhilaration. Even in cyberspace, the X scar on Ester’s back was an image that he hadn’t been able to shake. Her pale, smooth skin, that had looked ever-so touchable—something even his 13-year-old libido was capable of grabbing and running with. The way her undergarments had rested so softly and warmly against her fresh skin. He wished he could go back in time. He would’ve reached out and run a finger or two across the synthetic fibers (or maybe they were natural; rumor had it that her parents were rich). Maybe he would’ve touched that scar. Just to feel. Just to experience. Just to discover.

No. That was wrong. That wasn’t where he wanted his thoughts. Trey shook his head to clear it. How could he be feeling these things for a girl that wasn’t Serenity? Did all girls have the potential to affect him like this? Glitch, there must be something wrong with him.

Back to Serenity. His mind couldn’t quite substitute an image of Serenity wearing only what Ester had. His mind rejected the image, not allowing it to form, as if the mental picture of her stripping and almost naked was

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sacred, only viewable by the worthy.

“You could play with some of the other girls before you move onto Serenity,” Raynbow Spryte said. “Just for fun.”

Trey wanted to move onto Serenity right away. He was disappointed that Raynbow Spryte wanted him to wait. “I’ll have to think about it,” he said.

Raynbow Spryte jumped around the room for awhile, ignoring Trey’s response. Trey had to back up into one corner to avoid being hopped on. The bunny’s halo slewed to one side as he hopped, never quite falling off, but always on the verge of doing so. Those leathery, batty wings flapped, making the arc of his hops more horizontal than vertical. Raynbow Spryte was singing a hippity-hoppity little verse:

*What’s a boy to do?
Boy got a girl.
Oh how.
Wait now.
Boy don’t got a girl.
Well, piddly paddly poo!*

Trey didn’t know if he liked this one. Actually, he was pretty sure he didn’t, but he wasn’t gonna tell that to the bunny with the glistening fangs and the shiny laser-paw.

Raynbow Spryte hopped to a stop in front of Trey. “Want to play a game?”

He didn’t want to, had no reason to, but Trey stammered when he replied. “S-Sure. W-What game?”

“It’s a new one, and it’s funny fun fun funnerific!” Raynbow Spryte yelped as only he could, puffball tail twitching so fast it was blurry. “It’s called Classroom Knight.”

Trey hadn’t heard of it, though backing out wasn’t an option.

“I’m loading it now,” Raynbow Spryte smiled. “This’ll be goody goody goodness maximus!”

The virtual room, which Trey still hadn’t become accustomed to, faded. After a second, it was gone and they both hung there surrounded by an infinite black nothingness. Trey sensed a hum. It was a low frequency vibration

that was affecting his husk. Much like before, when he was in the presence of Rainbow Spryte, he found his muscles unresponsive in realspace. No amount of shielding could stop it. He'd modified his code. He'd even added some ultra-violent retribution routines designed to mete out large quantities of pain to anybody who tried to get through. It didn't stop Rainbow Spryte from yanking Trey into his bunny lair the nanosecond he jacked into cyberspace and taking his realspace body's motor control as if he were a youngling with a toy.

The hum and vibration stopped. Trey's husk shivered. He wasn't cold.

Rainbow Spryte was hopping up and down in the blackness. His ears flopped. Trey wondered who had bitten off his ear. He thought about asking, but he remembered what had happened before when he'd deliberately provoked Rainbow Spryte with a question.

"Lock and load," Rainbow Spryte giggled. "Happiness is a warm gun."

Trey didn't understand the reference, so he floated quietly as the world began to solidify around them. The landscape was still dissolving in, still transparent, but Trey knew exactly where they were.

Trinity School for the Eternally Blessed. At the base of the steps leading into the classroom complex.

Where truthfully, this had all started. Where he'd first met Serenity. Seen her smile at him. *At him!*

Rainbow Spryte hopped over beside him, brushing Trey's leg. Trey looked down, thinking this was the first time that the bunny had touched him. Even though his matrix husk was wearing a space suit, he felt the downy softness of Rainbow Spryte's fur. It was luxuriously silky and Trey wanted to let his hand come down, run his fingers through that dark forest of hair. It would be so very soft. So very smooth.

Trey would only pull back a leaking stump though. This he knew without a doubt. Rainbow Spryte would not abide being touched in that manner. *Chomp!* It would only take one. Trey could picture it, and the image of Rainbow Spryte with Trey's hand in his mouth, wrist spurting countless streams of red life liquid out onto the ground. *You shouldn't have done that, kiddo, he would grin. I didn't sing that verse of my song, but you should've figured it out on your own after asking me about my paw. Truth truly true! Somebody as stupid as you doesn't deserve to have a girl like Serenity. Maybe I'll have her for myself. All girls like bunnies, right? And I'm the cutest of the cutest!* Then Rainbow Spryte would

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throw his head back and swallow Trey's hand whole. *Slurp! Chew! Gulp!* Yeah, this bunny was a meat-eater, guaranteed.

"Aliens have taken over the school," Raynbow Spryte said, pulling Trey from his cannibalism fantasy (It was cannibalism wasn't it, because there had to be a human behind the bunny, right?).

Trey discovered that he was carrying a small arsenal of weapons. His primary weapon was the Needler in his hand. It was an older weapon, and had been banned in many countries. Certainly, it was illegal to have one on Trinitary School property.

"Ready?" Raynbow Spryte asked, tapping on the ground impatiently with his laser paw.

"What do the aliens look like?" Trey asked.

"They're all slimy and disgustingly icky. Follow the trails of ooze."

"What's our objective?"

"Kill all of them. Make them dead-dead."

"Why are they here?"

Raynbow Spryte tilted his head up, black eyes narrowing. "The only reason aliens would come to this stinking planet, of course: to impregnate all the girls with their alien spawn."

Trey could think of other reasons why aliens might invade the planet, but he didn't say anything except, "Oh, right. Naturally."

"Follow me," Raynbow Spryte said, hopping forward, wings beating madly.

The game began.

Hours later, as Trey—covered in slime and slick with some of his own blood—dispatched what must have been his thousandth overlord alien, Raynbow Spryte asked him a question.

"Having fun?"

Trey realized that he was. He nodded, aimed, squeezed the trigger on the Needler and turned a writhing tentacle mass into writhing-tentacle-mass puree.

"Wanna play again sometime?"

He nodded again, smiled wide, vaporized another alien.

Raynbow Spryte hopped closer, rubbed up against Trey's leg, alien goop from Trey's spacesuit leaving the bunny's fur slicked back, then looked up. "Have you decided what you're going to do about Ernie?"

Ethan A. Cooper

“Who’s Ernie?” Trey asked as he took aim at an new swarm of aliens who had regrouped down the hall.

“What?!?! You mean you don’t know? Truly silly, Trey! Ernie is Serenity’s boyfriend!”

12. PaSSwordS and Advice

It was true. Trey saw them together the next day. His heart sunk when he realized that Ernie—the boy Serenity was holding hands and touching toes with over lunch—was none other than Mr. Green-Hair-with-Freckles. How could this have happened? And how could this have happened *without Trey noticing*? It didn't make any sense! Trey regretted not paying more attention to classroom gossip. He usually ignored conversations that others were having nearby. But it was too late. He couldn't prevent them from getting together.

"You'll just have to do something about him," Raynbow Spryte said later that evening after Trey had finished ranting. It had been a good, stubborn, adolescent rant, and Raynbow Spryte hadn't interrupted it.

"Give me the second password," Trey said. "I know what to do."

Raynbow Spryte hesitated. "I don't know..."

"Tell me. Oh, and I want the third one too."

"Kiddo, why do you want the third password?"

"I don't want to lose the game. I know it's just a simulation, but I don't like losing. If I can't have Serenity, then this simulation isn't worth anything to me. I'll quit before I lose."

Raynbow Spryte wheezed out a bunny laugh. "What about your education? Your grandparents paid out their orifices for you to come here."

Trey shook his head. "They just wanted to get rid of me."

"But you're probably still in their house—just jacked in."

"They got rid of me in the only way they could then. They don't care about me. Not like you might think. Please. Give me the passwords. They're the only things that can help me get what I want. You already said you were going to help me. You wouldn't have told me about the passwords if you weren't going to give them to me."

Raynbow Spryte twittered at that, his nose sniffing the air. He did a little bunny dance and spun around. When he came to a stop, his halo continued to spin. “You’re right, T-T-Trey,” he said, inserting the stutter.

As with many things Raynbow Spryte said, Trey was pretty sure he was being mocked. Didn’t matter though. Raynbow Spryte had what Trey wanted. Had what Trey needed. So Trey was going to put up with it until he got it. After that, maybe things would change. Trey was pretty sure they would. Because Trey was going to change them.

Not right then though. It wasn’t the time. Raynbow Spryte still couldn’t be touched. Trey waited.

Raynbow Spryte stood on his hind legs, stretched upward, resting his good paw on Trey’s shoulder, and whispered the second and third passwords into Trey’s ear. Raynbow Spryte’s whiskers tickled his neck. Instead of vegetables, the smell of fresh meat was evident on Raynbow Spryte’s breath. Trey endured it, resisting the urge to flinch away.

“Go get her, tiger,” Raynbow Spryte said, retreating, his paw laser clinking on the floor.

As it always did when Raynbow Spryte allowed him to leave (Trey never left before the bunny wanted him too, that was for sure) a door slid into existence on one wall. Trey moved toward the door, which opened into blackness.

“Anything else I should know?” Trey asked, stopping short of the door. He wasn’t sure why he asked; it just felt like the right thing to do. Necessary even.

“Little lovesick teenage Trey isn’t as stupidity-stupid-dummy-dumb as all the kids say!” Raynbow Spryte intoned, his voice hauntingly musical.

Trey sighed, and vowed revenge on Raynbow Spryte at the earliest opportunity. He didn’t know how, and he didn’t know when, but he knew it with certainty. There was a way to get back at the twisted human behind this husk. Trey would find it. Trey would use it. Then Trey would be the one singing the songs of mockery.

“It’s just a little something you might be able to use,” Raynbow Spryte said. “Just a tiny bit-o-bit of data. A point of commonality between you two. You say your grandparents got rid of you the only way they could—oh, so sadly sad! Poor-oh-dear Trey. Nobody likes him. Everybody hates him. Guess he should go eat worms!”

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Trey pushed anger down, but it took all his will. He managed to keep his husk from emoting at least.

“Well, let me tell you a secret,” Raynbow Spryte said. “Serenity’s parents did the same thing. She’s just as unwanted as you are.”

“Who gives a glitch?” Trey growled. “She’s only a construct.”

Raynbow Spryte laughed hysterically, stumbled backwards, knocked over a couple chairs and sent the contents of the table (two plates, several utensils, a drinking cup that was five times too big to be useful, and a vase of neo-plastic flowers that glowed so brightly, it was impossible to look directly at them for more than a second or two) onto the floor. The clanging and clamor continued for at least a minute because everything in the room seemed to be extra bouncy, obeying the laws of a different planet’s gravity. Raynbow Spryte continued laughing, holding his soft belly. At one point, his laser paw went off, burning a perfect hole in one wall.

Trey waited.

When Raynbow Spryte stopped laughing, he looked over at Trey. If a bunny could get drunk, it would look exactly how Raynbow Spryte looked right then. “You’re so naïve, Trey.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you’re missing the point.”

“What point?”

“That it matters *not* that she’s a part of the simulation. What matters is that you’re currently treating her like that’s all she is.”

“But, that *is* all she is.”

“If you think that way, then you can just use password number three right now, because you’re gonna fail with her.”

“I have password number two. If it works, then this isn’t a problem.”

Raynbow Spryte wiped tears from his eyes. The drops glistened on his fur. “You can reprogram parts of the simulation, but you can’t change her behavior, kiddo. You’re too young. You don’t know enough yet. Trust me.”

“I might surprise you,” Trey said.

“Treat her like she’s real, or you’ll never win her. It’s that simple. That’s it. That’s all I wanted to say. You can heed or not. Your choice, of course. Now get your tail out of here.”

Trey shrugged, walked six steps to the doorway, looked into the void beyond, and stepped through.

13. Lavatory and GlimpSe

Serenity was in there. Trey knew this. He'd seen her go in. If she'd looked at him as she'd passed, she'd only have noticed a boy about her age doodling on his datapad, probably drawing pictures of spaceships, or maybe naked girls—nothing of importance. She might have recognized him as that boy who sat behind her in class every day, but that was unlikely. She'd never given any indication that she knew he existed. Trey didn't think anything had changed just yet.

He intended to change that today.

Trey leaned across the wall from the lavatory and considered exactly how he was going to proceed. He didn't have long; she would only be in there for a few minutes.

He'd have to get in there. Use the second password on her directly. Despite what Raynbow Spryte said, Trey knew that Serenity would respond to his use of the password. How could she resist it? She was a simulation, so she'd have to obey when he used the password to reprogram her code.

Trey made his move toward the door. He knew she was the only one who was in there. It would be safe for him to go in.

Just then, one of the coven came around the corner, headed for the lavatory. It was Ester. Her sudden appearance, coupled with the brilliant picture of her standing in her undergarments that hit Trey then, was too much. He faltered in the middle of the hall, almost dropping his datapad. Ester approached the door. Too fast. Everything was happening too fast! What could he do? Wait till Ester came out? Wait till Serenity came out? He didn't know. He had planned on confronting her in private. He wasn't sure if the second password would work on both girls at the same time. Actually, he figured it would, but he didn't think he was capable of using it like that. Maybe with more practice—something he didn't have currently. There was

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no time for that. There was only time for quick thinking.

Think quick, kiddo.

The voice in his head was Raynbow Spryte's. Trey didn't like it, but he didn't think that the angel/demon bunny was actually talking to him. His subconscious was obviously filling in some blanks of its own free will though.

Trey thought quick.

Desperate, he spoke the second password. *Angelfear.*

Too late though. The lavatory door slipped open and Ester stepped through.

Or maybe it wasn't too late after all.

Trey could see Serenity through the open door.

He saw her long blonde hair first.

He saw her bare back second.

His mouth dropped, just like a character out of a cyberspace kiddie flick. His body suddenly felt too warm, his clothes too tight, his bones too big for his skin.

Ester had been beautiful, but the landscape of Serenity's bare back was beyond beautiful. It was heavenly. The light in the lavatory sent a halo of light around Serenity's head. Even at this distance, the clarity of Trey's vision was unbelievable. Trey was too caught up in the exquisite sight before him to wonder about that though. Trey couldn't believe that she wasn't wearing anything on her torso, giving him a more splendid view of her than he could've wished for.

What was she doing? Why was she partially undressed? Is that what girls did in the lavatory? Did they do that every time? Trey sure didn't get undressed when he used the one for the boys. Maybe it was a girl thing. Either that or she *had* noticed him out in the hall and had been waiting for the door to open, so she could give him a little glimpse of what was to come.

No, that was preposterous. It was the second password. He had used it without much thought, without proper preparation, and it just hadn't had the effect that he'd expected. Not that he was complaining. This was more than he could've hoped for. Especially if she *had* meant for him to see. The thought of her intentionally undressing so that he could partake of her skin visually accelerated his pulse to new speeds.

Raynbow Spryte was wrong. Trey was not going to fail with Serenity.

This proved it.

The door slid shut, but just before it closed completely, Serenity turned her head and looked over her shoulder. She should've been looking at Ester, who had just entered, but she wasn't. Instead, Trey saw her look out into the hall and directly at him. For that fraction of a second that her eyes seemed to lock with his, he couldn't breathe, and he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she was going to be his. She'd finish up in there with whatever she was doing, then she'd come out here, back him up against the wall with a single finger on his chest, tractor beam him with those eyes of hers, run one hand through his hair, the other down to between his legs, press her body full against his, her female yieldingness against him, lick his chin, suck on his lower lip, flick her tongue in his mouth, kiss him till they were both out of breath and panting, whisper in his ear that her roommate was out for awhile, so he could come back to her room and get under the bedcovers with her.

Or something like that at least.

Trey backed up against the wall across from the lavatory and waited.

The door opened a couple of minutes later. Trey looked up, expecting Serenity to ditch Ester, to walk right over and get down to business, but she didn't even look his way. Instead, Ester grabbed her elbow and pointed down the hall.

Trey swiveled his head, and felt his heart rend itself into several pieces.

Serenity broke from Ester's grip with a high-pitched squeal, and ran into Ernie's waiting arms. She pressed her mouth to his. Ernie placed one hand right on her...oh God, her eyes sprang open in wonder.

Trey didn't stick around to watch, but he suspected that Serenity kissed Ernie till they were both out of breath and panting.

14. Knowledge and Pa55word

Trey stared at the blood trickling between his knuckles. The skin there was split in several places. Little pieces of skin were curled, peeled up and away. It hurt, sure it did.

But it didn't hurt as much as seeing Serenity and Ernie together like that. So close. So intimate. So much in love.

It made him sick to his stomach. That familiar feeling of nausea that he usually felt when he was near Serenity hadn't hit him until he got back to his room. Then, it was like a tsunami washing over him. He'd spilled the contents of his stomach into the waste receptacle, but didn't feel much better. A pure water shower hadn't helped much either.

Jacking in, Trey once again found himself in the lair of Raynbow Spryte.

"Why aren't you listening to me?" Raynbow Spryte chided. "I know everything that goes on around here."

"Do you," Trey muttered, not making it a question.

Raynbow Spryte bobbed his head, causing his ruined ear to flop wildly. "I do! I do! I dooby-do! You would be a whole bunchy-bunch more scared if you knew what this place was really about. There are secrets here. Beneath the surface of Trinitary School is something that few have seen. To peel back the scales and reveal the true form of the lurking beast would be too much for your fragile young mind to take, kiddo. But me, I listen to the beast's pulse. I know the good and the evil of this place. I know about the indiscretions of Minister Sinister. I know what he does to his Daughters of Trin. I know about the Daregame those two girls play. I know about the Queen, how she's got her claws into this place, and how she meddles, using this place and its students for her own motives. I know about the creature that hides in the woods outside this place. I know about the Vilevilive, and I know what it is doing to one of our youngest and smartest students. I know

the horrible end that awaits us all. This place is dying. They just don't know it yet."

"It's just a simulation," Trey said. "None of that matters. Not even you."

Raynbow Spryte sighed, looking hurt. "If I don't matter, then why are you here?"

"You have something else I want."

Raynbow Spryte's ears perked up, but his eyes—impossible as it was—were darker than ever. "Oh really real? And what else can I possibly give you, Trey-y-y? I already gave you the three passwords. You haven't used them effectively. I'm sure you blame me for that, but you haven't taken all my advice, so you should first take a look in a mirror before demanding something else from me. Why don't you just leave. I'm tired of you, kiddo."

"No."

The body of the black bunny seemed to swell as it stepped forward, intentionally threatening Trey. "I can make you leave," Raynbow Spryte said, "but I'm going to have a little fun first. Last chance to back out, youngling T-T-Trey."

"Give it to me," Trey said, not moving.

"Give you what?"

"The fourth password."

15. Leader and Ernie

Raynbow Spryte froze.

To Trey, time seemed to do the same. He may have made a mistake...

After Trey found that he hadn't taken a breath in over a minute, he quietly inhaled and then blew the breath out. His matrix husk mimicked his realspace actions.

"There is no fourth password," Raynbow Spryte said finally, giving a shark bark of a laugh.

Trey relaxed, but only a little. Raynbow Spryte was smiling. It wasn't a totally disturbing smile, but neither was it a comforting one. Wet fangs hung from that bunny mouth.

(meat-eater)

"But there's something," Trey said. "There's gotta be!"

"You didn't even use the first two passwords properly. Even if there was a fourth password, you couldn't make use of it, silly little Trey-boy."

"I don't believe you."

Raynbow Spryte backed off, backed away. "You're upset about Ernie and Serenity, and how they're leveling-up their relationship. I understand. What you need is a distraction."

"I don't need anything except that password."

"Drop it, kid-d-d-o. Let's play some KK."

"I'm not really in the mood."

Raynbow Spryte shook his head and raised his laser. "Fiddle-de-foo, of course you're in the mood."

Trey rubbed his forehead. "I'm not. Really, I'm not."

"Fiddlesticks and glitch. You need something to take your mind off of that girl for awhile. We're playing."

And that was that.

Trey sighed as the world faded to black, then back in.

Raynbow Spryte was hopping up and down with glee. “Aliens have taken—”

“—over the school,” Trey finished. “I know. You say that every time.”

“Sure I do! I’m predictable! Scrumptious!”

Trey held up two Needlers, one in each hand. They looked different from before. These ones had been modified. For starters, they had been painted blood red.

Raynbow Spryte smiled, fangs extending, dripping saliva as if they were generating it. “I figured it couldn’t hurt to give you a little extra firepower today, what with you being all sadly-sad.”

“Um, thanks,” Trey said, almost feeling better. He put his fingers on the triggers. There, that felt nice and familiar. He blew out a breath, welcoming the sense of calm that was seeping through him. It was slow, but it was happening,

“Careful where you point ‘em. Triggers been adjusted. Only gonna take a thought and they’ll go off. I ramped the firing rate up a little too. Fifteen hundred shards a second now.” Raynbow Spryte’s eyes shone darkly. He began to polish his laser-paw against the soft fur on his belly. “Had to add recoil dampeners or the first time you pulled the trigger on one of those toys, it would tear your arm off.”

“Okay, okay,” Trey said, finally smiling. “I’m ready. And thanks.”

“You’re welcome. It’s why I’m here. Tell you what, why don’t you lead me in?”

Trey gaped. Raynbow Spryte had never let him do that before. This was unexpected. “Really?”

The laser-paw pointed to the entryway to the classroom complex. “Take us in, kiddo.”

Trey took a step forward. Then another. Adrenaline surged through his body, and he began to jog. By the time he hit the entryway steps, he was at a full run. When he kicked open the doors there was a wailing in his ears, like some emergency warning siren. It took his mind a few moments to realize that he was screaming. He noted this fact, but the haze of anger and excitement obscured rational thought. He screamed as he ran, eyes darting, searching for any movement. His footsteps echoed in the empty hall like the beat of his heart thumping in his chest, synching up until all he could hear

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was a THUMPthumpTHUMPthumpTHUMP rhythm that kept time to some otherworldly beat.

Movement. Off to his right.

Trey twisted sideways, swinging both Needlers, reveling in the growl and whine that permeated the air as the weapons spit out thousands of atomized slivers. Accelerated at speeds just this side of supersonic, the slivers seemed to tear a hole in the fabric of the simulation itself.

Ernie's head disappeared in a detonation of blood.

Trey released both triggers, but too late. The hail of slivers, which had been tracking laterally, flayed off Ernie's right shoulder and most of the attached arm. His hand went spinning off, creating a helix of blood in midair. The rest of Ernie's body twirled around twice, splattering a bloody spiral on the hard neo-plastic floor before collapsing into a leaking heap.

Trey's scream withered in his throat, sounding all the while like a deflating balloon, or maybe a dying animal.

"Wha—"

"Kiddo..." Raynbow Spryte spoke from directly behind Trey, almost causing Trey to squeeze the triggers on the Needlers. Trey shuddered and tried to control his breathing.

"Wha—"

"You didn't let me finish earlier. Aliens have taken over the school, and they've disguised themselves as your classmates."

"So that wasn't..."

Raynbow Spryte shifted, looking down each side of the hallway, making sure things were clear. He gave a bunny-shrug. "I'm not sure how to tell the difference yet. But better safe than oh-so-sorry, I always say."

"I'm not sure."

"You did the right thing."

The ruined body at his feet sure looked human enough. The blood looked real. The ragged flesh thrown around in soggy nuggets looked real. The severed bones looked real. The brutality of it all weighed on him unexpectedly. It was one thing to kill aliens in this game, but it was quite another to inflict harm on ones that looked human. But if they were aliens...

It felt wrong and right at the same time. How could that be?

Part of him was shocked at the damage he'd inflicted. Another part of him felt a tiny thrill at seeing his enemy broken and destroyed, pooled at his

feet like discarded waste, deader than deady-dead as Raynbow Spryte might say.

Ernie would never touch Serenity again. Because he was deady-dead. That knowledge felt pretty glitched good.

“I have an idea,” Trey said.

“Talk to me,” Raynbow Spryte said. “Leader.”

“They’re *all* aliens.” Trey knew it was true. It had to be true, because it was the only thing that made sense in here.

“All of them?”

Trey checked the Needlers. The ammo indicators both read 99%. “Every single one of the students in this school are aliens, and we’re going to kill every single last one of them. It’s the only way.”

Raynbow Spryte took a couple of hops away from Trey. The bunny’s face was unreadable though. “Are you sure?”

“I’m surey-sure,” Trey said. “Now follow me.”

Trey’s boot slipped a little in a pool of Ernie’s blood. He looked down with disgust. Stupid aliens. Stupid Ernie. Mr. Green-Hair-with-Glasses had been in the wrong place at the right time. Trey was glad that he was dead. Then, an even darker thought entered his mind. Trey, caught up in the reality of the simulation, didn’t recognize the dark thought for the danger it posed to him. Instead, the dark thought took root. After only a few seconds, the thought wasn’t all that horrible any more. No, it seemed to make a whole glitch of a lot of sense.

But that was for another time. It was time for battle. It was time to cleanse Trinitary School for the Eternally Blessed of the insidious invaders who only wanted to inseminate the female students with their alien seed. And if those aliens just happened to look like students—male or female—then so be it. They would die. Trey would kill them as long as the Needler ammo supply held. When the indicators clicked over to empty, he’d toss the weapons aside and use his bare hands if he had to.

Yeah, that’s the way it was going to be. Fun, fun, fun-a-rrific.

Trey laughed out loud as a signal sounded. He knew that signal. It sounded at the end of every class period. In about fifteen seconds, the halls would be filled with students. Or rather, filled with aliens disguised as students. Trey took a deep breath. When he let it whistle back out through his teeth, it came out ragged, in uneven bursts, like the breath of a shadow-

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dwelling beast lusting for prey.

The signal stopped, its echo continuing for another few moments. Trey closed his eyes. When he opened them back up, the doors to the classrooms were opening. A quick look at Raynbow Spryte brought the picture of pitch black hair broken by brilliant white fangs set into a gaping grin.

“Get them, kiddo.”

Trey just nodded as his classmates filtered into the hall, at first to the sound of twin Needlers and one paw laser, but eventually to the sound of screams and splatter.

16. Water and Rendezvous

Trey had never seen the ocean before. It stretched out before him, flat and gray, like a soiled blanket draped over the planet's surface. The surface wrinkled and rolled at the beckon of invisible forces, wind and gravity immersed in their eternal war.

The sight of it was hideous, blinding.

The smell of it was deep and sick to Trey's nose.

The feel of the sand beneath his bare feet was that of a thousand needles.

The sound in his ears, of the relentless wave-cycle—crash-sshhh-ssss-crash-sshhh-ssss—was painful and puncturing.

The taste of it was faint, but slow and torturous, like the flavor of a long, drawn-out illness, deadly.

Trey sighed. He wanted to go back. There was little comfort for him on this particular filed trip. Teacher Stein had announced it the week before, but Trey had forgotten until this morning. He'd had to rush to gather his protective gear, barely making the transport in time. A torn seat in the front was the only one left. Sitting down next to an overweight girl with green hair barely fazed him, even though the stench of her gluttony and sweat permeated the air around her with the stink of fish. Trey had put his head into his hands and concentrated on catching his breath, simultaneously trying not to breathe too deep. When, several minutes later, the transport (bright yellow, cylindrical, inscribed with the Trinitary School logo on either side and the words NEUTRAL TRANSPORT on the roof) rolled out between the towering main gates, the girl beside Trey tapped him on the shoulder.

"You're in eighth, right?" the girl asked. "Third row, four back?"

Trey twisted his head in his hands. Mismatched eyes met his. Black and

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green. The green one matched that fluorescent hair of hers. Trey nodded in answer.

“I’m sixth row, seven back. This is my third year. It’s your first, isn’t it?”

Trey nodded again. He was amazed at how pretty her voice was. To him, this voice didn’t belong to her body. No, it belonged on one of those flik girls. Her voice rang clear amidst the noise of the other conversations and the low rumble of the transport. Despite his mood, he wouldn’t mind hearing her voice some more.

The girl twirled strands of hair around a pudgy finger, like a serpent around the trunk of a tree. “Thought so. It’s good to meet you finally.”

“F-Finally?” Trey asked.

“Oh, I’m trying to meet with everybody in class.”

That was strange. At least to Trey, who only had one person he wanted to meet. “Why?” he asked.

“I just like to, that’s all.” Her eyes shifted. The girl gave a small jerk of her head, hair cascading, just touching her shoulders. Her movement gave Trey the briefest glimpse of the back of her neck. There, like spines on an eoa were three curved bonespikes. Each broke the skin by only three centimeters, but Trey’s mind told him that they went under her shirt, all the way down her back. The girl brushed her hair back down, and the look in her eyes was a questioning one: Did you see, Trey? The girl recovered, stuck out a hand, hesitated, then pulled it back, and finally settled for saying, “My name is Ela.”

Trey could only nod again. He figured she already knew his name, so he smiled as best he could given the awkward situation. Her smile in return lit up her face, and Trey could see that she was pretty like that. In the shadow of Serenity, there was little room for Trey to recognize true beauty when it was presented for him, but ela broke through the haze with naked simplicity.

Two thoughts hit Trey at that point. One, this simulation might still be worth existing in if things with Serenity didn’t work out (which they would, so that was merely a distractive way of thinking). And two, there was no way this green-haired girl was thirteen-years old.

He didn’t know why he hadn’t noticed before—the way her face was so young, the way her feet didn’t reach the floor or the raised footrest. Sure, she was overweight, but this should have been obvious! She couldn’t be

more than nine. Maybe seven.

How was it, then, that she was in his class?

It was the glitched simulation. That had to be it. Some programmer somewhere had inserted the wrong number in her classroom assignment variable.

Then again, she seemed intelligent. Maybe she was a prodigy.

Trey decided that it didn't matter. As pretty as her smile was, his infatuations were already committed to a different girl. Turning around and looking down the aisle, he could see Serenity back there, all the way in the back, surrounded by the coven. Across the aisle from Serenity, Ernie and some of his friends were laughing louder than necessary, as if their laughter made them more attractive to the girls scattered. Trey was dismayed at the shy glances Serenity cast over at Ernie, hoping to catch his eyes. Ernie seemed to be ignoring her, but Trey knew that Ernie was fully aware of Serenity's attentions and was simply remaining distant in front of his friends, unable to show affection or consideration, weakness.

Trey vowed, when Serenity was his, he wouldn't treat her like that.

Unable to watch any longer, Trey turned away. Glancing over, Ela was looking at a small datapad in her lap. Had she been watching him? Trey thought she might have been.

Neither of them spoke for the rest of the trip. Several times, Trey wished she'd say something, just so he could hear her voice again. Since she didn't respond to his quiet, mental requests, Trey sat there thinking of Serenity, and what he was going to do next. It would happen today—he just wasn't sure when and what.

Hours later, they arrived. As they exited the transport, stepping out onto a debris littered platform, Ela spoke to Trey one more time. Her voice filtered easily through the excitement behind them. "The Queen is watching you."

When Trey turned around, Ela was at least five meters away, engrossed in conversation with two other girls. She looked over, gave a little wave, then returned her attention to her friends (if that's what they were).

Trey shook his head, feeling the first twinges of a headache. Maybe the simulation was slowly killing him. It certainly was possible, and it certainly felt like it.

Hours later, bare feet in the sand, Trey's headache was worse, and that

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familiar nausea was back too. He could see Serenity and her coven down there, wading in the shallow water. Minor exposure wasn't hazardous here, and Trinitary School had deemed such excursions necessary for the education of their students. In theory, the students were supposed to be gathering water samples, but most were either standing around talking or trying to catch fish-eels that had washed ashore with the surf. Every few minutes one of the students would cry out, having been bitten or shocked by one of the fish-eels.

Trey scanned the beach. Off to the left, it extended straight for as far as he could see, but to the right it rose to a small hill that obscured any idea of what lay further on.

Thinking about Serenity all the while, Trey headed toward the hill. When he reached the top, he looked down into a thick forest of trees. They were all colorless, devoid of leaves, and grouped tightly. Not wanting to go back to where everybody else was, Trey headed down the hill. He cut left, tracking down almost to the edge of the water. The trees stopped abruptly there, like a military advance halted by a superior force. Trey traced the edge of the trees, keeping his distance from the incoming waves, not wanting to experience the cold, slimy liquid bathing his feet.

If he could just get Serenity alone, he could explain everything—how he felt and how things should be between them. If he could just get her alone, without other distractions (such as her boyfriend), things would go a lot more smoothly than they had the last time.

If he could get her alone...

It wasn't long before Trey came to an area where the trees thinned out. Peering deeper into the forest, he could see that the trees were even sparser farther in. When he put his back to the ocean and headed toward the trees, he noticed that there was a narrow path. It was lined with packed sand and had been cleared in such a way that it was difficult to see from the shoreline. Trey felt a little better the second he put a foot on the path. There, with the trees close and pressing on all sides, the headache and nausea faded. Trey moved deeper in. The smell and sound of the ocean were overcome by the fragrance of damp earth and dry, brittle wood.

Trey entered a clearing. A perfect circle about ten meters across, where the ground sloped convexly.

Here. If he could get her alone here...

Trey wished they had been allowed to bring their data spheres on the field trip. He wanted to talk to Raynbow Spryte. Trey needed some advice. Sometimes, only the black bunny knew what to do.

Only, Trey realized that he already knew what to do. Raynbow Spryte had already helped him all he could. Trey hadn't listened as well as he could have, but he did remember everything that Raynbow Spryte had said—how Serenity was a part of the simulation, and that's how Trey was treating her. Trey had understood what Raynbow Spryte had meant, but hadn't done anything about it. That was about to change.

Trey would treat her like a real girl, not like the construct she was, not like the encoded data stream that he knew was at her core. She could no longer be a simulation to him; she had to be real.

She is real, Trey told himself, then: *Angelfear.*

He said it out loud while he thought it. Then he did it again, and a third time just to seal the deal. After that, he waited. A few minutes later, he decided that waiting in the middle of the clearing for Serenity probably wasn't a good idea. If she came here and saw him first, she might not approach him—even with his use of the second password. Stepping carefully, he walked into the thick of the trees. Even a few meters away from the clearing, he would be hidden from view. There, a tree had fallen over (or had been felled by some forest beast) and provided Trey with a place to sit down. His feet dangled as he sat. He swung them back and forth. Thoughts of his grandparents intruded at that point, disturbing the calm that had settled on him since entering the forest. He pushed thoughts of them and their betrayal away. At one point, Trey closed his eyes and emptied his mind as best he could.

Footsteps. A cracking twig.

Yanked from his mindless state, Trey almost fell off the tree. Steadying himself with both hands, he looked into the clearing, barely noticing the nausea that was seeping back through him.

Serenity was standing there in the center. Alone and beautiful.

The password had worked! And that glitchy-glitch Ernie wasn't around to mess up his plans.

She looked so fragile and vulnerable there. Her blonde hair hanging limply, wet and crinkled up at the ends where she'd been splashed with water from the ocean. She wore a faded pink top (a pullover) with long

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sleeves. It looked softer than soft, and Trey wished he could touch it, just once, to see what it was really like. The fabric glittered with a metallic substance inserted into the atomic weave. The collar of her top split down the front in a narrow V that Trey couldn't take his eyes off of. The knee of her right pant leg was woven with some sort of emblem—one that reminded Trey of a nightivy bloom. Her pants legs were rolled up, and her feet were bare. Her toenails, painted with color-changing paint, glimmered and shifted in the washed out light that filtered down through the trees.

Oh, heaven and hell, how Trey wanted her! Wanted to run to her and fold his arms around her, just to see how incredibly soft she was, how good she would feel.

Trey hopped down from the fallen tree, banging his big toe in the process. Ouch, that hurt more than it should have, pain lancing up his leg. He swallowed the curse that rose in his throat, clamping a hand over his mouth. Tears sprang into his eyes, welled up, ran down his cheeks, but he didn't make a sound. Carefully, he backed up against the fallen tree and lifted his foot. At least he wasn't bleeding. Down on the ground was a rough rock. That must've done it. He wiggled his toe. Wow, that hurt, but he thought the pain was lessening. Endorphins doing their job, kicking in. He wiped his cheeks and let out a measured breath between clenched teeth. Okay, he was tough enough to handle a wounded toe. Back to the business at hand. Back to Serenity. Who was still as beautiful as ever, but (no really, stop, tell me if you've heard this one before) was no longer alone. Ernie had joined her.

What?!? How could this have happened?!? Trey was ready to scream in frustration.

He felt his strength leave him, and he slumped against the fallen tree, its unforgiving bulk pressing against the small of his back. He felt several vertebrae pop out of place (or maybe back in). With his toe hurting and his body limp, he peered into the clearing and watched what happened there. What else could he do? If he tried to leave, they would hear him. He was trapped, and what really scorched him was that he'd pretty much done it to himself. With this knowledge, he resigned himself to listen and watch, no matter what.

“How did you find me?” Serenity asked, her face lowered, but her eyes turned up. Ernie was slightly taller than her.

“I followed you when you left the others,” Ernie said. “I wanted to be

alone with you.”

“You could have just asked.”

Ernie looked embarrassed. “I know, but I...”

“You didn’t want to do it in front of your friends. Is that it?”

“...yeah.”

“I see,” Serenity said, turning away. She was facing Trey, peering right at him it seemed. Trey resisted the urge to duck, to move. When Serenity spoke again, Trey couldn’t help but think she was talking directly at him. “I understand. I know how you feel. But that’s not how it’s gonna be between us.”

“What do you mean?” Ernie was quick to ask.

Serenity still had her back to Ernie. “You can’t be afraid. You can’t let others influence what you do. If you want me, you have to be bold. You have to be willing to sacrifice.”

“Serenity, I like you—”

“You have to be willing to go to the limit and beyond. I’m not like all the other girls. There’s something different about me. Do you sense that?”

Yes, Trey thought.

Ernie stammered, taking a half-step back. “I mean, you’re prettier than every—”

Serenity’s shoulders slumped, and Trey heard a soft sigh that sent a thrill through him. “I don’t even know why I came here,” she whispered, maybe to Ernie, maybe to herself. “It just felt...right.”

Regaining his composure (or sensing weakness), Ernie moved closer, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Maybe you wanted to be alone with me too.”

Turning back to Ernie, Serenity said, “I did. I do.”

They kissed then, and Trey made himself watch. It hurt. It hurt a bunch to see them switch the rest of the world off like that. To see Ernie standing where Trey should have been. To see Ernie’s lips where Trey’s were supposed to be. It was pain, but he made himself do it. His anger grew with each passing second, but so did his resolve. There was a way to fix this. There had to be. This wasn’t the end; he wouldn’t let it be.

The kisses in the middle of the clearing went on for awhile—much longer than Trey would’ve liked. Yet, he watched.

He watched as Ernie’s hands began to travel across Serenity’s waist, up

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and down her back, over the curve of her buttocks. Serenity gave a little squeal and giggle, and then her own hands began to wander. First they combed through Ernie's green hair, grabbing tufts and holding him tight.

It's all an act, Trey thought. She doesn't really want him. How could she want him? He's not right for her. It doesn't make any sense for her to choose him—not when she could be with me!

Ernie whispered in Serenity's ear. Trey didn't hear exactly what. Serenity pulled back a little, shaking her head.

"Why not?" Ernie asked.

"Not that. Not yet."

"What then?"

There was a pause, a single breath in infinity, before Serenity's lips moved to form a single word: "This."

Her hands and mouth and tongue danced wickedly then.

17. Dirt and DeSire

Later, after Ernie had walked (staggered like he was drunk) away, Serenity remained in the clearing, kneeling as if in prayer, doing her best to clean herself up, to hide the evidence of what had just transpired. She wiped at her lips, her chin, and ran fingers through her hair. Grains of sand clung at the edges of her hair. She brushed dirt off her pants and adjusted her top, smoothing wrinkles. When she was done, she stood up, took one last look around, and walked back down the path.

Trey had seen it all, every horrific kiss, every disgusting touch. He'd heard every sick grunt, every repulsive moan. Then, at the height of it all, he'd seen...oh, god it was...

He didn't want to think about that anymore.

It was impossible not to.

It had been paralyzing. It had been torture. The upset feeling in his stomach lingered. The nausea he felt when Serenity was near had been present the entire time and had grown as he watched. Delirious with relief that it was over (even though his mind would never let those images fade, not for the rest of his life), the urge to kneel down and vomit the contents of his stomach onto the forest floor was overwhelming.

Weak, Trey barely registered his body sliding to the ground. He landed hard, sprawling, his toe slamming into something hard, sending another pike of pain up his leg. He winced, let himself cry out, shocked to discover that there were already tears in his eyes.

Strange enough, sadness wasn't what he was feeling. Frustration and cold rage were what filled him up as he sat there, hurting, tears dripping audibly onto the ground.

He didn't need this. He didn't have to put up with this type of pain, Raynbow Spryte had given him his way out. All it would take is one simple

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word and this would all be over. He could end the simulation. His grandparents would be upset, a little poorer (not that they didn't have enough already, and not that this bothered Trey). One word. One password. It would all end.

Click. Boom.

Fade out to black. Fade in on realspace.

One password, oh so easy, oh so quick.

Trey wasn't going to say it though. That would be admitting defeat to that j'aa eating Mr. Green-Hair-with-Freckles glitch bucket. That would be admitting that he wasn't capable of winning Serenity. His attraction to her wouldn't let him say that third password. Pride was mixed in there too. Something deep within him wasn't going to recognize that he was losing the battle for her affections. What Ernie and Serenity had done in the clearing changed little. After all, Serenity had been in control the entire time, dominating the encounter. Ernie, the obvious weaker of the two, had only been able to receive. Trey wondered how he could have ignored Serenity like that. How could he be so inconsiderate, so selfish? If Serenity had derived any pleasure, it hadn't been obvious to Trey. He had barely understood what he had seen, and would've been hard pressed to describe it to anybody else, could hardly describe it to himself. His mind kept flashing him images though. Over and over they replayed.

If he wasn't going to speak the password to end the unreality, then what else was there to do?

Raynbow Spryte would know.

Actually, Trey believed that Raynbow Spryte had known all along, and was still holding out on Trey. The passwords worked, Trey knew that, but there was more. There were always ways to dig at the core of a virtual world. The three passwords Raynbow Spryte had given Trey were effective, but they were still too weak to be all that there was. An entity as powerful as Raynbow Spryte would have higher access to the system—at least they ought to.

Raynbow Spryte did. Sitting in the dirt, crying, this was undeniable in Trey's mind.

So then, there was only one thing left to do: confront Raynbow Spryte one last time. If Trey could get the fourth password (you believe it exists, don't you?), he could change the parameters of the simulation, get to the

root of the code. Serenity could be reprogrammed. When he got the fourth password and put it to use, Serenity would love him.

No, more than love—she would *desire* him. She would be uncontrolled in her need to be with him.

All-consuming desire. *Yes! Oh, yes! Oh Trey!*

Click. Boom.

Trey stood, ignoring the pain in his toe, ignoring the nausea. He couldn't help looking at the disturbed dirt in the center of the clearing, but mercifully for him, he felt little except for rage and resolve.

Wiping his cheeks and favoring his right foot, he followed the trail back to the beach.

18. Carrot and Lie5

“Sorry it didn’t work out, kiddo,” Rainbow Spryte said without turning from his food. “I’m not sure you listened to me, but I’m also not sure you didn’t. Sounds like you just got there too latey-late.”

Trey had decided to take a different approach this time. “Can you help me? What should I do?”

Rainbow Spryte was eating a carrot that was at least two meters long. It lay on the floor, taking up entirely too much room in Trey’s opinion. The table and chairs were pushed up against one wall to make room for the carrot. Had Trey not been concentrating on getting the fourth password out of Rainbow Spryte, he might have found the situation humorous. Since Rainbow Spryte only had fangs, it was difficult (perhaps impossible) for him to bite into the carrot. Instead, he had to chip away at it with exaggerated head movements, catching flying chunks of carrot in his mouth as they flew into the air. Seeming to consider Trey’s question, the bunny turned. “Oh, you’re asking now instead of telling? Wonderfulistic! Here’s a song:

You can’t have her.

No!

Does she want you?

Glitch no!

Does she need you?

Cosmic glitch no!

Why don’t you,

Jack into realspace,

Kid, kid, kiddo?

Oh, and just because it's my thing, I'll end with a, Fiddly faddly foo!"

"I should give her up, then?" Trey asked.

"Click," Rainbow Spryte said.

Trey wasn't giving up, but he asked anyway, "What am I supposed to do now if I do?"

"Go to school. Learn. Find another girl."

"Find another girl..."

"Yessssss! Like that Ela scorchie!"

"You think she's a—"

"What!?! Are you brainfried? Have you actually seen her? She's probably the most beautiful girl in the school. I know you're a teeny tiny eenie bitsy wittle bit infatuated with Serenity, so you didn't really notice it, but it's still truer than true."

Trey had seen a glimpse of what Rainbow Spryte was talking about, but he didn't understand it. "I don't think I can do that."

Rainbow Spryte went back to his energetic stabbing of the carrot. "Whatcha gonna do then?"

Trey took a deep breath. "If you can't help me, then I won't be able to have Serenity. If I can't have her, I'm going to use the third password to end the simulation."

A lengthy pause followed that. Finally: "You're going to give up?"

"Yes," Trey lied.

"But you won't have her either way then! You've put all this effort in, and you're just gonna give her up, just like that? Are you taking something? Are you soaring?"

"I know. I'd rather live in realspace if that's how it is," Trey lied again.

Rainbow Spryte had stopped eating entirely. There were bits of carrot stuck to his teeth. His whiskers twitched as he paced back and forth—an unnatural movement for a bunny. Trey found the uneven swaying movements disturbing. Bunnies should hop, not pace. This wasn't right. He suspected that Rainbow Spryte was doing it on purpose. "You're seriously serious then?"

"Yes. You told me to give her up!"

"Give her up, yes. Jack out, no."

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“You gave me the password.”

Raynbow Spryte’s nose twitched and his whiskers quivered. “I wanted you to have the option, but I didn’t think you would use it. I...thought you were stronger than that.”

That stung. Internally, Trey was hurt. It fueled his anger though. He fought to maintain control of his matrix husk, to make sure his facial expressions didn’t betray his barely-restrained rage.

“I guess you were wrong,” Trey said.

Raynbow Spryte turned away, dropping back down on all-fours. “Okee okay. If that’s your decision. I gave you the power. I can’t stop you.”

“I’m sorry,” Trey lied yet again.

“I’m so so so sorry too. Guess I won’t be seeing you around.”

“Guess not.”

The room seemed to dim then. The ultra-bright colors faded down a couple notches.

Raynbow Spryte waved his laser-paw. A door appeared in the wall. “Bye-bye, kiddo.”

Trey just walked to the door and stepped through it.

Though, the door disappeared before he could.

“Wait,” Raynbow Spryte said.

“I can’t leave if you won’t let me,” Trey said, exaggerating a sigh.

Raynbow Spryte hopped over. His laser-paw clicking against the floor. His halo was pulsing madly. His wings kept folding and unfolding. “I can help you.”

“How?”

“I can tell you the fourth password.”

19. Pa55word and Leaving

“Really truly true,” Raynbow Spryte said, “there is no fourth password. I wasn’t lying to you when I told you that.”

“Then what is there?”

“I told you before, you can take actions that the system can’t account for.”

“Like shooting myself in the head.”

“Yes. The simulation isn’t capable of dealing with that.”

“You’re not saying I should...”

“No!” Raynbow Spryte growled, eyes pulsing blackly. “Don’t be stupid. I already told you what would happen if you did that.”

“Then what?”

“Other things. There are other actions you can take. In this case, there is only one thing you can do.”

“Tell me. I’ll do anything to have her.”

Raynbow Spryte smiled oh so very wide at that. “Are you really really truly so very very sure?”

“Yes.”

“With your failures with the first two passwords, there’s only one way to cause the system to break down to the level you need. It’s gonna be messy messy juicy, but you’re probably ready. Maybe.”

Trey knelt down in front of Raynbow Spryte, eyes pleading. “Tell me. I’m ready.”

“You have to kill them.”

No hesitation at this point. “Kill who?”

“All your classmates. Every single last solitary one down to the last boy and girl.”

“A-All of them?”

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“And Teacher Stein. Oh, we mustn’t leave him out. No, nobody in the class can live—not if you want Serenity. It’s not really a fourth password, but it’s close enough to one.”

Trey sat back on his heels, unfeeling. The rage had vanished, and he hadn’t even realized when it had happened. Ever since he’d seen what he’d seen in the clearing, his body had felt like it was being squeezed by an invisible hand. That hand had vanished. He could breathe a little easier, no longer caught in the grip of his fury. Not that this was much better. It felt like the invisible hand had gone away, only to be replaced by an invisible weight on his shoulders. No, this wasn’t much better at all.

Kill them. All of them.

How wasn’t a concern—Raynbow Spryte would handle that, Trey suspected—*if* was.

The decision, when it came right down to the reality of it, was simple.

Trey closed his eyes, picturing Serenity’s smile, and then her lips, and how soft and moist they would be when he touched his to hers. A quick flash of the clearing tried to intrude—an image, just as...

NO!

He forced his eyes open, asking, “What do I do?”

“A few easy-weasy things,” Raynbow Spryte said. “Serenity will be yours after you’re done; she just has to see you kill the last classmate. If she doesn’t, then you’ll have glitched up the simulation for nothing. After you’re done, just say something nice to her. Tell her you love her or something romantic like that. You can be romantic can’t you? Anyway, she’ll be very susceptible to commands at that point.”

Trey knew just what to say.

“There are a couple of conditions to our little dealy-weally. First, you have to live with the consequences of what you do. Doing this will corrupt the third password. You won’t be able to get out of the simulation until it’s over. Can you scan that?”

“Yes,” Trey said.

“Thought so. The other condition is that, after this, you won’t be able to enter this channel again. I can’t have them, or that witch-Queen, tracing your use of the fourth password back to me. By doing this, you’ll be leaving me.”

Trey pondered these things for only a moment before responding. “I do

appreciate your help, but I have to have her.”

“I understand, kiddo.”

“Are you mad at me?” Trey asked, strangely calm.

The bunny looked offended. “Mad at you? What a glitch of a thing to say to me, after all we’ve been through! Of course I’m not mad at you! I wouldn’t be helping you get what you want if I was mad at you. Really truly real, I’m happy for you. Or, I will be when you get the girl, just like in a matrix flick.”

“Thank you,” Trey said, then added, “RS.”

It was impossible, but Raynbow Spryte’s smile grew so big it extended off of his face.

20. Storage and Monitoring

With Raynbow Spryte, all things were possible.

Getting past security checkpoints was easy with the first password. It took the second to get into the weapons storage area, but even that was simpler than simple. Trey didn't even consider the reasons why the Trinary School for the Eternally Blessed might have a weapons cache sizeable enough to take on a small army; he simply took the weapons and got out. When he left, he was carrying, in a large backpack:

A pulse dagger.

A TK2 monofilament constriction web.

Two flay grenades.

A Needler (ammo reading: 55% of capacity).

One shock wand, extendable.

And a single sever-whip.

There had been other weapons, but these were the ones he recognized. Plus, his backpack was filled to capacity.

It took several attempts with the second password to gain access to the visual monitoring system, and a combination of the first and second to schedule the system to shut itself down at the scheduled time.

Raynbow Spryte had told him what to do, what to say, when to do what, and it all worked perfectly.

When he was done, he was armed and ready.

Tomorrow would be the day.

(October 31, 2202)

21. HoStage and Trigger

Trey adjusted the data sphere at his waist. A thin wire ran to the jack at the base of his skull.

“RS, are you there?”

“Right here, kiddo,” came the familiar, welcome voice. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m down the hall from the classroom.”

“You’re late for class.”

“Just like you told me.” Trey double-checked his inventory. Pulse dagger, shock wand, and sever-whip at his waist. The two flay grenades were clipped at the base of his spine. The Needler was thrown over his shoulder, held in place by a short strap. The constriction web had folded up nicely, so he had put it in his pocket. It wasn’t as convenient, but he didn’t have any other good ideas for carrying it. Though he would’ve been hard pressed to admit it—even to himself—he was enjoying a prickly thrill coursing through his body at the thought of using these weapons.

It would be just like the cyberspace game, Classroom Knight. His whole body was trembling, feasting on adrenaline like a starving child eating for the first time after a week without food.

Serenity, I’ll do anything for you, Trey thought. *I love you more than anything in this world. We’re going to be together forever.*

These are the words he would say to her after he was done, after the slaughter. After he turned this simulation into a world of glitch.

“Are you ready to go go go?” Raynbow Spryte’s voice asked. There was no visual feed, but Trey’s data sphere was able to pick up the bunny’s audio stream.

“Yes,” Trey said.

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"Then go go go!"

Trey wanted to go go go, but he knew that for this part, he had to practice patience. So, he waited. He had seen the boy go into the lavatory less than three minutes ago. The boy hadn't come out yet. Making sure the hallway was clear, he moved to the wall beside the lavatory entrance door, the sounds of his shoes clicking on the neo-plastic floor and his measured breathing a haunting melody in his ears. He unslung the Needler and gripped it tight, bringing it up perpendicular with his body, pointing it at the lavatory door.

Less than ten seconds later, the door opened and the boy came out.

"What's happening?" Raynbow Spryte asked. *"Are you shooting yet?"*

Trey was concentrating and didn't answer. The boy had turned away from Trey, not noticing him, and had begun walking toward their classroom. Trey moved fast, but quietly. When he reached the boy, he grabbed him around the waist and pressed the barrel of the Needler against his back.

The boy let out a little squeak, but was more intelligent than Trey had originally presumed, because he knew enough to not make too much noise. Either that, or he had been scared mute.

"Don't scream, or you're deady-dead," Trey said, his lips at the boy's ear.

The boy managed to emit only a soft whimper. Trey could feel the boy's heart pounding. Could smell the boy's sudden sweat.

"Tell me your name," Trey said.

"Nester."

"Okay, Nester, we're going to class now. Do exactly what I say, and you'll live through this."

"Don't you mean live longer?" Raynbow Spryte queried into Trey's ear. Then Raynbow Spryte was laughing a perfectly diabolical laugh that seemed to echo down the hall.

Trey was glad that he was the only one who could hear what he was hearing.

"Walk forward, Nester."

Needler pressed right into his spine, Nester walked forward. Trey removed his hand from Nester's waist, but walked close behind. As he pushed his hostage in front of him, he wondered how Nester was staying so calm. Trey wasn't calm. His hands were sweating. As they approached the

classroom door (only two meters away), the world seemed to be getting warmer, as if somebody had increased the temperature in the hallway.

“RS, can you do anything about the heat in here?” Trey thought.

“Checking. Might take a minute. Don’t wait for me.”

Nester stopped in front of the classroom door. “What do you want me to—?”

Trey pushed Nester forward. The door slid open just before he could hit it. The tip of one of his shoes caught on the heel of his other, causing him to stumble into the classroom. Trey took a couple of long strides in order to stay with him.

Teacher Stein stopped in mid-sentence, regarding Trey and Nester with obvious contempt. Though Teacher Stein’s eyes remained emotionless, his mouth twisted.

“Nester, you exceeded your allowed time in the lavatory, and, Trey, you are late. Both of you will have your behaviors recorded in your personal logs.”

Trey barely heard Teacher Stein’s words. Instead, he was looking around the room, taking inventory of the students. Most of them were looking his way. It became distressfully evident to Trey that things were amiss. There was the coven, but...

Serenity wasn’t here yet.

What the glitch?!? Like Trey, she was never late. Only today, like Trey, she *was* late. Well, glitch it all. Trey realized that his finger was on the trigger of the Needler. He pulled it away, not willing for anything to happen prematurely. No, that just wouldn’t do. Nester’s body was blocking Trey well enough that nobody could see the weapons he was carrying. If Nester moved though, it would be all over. Trey had to think fast.

“RS, I got a problem. She’s not here.”

No answer. Glitch.

“RS?”

“Click. Can’t do nothing fast ‘bout the heat, kiddo. They installed a new firewall, and it’s gonna take me four more minutes to drill it.”

“She’s not here.”

“What?”

“Serenity’s not here.”

“What do you mean she’s not there? I thought you told me she’s never late!”

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“She’s not. Can you locate her?”

“Not now that you shut down the monitoring systems. Contrary to popular belief, I’m not omnipotent. So so sorry-o.”

“What do I do now?”

“Is it too late to get out of the room? Have too many people seen you?”

Eyes flicking about the room, Trey saw that all of them were looking his way. Teacher Stein’s foot had started tapping on the floor. It was obvious that class wasn’t going to continue until the two of them were in their proper places. Trey wanted to wipe beads of sweat off the back of his neck, but didn’t want to make any unnecessary movements. There might still be a way to back out of this with only minor problems.

But not without being seen. Trey’s thoughts were a storm of data into his MIU. *“Everybody in the class is looking right at me, including Teacher Stein. They’re waiting for me and Nester to sit down.”*

“Ask one of them where Serenity is.”

Trey didn’t think that was a good idea, and sent Raynbow Spryte his thoughts on the idea.

“Then start the killing, kiddo. Leave one of them alive till Serenity gets back.”

Just like that. Start the killing. Words so simple, yet behind them was the course of action that Trey actually hadn’t committed himself to yet. Pressed up against the cliff of decision, he found that he was hesitating. It was just a simulation, yet he couldn’t find the resolve to pull the trigger (the one his finger was once again resting on). He had attended class with each of these students every day since his first day here. He knew many of their names, even if he didn’t know them personally, and even if they didn’t know him. This wasn’t Classroom Knight. Though this was a simulation, each of the students was a unique entity within that simulation. They had been real enough until Raynbow Spryte had revealed the truth to him. Even after all that time, faced with the actuality of it all, he found that his mind and body were staging a little rebellion. Even seeing Ernie over there, in the back, couldn’t shake him from his frozen state. His previous thrill at killing Ernie in Classroom Knight was gone. His previous anger at seeing Ernie and Serenity together in the clearing was gone. He didn’t want his anger to be gone, out of reach, but it was. In place of it all, he felt a more basic emotion: uncertainty.

“Kill them,” Raynbow Spryte whispered.

“Hold on,” Trey thought. *“Let me think.”*

Teacher Stein had stopped tapping. “Gentlemen, if you would take your seats, I’ll consider not assigning you extra work this evening.”

Raynbow Spryte’s voice was soft in Trey’s ear. *“You’re out of time, kiddo. Serenity is yours, you just have to reach out and take her.”*

“O-Okay,” Trey thought. *“Just give me a second.”*

“A second is something you don’t have. You’ve come this far. Hesitation is fatal. Make! Your! Choice!”

Trey saw Teacher Stein’s eyes widen at something. What was it? Trey looked down. Glitch, the Needler was—

There was a swishing sound behind Trey. Involuntarily, he turned, pulling Nester with him. Several things happened at that point:

Students in the classroom began whispering, talking, moving.

A coven member, Tris, walked in. (Wait, wasn’t she already in her seat?)

Nester began to wail.

Footsteps (Teacher Stein’s) headed toward Trey.

And finally, Trey, perhaps by reflex, perhaps by muscle spasm, squeezed the trigger on the Needler.

22. Constriction and HoStage

Nester's body blew apart in the middle. Gore and thick ropes of blood splattered the entire front part of the classroom. Nester stopped screaming abruptly in mid-fall, his torso separating from his waist and legs. The two pieces of his body went down, twirling in different directions.

Trey, stunned, released the trigger on the Needler and almost dropped the weapon.

"That's the spirit!" Raynbow Spryte yelled into his ear.

At the far end of the room, a girl in the front row was clutching her face, screaming. Her hands were covered in blood, her eyes and cheek punctured by stray Needler slivers. The wall beyond her bore a mottled black scar where thousands of tiny slivers littered its surface in a uneven gouge.

The room erupted in screams.

Tris locked eyes with Trey. Her hair, almost as long as Serenity's, had come down across her eyes. Her eyes were wide, those of a wild, frightened animal. There was a scream in her throat, just a nanosecond from getting out, but lucky for Trey it was stuck there.

She spun around.

Trey, even in his surprised state, couldn't let her escape. He whipped the Needler around, catching her in the shoulder. He hit her hard, much harder than he expected, because he felt something give. There was a crack as a bone in her upper arm fractured. Still, she didn't scream. Instead, a wavering sob burst from her mouth, coupled with a sad gasp of pain that cut off when her body hit the wall next to the door. The door, sensing her proximity, slid back open. Trey looked out into the hall, expecting to see a security squad waiting. The hall was empty. Tris began to cry, her wail building.

Trey grabbed her unbroken arm and pulled her away from the wall, pushing her toward the rest of the class. She stumbled over Nester's legs and tumbled to the floor, coming down on her broken arm.

This time, Tris did scream, adding her voice to the other students already doing so. Trey heard them, but barely. His mind, in some self-saving move, was discarding all audio streams of fright and terror it was receiving.

Problem. Trey had an immediate threat. Teacher Stein. Oh hey, he was getting entirely too close.

Trey swung the Needler around, finger ready. Teacher Stein stopped, hands up. The MIU on his ear was askew. As he pulled up short, it came loose, falling to the floor. Trey stared at it, realizing that he'd made a big mistake.

"RS, can you cut the cyberspace feed to all MIUs within ten meters of me?"

"Way ahead of you. Did that before you stepped in the door."

Trey exhaled, keeping his attention on Teacher Stein. Raynbow Spryte had saved him. What would he have done without the black bunny?

"Trey, what are you doing?" Please don't hurt anybody else."

"None of this is real," Trey said. "It doesn't matter."

"W-What do you mean?!? You just killed Nester!"

Trey looked down. Blood from Nester's waist had pooled out into a large puddle. A few feet away was Nester's torso; a similar pool had formed there, only a thin strip of floor separated the two pools. They would meet in another minute or two. Trey laughed. Something similar had happened in Classroom Knight. He could almost see the interface breaking down there in that strip of floor. He could almost see the resolution of the simulation. Yeah, those looked like pixels, visible to the naked eye. He wondered how he had missed the flaws in the simulation fabric before.

"Nester was just the first," Trey said. He raised his arm, pointing the Needler into Teacher Stein's face. With his other hand, he reached into his pocket.

Teacher Stein took a step back. Trey laughed at the look on Teacher Stein's face. There was fear, sure there was, but it was overshadowed by anger. Trey thought he could see the simulation breaking down there too, raw pixels gleaming in Teacher Stein's eyes.

Trey figured that he only had a few seconds. After that, Teacher Stein was going to make a move. The Needler in his face wasn't going to deter

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him much longer. Teacher Stein recognized how desperate the situation was, and how desperate he would have to be to get out alive. Trey knew he had to prevent that. He glanced at the other students. Only a couple of them weren't cowering in the far corner. Tris was crouched and crying behind a desk.

The constriction web was a thin square wad in Trey's fingers. He slid a thumb across the activation strip.

Teacher Stein's eyes shifted, noticing Trey's movements. Another glance at Trey and he was moving sideways. Trey followed Teacher Stein with a steady stream from the Needler. The classroom filled with the sound of thousands of slivers screaming into the air. The surface of the wall seemed to explode, blowing pieces of neo-plastic out in a maelstrom of splinters. Trey flung out his arm, releasing the constriction web. At first, Trey was afraid that he had done something wrong because nothing happened except that the web flew across the room in a loose wad. Teacher Stein was fast. He was going to make it to the door.

Then the constriction web caught, opening wide like a parachute, only it did so without slowing. Actually, it seemed to Trey that it picked up speed, lurching in midair toward its target.

Teacher Stein had almost made it to the door when the constriction web caught up with him. The web had fully fanned itself out, covering Teacher Stein completely, catching him less than a meter from the door. Teacher Stein's body was flattened against the wall, one outstretched hand still reaching for the door. His extended limb was the only part of his body that lay outside the perimeter of the web.

"Gotcha," Trey said. He was unconcerned that his back was to the rest of the students. He could hear them gasping and sobbing behind him. They wouldn't be a problem.

It was fascinating to watch the constriction web begin to work. How it attached itself to the wall, Trey didn't know, but it was remarkably effective. Teacher Stein was just a caught animal.

The constriction web tightened. Teacher Stein cursed and sputtered. To Trey, his words were unintelligible. Probably a foreign language. As the fibers of the constriction web began to cut into Teacher Stein's body, blood blossomed across his body in a hundred places. The stream of gibberish coming out of his mouth devolved into a strangled flow of grunts and

growls. He screamed as the constriction web bit harder, digging deep furrows across his skin. Blood was pouring from the crisscross pattern of wounds, dripping down, racing toward the floor. Saturated squares of fabric fell away from his skin, tumbling wetly.

There was an element of horror to the gruesome sight of his teacher being wounded in such a manner, and some small part of Trey's mind told him that what he was doing was wrong. That he should quit before things got any worse. Serenity wasn't worth all this. She was just a girl that didn't even know who he was.

Don't look away, a voice in Trey's mind said. He wasn't sure if it was Raynbow Spryte's. *Here comes the good part.*

Trey couldn't have turned away if he had wanted to. His neck muscles wouldn't turn. He wondered if Raynbow Spryte was keeping him here. He'd never done such a thing when Trey wasn't within the walls of his virtual room, but...

What happened next, happened fast. Somehow, Teacher Stein was still screaming. But then the constriction web jerked as if pushed by some invisible force, cutting all the way through Teacher Stein's body. Blood flowered into the air as he was instantly diced. A moment later, hundreds of Teacher-Stein-chunks fell to the ground. The roars of fright from the students behind Trey rose, but all he really heard were the *plops* and *slaps* of raw meat hitting the floor. The constriction web clung to the wall, a bloody net against an equally bloody wall. Amazingly, Teacher Stein's hand that had been outside the constriction web was still there, still extended toward the door, held in place by the edge of the constriction web and the fingernails that were digging into the surface of the wall. It was bad, violent art.

"Better than KK, ain't it kiddy-o?" Raynbow Spryte said. *"Too bad it isn't really-real. Watch your back."*

Trey spun, bringing the Needler up. Several of the boys had formed a group and were advancing up one side of the classroom. The boy in front stopped, holding up his hands. Trey didn't even flinch as his finger contracted. The Needler tore the group of boys apart, tossing arms and heads into the air, limbs thumping down in a messy, scattered pile. A red mist hung in the air over the bodies. Almost like in KK.

The room was beginning to smell like blood. *Exactly* like in KK.

"Everybody in the corner," Trey commanded, motioning with the bar-

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rel of the Needler. The students, like herded animals, moved to obey. Didn't look like anybody else was willing to challenge him. Anyway, what could they say to him? They didn't know him. Trey suspected most of them didn't even know his name. They hadn't cared about him before, and they only cared now because he had forced them. None of them had really talked to him before. None of them were his friends. None of them had wanted to be. Even in a virtual world, there should have been at least one, shouldn't there have been? Well, glitch it, there hadn't been. And there still wasn't. Except for Raynbow Spryte.

Trey pulled the sever-whip from his belt and activated it. A thin wire of light shot out of one end, drooping to the floor. There, it sparked and hissed. He walked halfway across the room, toward the group of students in the corner.

"Where is she?" Trey asked. "She's never late."

No answer but sobs.

Trey pointed at a freckled-faced boy in the front. "Get up. Come closer."

The boy pushed to his feet, trembling. He stopped a few feet in front of Trey. The boy's eyes darted to the glowing sever-whip every couple of seconds, and he wouldn't look Trey in the eye.

"Where is she?"

The boy shook his head. "Where is who?"

What?!? Could this boy really not know who Trey was talking about? The prettiest girl in the class was missing, and this boy hadn't noticed? Trey was angry. Angrier than he had ever been in his life.

"Serenity!" Trey screamed and brought the sever-whip around at the same time. There was a streak of light where the sever-whip cut the air. It caught the boy in the neck, taking his head from him. The arc of Trey's arm was too tight though, and the sever-whip slipped from his hand. As the boy's lifeless body sank to the ground the sever-whip deactivated in midair, bounced across the tops of three desks, then rolled to the ground.

Trey felt nothing other than anger. Why should he have?

The students barely reacted this time to the death of another of their own. Trey pulled the shock wand from his belt, considered it for a second, then tossed it to the front of the room where it landed in the pile that was the remains of Teacher Stein.

There were seven students left, cowering and waiting for their turn.

Trey took several deep breaths. Oxygen filled his lungs with a curious burning sensation, as if the air was more potent than normal. A faint metallic taste manifested in his mouth. Blood.

What to do next? Should he finish the rest of them right then? No, he had to leave one of them alive until Serenity got here. But wait, what if she wasn't going to come? What if she was skipping this session? What if she was sick? If she didn't come, all of this would be for nothing. He could leave one alive, and then hold them hostage while he went through the halls searching for her.

No good. Wouldn't work. Out there, the simulation would swarm him with security personnel. He'd never make it to Serenity. Glitch, what to do?

A quick glance at the group of students and Trey came up with the solution. He needed a hostage. Trey pointed the Needler. "Ernie, come here."

Ernie didn't respond, but looked to either side, as if Trey had been talking to somebody next to him.

"No, I mean you, Mr. Green-Hair-with-Freckles. Get over here."

"You're talking to me?" Ernie asked.

"Yes. Get over here quick, or I'll kill all of you right now."

"What does it matter? You're going to kill us anyway." Ernie pushed his way through. He was the only student not leaking tears. That made Trey angrier. His stomach twisted with nausea. Why wasn't Ernie scared? Trey thought of how Ernie had died in KK, and he felt a little better, though no less angry.

"You don't know that."

Ernie didn't respond.

Before Ernie got too close, Trey said, "Turn around, back towards me."

Ernie did so, careful to step over the decapitated body on the floor between them.

"Keep your hands where I can see them," Trey said as Ernie approached. "So-so-slow and nicey-nice."

"Don't kill me," Ernie said. His voice was curiously calm though.

Trey was suspicious. Why wasn't this one as frightened as the rest? Ernie was next, and he probably knew it. Why wasn't he crying? Why hadn't he collapsed like the others?

Raynbow Spryte's voice was a soft whimper. "*After what he and Serenity*

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did together! You can't let him live! I mean, you saw what he did when she put her—”

“I know!” Trey shouted.

The students went mostly silent at that, except for a couple of the girls who were trying to breathe between their stilted sobs. Ernie jerked and stopped. Furious, Trey reached for Ernie's shoulder and yanked him backwards, pulling him close, holding him tight. He shoved the Needler into Ernie's back. Ernie gasped and went rigid.

“Move and die,” Trey whispered. Keeping the Needler tight into Ernie's back, he let go of his shoulder and pulled the pulse dagger from his belt. Raising the handle to Ernie's neck was a fluid, pleasant movement. Pressing the inactive weapon to his throat, and resting a finger on the activation switch sent no small thrill through Trey's spine. He found himself smiling.

A quick glance around and Trey's mind was spinning with the sight of all that blood painting the walls, the desks, the floor. It was splattered on the faces of some of the students. Trey's eyes were watering. He blinked, and water flowed down his cheeks. Did those students think he was crying, just like them? Did they think he was scared?

The pulse dagger blade shot into existence, glowing slightly with the initial energy charge. Ernie inhaled sharply. Trey could smell his sweat and the pale fear that permeated it.

“Don't get fidgety, Ernie,” Trey growled.

23. Grenade and Door

All caught up? Excellent. You know a little more of the story already, so let's fast forward past what you know and get to the good stuff.

The whine of the Needler filled the room.

The little blonde girl wasn't going to move. She was a zero signal, and none of the other students were going to leave the room to find Serenity.

Trey changed his mind. Ernie would be the last to die. Serenity would watch as Trey killed him. Mr. Green-Hair-with-Freckles deserved it for what he had stolen from Trey. For what he had stolen from Serenity. She hadn't given it willingly. He'd seduced her, forced her on him. And in a few minutes, he would bleed for what he had done. Bleed profusely.

Trey pulled Ernie to the side, guiding him with the pulse dagger at his neck. Trey aimed the Needler at the cluster of students, the weapon screaming like a banshee. Trey stared into the already-dead eyes of the pretty blonde girl, wondering what her name was even as he squeezed the trigger. The girl's eyes never wavered, even though her death lay only a second away.

The Needler sputtered and died. Trey looked down. The ammo indicator read 0%. How the glitch had that happened?!?

The blonde girl still hadn't moved. Trey wondered if she was dead from fear. He dropped the Needler, hearing it land with a thud, not on the ground, but on the spongy surface of a dead body. He reached around to the base of his spine, grabbing a flay grenade, pulling it loose. He held it up, rotating it with his fingers while he studied the small switches that were aligned on one side.

In Trey's grasp, Ernie began to breathe violently. *"Oh God, why are you doing this?!?"*

"Er-Er-Ernie...It should be obvious that I'm not God," Trey said,

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flicking a switch on the flay grenade. It began to hum and vibrate in his fist. “*You* wronged *me*. I’m the victim here.”

“Stop calling me—!” Ernie began, but cut off when Trey tossed the flay grenade.

It sailed in a gentle arc and landed in the lap of the catatonic blonde girl. She didn’t seem to notice. Tris, and a second member of the coven (Ester) screamed, and bolted. They didn’t even make a single step before the flay grenade exploded, instantly encompassing the cluster of students in its destructive clutch.

Heat.

Smoke.

Fire.

Blood and bone.

The shockwave slammed Ernie into Trey, taking them both from their feet. Trey’s head hit the hard floor and he blacked out for a moment. When the world faded back a few seconds later, he felt wetness at his fingertips. A slow ache was seeping through his body. When he sat back up, nausea took him in its grip. Serenity’s scent was bold and clear. Was she back? Trey whipped his head toward the door, where Serenity most certainly wasn’t.

“*Looky looky!*” Rainbow Spryte’s voice insisted.

Ernie was crawling toward the door though. Oh no, it wouldn’t do to have him escaping like that.

Trey staggered to his feet, reactivating the pulse dagger (which, for some reason, had switched off during the explosion). The room was, quite literally, filled with a fog of blood. It was everywhere, sticking to everything. Thick clouds of the stuff were rolling and curling around Trey’s body as he moved. Less than a meter in front of him, Trey could see the air flow disturbances trailing from Ernie’s body as he crawled toward the exit.

It was all impossible, and yet, there it was.

Trey kicked Ernie in the side. Ernie groaned and crumpled, rolling onto his back.

“Trying to escape?” Trey asked. “Not possible, Ernie.”

Ernie just groaned, clutching his stomach, his body shaking as he gasped for air.

Trey took a deep breath, tasting the tang of blood in the air. When he blew the breath out, it sent ripples through the red fog. “Now that it’s just

you and I left, I don't think we're gonna sit around. I don't feel like waiting anymore. Let's go find her so we can end this."

Ernie's voice was wet and forced. "What do you mean? How's this going to end?"

"Oooo, *good question!*" Raynbow Spryte said.

"Get up," Trey said, waving the pulse dagger. "Get on your feet, or this is going in you. Hurry."

Ernie only stared through dripping eyes for a moment, but then squeezed his eyes shut, blowing out a breath. He rolled to one side, pushing to his knees. Impatient, Trey grabbed his arm and pulled him the rest of the way up. Ernie's skin was slimy with a blood-sweat mixture.

"You're going to kill us both, aren't you? Why?"

Trey turned Ernie toward the door. "Not both of you."

"Me then. That's it, isn't it? You're going to kill me, and—" Ernie whipped his head around, eyes searching Trey's. "*—oh, God, you're going to make her watch!*"

Trey smiled and tightened his grip on Ernie's arm. "What do you know, Ernie? You're just a lousy little thief. Now move, or you're not going to get a chance to find out whether you're right or wrong." Trey guided Ernie toward the door.

"You won't get away with this," Ernie said, just before the door could open for them. "They'll catch you when we leave."

"You don't understand what reality really is then," Trey said. "I can do whatever I want here." Trey smiled wider this time. He thought of Raynbow Spryte smiling, and how his smile had been so big and wide that it had extended off his face. Trey imagined that this smile was that big, and that made his smile even wider. Was it wider than his face? Trey thought it might be.

The door slid open.

And there stood Serenity, golden-haired goddess.

24. Throat and Tongue

Head bowed, she was reading a book (a real one, made of paper, glue, ink, and all that stuff), and into the room she stepped, oblivious to the school-room slaughterhouse that awaited her.

“RS, *kill the door!*” Trey thought, a fresh wave of unbalance and nausea wrenching at his stomach. Through the blood stench, he could smell her. His head swam with the sensation, and he struggled to keep his eyes in focus.

“I surely-sure can do it, but I’ll hafta kill the cyberspace feed to the room too. You’ll be on your own.”

There wasn’t time to debate. The second Serenity noticed the hell storm she had just walked into, she would bolt. “*Do it,*” Trey sent.

“Bye-Bye, Trey. Good luck.”

Even though Trey couldn’t see him, he felt Raynbow Spryte’s sudden absence. He felt a sudden, inescapable loss, like his only friend had just left for a long trip.

The door swished shut.

Her hair hanging over her face, Serenity looked up from her book. Behind a veil of wispy gold strands, those eyes widened and that exquisite mouth parted, sucking in a quick breath of surprise. Trey watched her eyes dart around the room, her tongue touch her lips, as she took in the sight and taste of the classroom. The fog of blood seemed to part for her, as if it was unwilling to mar such beauty, to corrupt such innocence.

There was a sound—the book hitting the floor—then Serenity’s hand flew to her mouth. There was a scream stopped there. Trey wasn’t sure what was holding it in. She backpedaled, but the door didn’t open, and she pressed up against it. Trey could only imagine what she was thinking. Whatever it was, it would change in a moment. That was for glitched sure.

“Serenity, please help me,” Ernie whispered.

“W-Wha—?”

“Hello, Serenity,” Trey said from behind Ernie. “Goodbye, Ernie.”

Ernie jerked in Trey’s arms. “You stupid glitch! That’s not my—”

The pulse dagger slid into the side of Ernie’s neck like it was dipping into water instead of flesh, muscle, and bone. The glowing blade severed Ernie’s throat and spinal column, killing him instantly. Ernie’s body began to spasm, his arms wild. As Ernie’s legs collapsed, Trey released him. Ernie’s neck slipped free of the pulse dagger with a wet squelch. His neck spurting as his body fell, bludgeoning through the blood mist, his impact releasing a pressure wave that cleared the immediate area of the red haze.

For just a moment, the simulation seemed to shimmer.

Trey barely noticed; his eyes were glued to Serenity and her wide eyes, not quite hidden behind a wall of her hair. One hand was a claw at the door, as if she could dig through it. The other held in the scream that surely rested on those soft, pillow lips. Trey watched as her chest rose. She was inhaling. Deeply. She was going to scream. Even though nobody was getting through that door, Trey didn’t want her to scream. That would mean she was frightened. Of him.

“Serenity,” Trey said, half amazed that his voice was still working. “I love you.” At his words, it was as if a massive hand took his stomach and crushed it into a fist, then twisted. His knees went loose, but he tensed his legs and managed to stay up. He tasted bile in his mouth, cold and tangy. He had to swallow at the last moment to avoid vomiting in front of Serenity. The pulse dagger slipped from his hand.

Serenity’s hand was dropping from her mouth. Had it worked? Was she susceptible to Trey’s commands already?

No, her eyes were still wide, still horrified.

“I love you more than anyone in this world.”

Her eyes softened, just a little.

“You’re beautiful. We’re going to be together forever.”

There. It wasn’t just her eyes that relaxed, but her entire body. Her shoulders lowered and she blew a slow breath out, strands of hair flaring outward, away from her face. Her lips parted, giving Trey a glimpse of white perfection. Her pale throat jerked as she swallowed. Trey wondered what it would be like to kiss that throat, to lick the skin there.

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“Who are you?” Serenity asked, her voice low, as it usually was. “You’re in this class aren’t you?”

“I’m Trey.”

“And you...” She looked disoriented. Did she even know where she was anymore? “Wait, you sit right behind me, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

Serenity surveyed the room briefly. “What happened here? Are these our classmates?”

“Yeah, they are,” Trey answered, but only her second question.

“Are they...dead?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.”

“How do you feel?”

Serenity paused, her thin eyebrows shifting. “I’m fine, I think. I feel a little...disconnected, like I just woke up or something. I think I was late for class, but now—” She looked around again. “—I guess we’re not having class today.”

Serenity didn’t seem to be affected by the carnage spread throughout the room. The fourth password had worked! Trey’s mouth watered.

“What do you want to do?” Trey asked.

She looked straight at him then, or perhaps straight through him, or maybe right *into* him. The world dimmed a little, going black around the edges. Trey almost fainted. The corners of Serenity’s mouth turned up. “What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“Come closer,” Trey managed.

Serenity moved toward him without hesitation. Her hips swayed, and the skirt of her school uniform swished mysteriously, motions and movements entirely at home on her form, but entirely scandalous from one so young. Trey felt like Heaven itself was bearing down on him.

She was so very close. Her scent was all the more potent, mixed with blood as it was. Up close, her gaze hit Trey with the force of a tidal wave. Somehow he managed to keep his eyes from shifting away. It wasn’t easy, but he did it, imagining that it was the equivalent of holding one’s hand in a fire through stubborn willpower. That glorious hair still hung like sunlit rain. Without thinking, Trey brushed a few strands away, clearing one half of her face. He held her hair for a second, running it between thumb and

index finger, slick as silk, and—sniffy sniff—it smelled good! Her smell cut the room like a knife.

They were the same height. Trey knew this, but Serenity being half a meter from him provided him tangible confirmation. It was like they had been made for each other, a perfect fit.

“I don’t really know what’s going on here,” Serenity said. “A minute ago, did you say something about loving me?”

“Yes.”

“Did you mean it?”

“Yes.” Was that all he could say in front of her? Just repeat that one word?

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything.” Trey’s stomach lurched. He almost grabbed her shoulder to steady himself. If something didn’t change soon, he was going to have to take a step back. “Do something,” he told her.

Like a child asking a parent for guidance, she asked, “What should I do?”

“Kiss me.”

Those pristine lips parted in a smile and the corners of her eyes crinkled just a little. “Okay.” Without any hesitation, she did exactly what he wanted, leaning in, pressing her closed mouth to his open one.

It was electric.

It was fire.

It was a bomb.

It was all these things, and yet, it was the softest, sweetest touch/taste Trey had ever experienced. As his involvement in the kiss deepened, his nausea faded. He could’ve stayed like that forever, their only point of contact being where their lips met.

When she pulled back, her chest was rising and falling pleasantly. “That felt good,” she breathed. Her smile was blasting at Trey with the force of a million suns.

“Yeah,” was all he could say, still stunned from the kiss, still stunned that this was all working out. After all he’d gone through, after all his failures, it was finally turning out like it was supposed to.

“I don’t know why I didn’t notice you much before, ‘Trey’—he shivered when she said his name—“but I’m glad I did. You know, it’s weird.”

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“What’s weird?” Trey said. Her hand was resting on his shoulder. She was closer than before. He could feel the gentle heat her body radiated.

“Ever since I stepped in here, I’ve felt...different.”

“Is that bad?”

Serenity shook her head. “No, just different, but it’s like I had a weight on my back, and now somebody’s lifted it off. I feel free. I feel like I can make my own decisions now. That’s a strange thing to think, I know, but that’s how I feel. It’s wonderful. I like it. And you know what? I think you had something to do with it.” Then her other hand was touching him, on his other shoulder.

“I don’t know—”

“I want to kiss you some more before we talk some more.”

Trey didn’t get a chance to reply because they were kissing again. Only this time it was better, because her tongue was in play. Oh, and all of her was pressed up against all of him. Ohmyohmy, this was better than he had imagined! His dreams hadn’t been this good! Her hands at his back pulled him close, and Trey’s did the same to her. He could feel her spine beneath her uniform and the thin bumps of her undergarments. He felt weak.

When she broke the kiss this time, she didn’t step away. Instead, she put her lips to his ear, whispering. “We can do even more if you want to.”

Trey’s mind swam, clouded with vague possibilities.

“I’m still intact, but I’m yours if you want.”

Then she exhaled, right into his ear. Her warm breath sent his stomach sailing back onto a boiling sea. The world spun. Trey clung to Serenity with the last bit of strength he could summon.

“Do you want me?” Serenity asked.

“Yessss,” Trey said.

“Where?”

Trey moved hair away from her ear, pressed his lips close. “Not here. Let’s go back to my room.”

“Right now, right?” Her voice betrayed her. She was impatient.

“Yessss.” He couldn’t help but slur the end of the word.

Trey pulled her toward the door, keeping one of her hands in his. There was brief resistance on her part for a moment, as if she had stumbled, or was reaching for something on the ground. The resistance was brief, and when Trey turned to look, she hopped awkwardly on one foot, giving him a

brilliant smile that sent a fresh wave of desire shooting into him. His shoes left bloody footprints on the floor. Serenity's didn't. She had been more careful.

His mind had a question for him: *Hold up there, Trey, aren't you forgetting something?*

Trey's mind raced. At least, it raced as well as it could given what he'd just done to his classmates and the kiss he'd just shared with Serenity. What was he forgetting?

The door. Ah, glitch.

Trey pulled up short. Serenity moved close behind him, resting her chin on his shoulder. Her hair brushed his ear. Her slender hands tugged on his shoulders.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The door isn't working." Yeah, Raynbow Spryte had done his job. There were no other doors. There were no windows. The Needler was out of ammo. The pulse dagger wouldn't be able to cut through the door. Maybe the sever-whip—

"Do you mean we're stuck in here for awhile?" Serenity asked.

Trey sighed. "I guess so." Once again, this wasn't how things were supposed to be. "Are you upset?"

"Mad? No."

"Good."

"Turn around."

Trey turned around, his bicep brushing ever so gently against the swell of her breast. A tingling sensation spread throughout his body. For a brief moment, he imagined the two of them back in his room, on his bed, doing...something. He wasn't quite sure what. That part was hazy because he didn't really know the specifics. Not really.

"Do you like me?" Serenity asked.

Trey smiled, but kept his eyes serious. "It's more than that. I love you."

Serenity didn't hesitate, but her words were measured. "I feel the same way toward you, I think...I mean, I do love you—at least I feel like I do. It's like a brand new feeling, and it's something I've never felt before. And now that I'm with you, it's filling me up. It's strong. I know that none of this makes any sense. You probably think I'm crazy."

"No I don't."

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“Thanks. I’m glad you don’t.”

“You’re more beautiful than any other girl in this school.”

Her cheeks turned red at that. She was blushing! And still she refused to break eye contact with him. What a girl! She was perfect, just like Trey had known all along.

And she was his.

Even though they couldn’t get out of the room, things *were* working out. They were just going to take a little more time.

Serenity touched her nose to his. “I like it when you say things like that,” she said, her voice husky and filled with promise.

“I want to do more than kiss,” Trey said, shocked at his own boldness. But it was what he wanted after all. And she was his. He could say these types of things, talk to her like this, tell her what he wanted. She would be receptive. She would be willing. Eager even.

“We don’t have to wait,” Serenity said.

Trey looked around. “There isn’t much room...”

“I don’t care about any of that. I want you too much.” She gave him a quick, hard kiss. Her fingers slid through his hair. That felt good. So did kissing her back.

Trey just wished that he could get the door open so they could get as far away from the classroom as possible. Even if they were the only two survivors, Trey figured that their best alibi would be to claim that they had been fooling around in his room. They might be punished, but given the horror that had fallen on their classmates (and the subsequent grief that he and Serenity would undoubtedly display), it was unlikely it would be severe. Anyway, he had the passwords and Raynbow Spryte. He could get out of anything serious.

Hopelessly lost in the heaven of Serenity’s lips, Trey heard the door behind him slide open.

Raynbow Spryte had figured that the deed had been done and had gone ahead and opened the door. Trey almost shouted for joy. He broke the kiss, taking a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

Serenity’s eyes had changed though. There were a million questions in there, or perhaps just one. Only, she wasn’t looking at him, but over his shoulder, at the door. Trey turned to see what she was looking at.

Ethan A. Cooper

Well, how about that? That sure looked like Irene, third member of Serenity's coven.

25. Irene and Dagger

The door closed behind Irene before anybody could react.

But wait just a glitched minute! No no nope! Irene was deady-dead. Trey had killed her, hadn't he? Looking over Serenity's shoulder, he suddenly wasn't so sure. What was left of the bodies was scattered, mostly on the far side of the classroom. He *knew* that there had been coven members in that cluster... No, this couldn't be Irene.

Irene was angry. "Serenity, I've been looking everywhere for you! I thought you weren't coming to class today."

"I changed my mind," Serenity said, shifting sideways, away from Trey.

"Why were you standing so close to that guy?" Irene asked, not even looking at Trey. "Where's Trin?"

"Trey's my new boyfriend." Serenity was moving to intercept Irene. "Trin and I are done. I love Trey now."

Trey turned his back to them, surveying the room again, confused. He moved to one side, so he could see the pile of bodies. It certainly didn't seem like Irene was there. He thought about it—*really thought about it*—and he wasn't so sure that he had already killed Irene. Maybe this girl really was Irene. Serenity sure seemed to think she was...but if that was true—

Then that meant that—

Oh—

Trey spun, grabbing for the pulse dagger at his waist. It wasn't there. Glitch, of course it wasn't. He'd dropped it after he'd killed Ernie. It was on the floor.

Only it wasn't. There were only smears and streaks down there, all of them red and congealing. But no dagger. Where the glitch was it?

Trey looked up.

Oh. Right. There it was. Buried in Irene's forehead.

26. Serenity and Sigh

Reality was bearing down on Trey with all the intensity of a nuclear blast, but his stomach was so upset, and his mind so confused, that he pushed reality away, letting a single “No” of denial escape through his lips before attempting to grab onto the edge of Teacher Stein’s desk, missing, then going down onto his knees.

One hand still gripping the pulse dagger, Serenity put a foot into Irene’s stomach and pushed. Deady-dead for really-real, Irene’s body fell backwards, her skull splitting with an audible CRACK as it hit the floor.

“Well,” Serenity said, as if that explained everything. She put a hand on her hip and sighed.

Trey’s mind scrambled. “I...don’t...I—”

“Don’t understand?” Serenity asked, then laughed, looking briefly at the glistening fluid on the glowing blade of the pulse dagger. “I’m surprised actually. I thought you were smarter than that.”

“So...you’re not...?” Trey couldn’t complete the sentence. Couldn’t bring himself to spit it out. Didn’t want to hear it from his own lips.

“Under your control? Hardly.”

“But—”

Serenity rolled her eyes. “The fourth password, right? You’re wondering why it didn’t work, aren’t you. I know you are. I can see it in your eyes.”

Trey slammed his mouth shut. She had him pinned. He was going to throw up in a minute. He couldn’t think. Couldn’t reason.

“Seriously, Trey, I mean you know who I am right?”

Trey shook his head. He closed his eyes. It wasn’t true. Couldn’t be. Wouldn’t be. Impossible.

Serenity laughed, performing a perfectly ravishing flip of her head that

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sent her hair flying. She raised a hand behind her head, two fingers forming a V. “Oh, fiddly faddy foo on you then!”

27. Spew and Pa55word

Serenity was Raynbow Spryte!

It had all gone wrong. The fourth password hadn't worked! All because of Irene! She hadn't been there. Ernie wasn't the last one of his classmates to die! Instead of Irene being killed by Trey, she'd been killed by Serenity. Consequently, the simulation was messed up. The fourth password had been used, but it was incomplete. No, it was *incorrect*. And things were horribly, irreversibly wrong.

That was enough for Trey. His stomach heaved and emptied itself. It burned and hurt as it came out, spewing with unexpected gusto. The liquid was pale green and brown. There were little chunky things and long, slimy tendrils. What *had* he eaten? When it finally stopped, he dry heaved a couple more times, saliva streaming from his lip and snot running from his nose. He wiped at his eyes, seeing his vomit mixing with blood on the floor.

"Silly Trey, there is no fourth password. I made it up."

"Why?" Trey spat, though he didn't believe her. The password was real; it had just been glitched up. Trey had glitched it up.

"I saw you that first day, you know," Serenity said, sounding like she remembered it with fondness. "I could almost hear your thoughts. I knew right then, that you were the one I could use."

"You used me." It wasn't a question. It was hate in sentence form. His mind struggled for a way out of this.

She smiled a smile so beautiful that Trey almost wanted to forgive her, let her use him however she wanted, just as long as she kept smiling. "Yes I did, and I bet you want to know why. Okay, I'll tell you. It's real simple: I hate this place, and I hate everybody in it. I want out, and I want them all dead. Since I can't have the first, I'm gonna have the second. Nothing like a little school violence to get the blood pumping."

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“You’re insane.”

Serenity held up the pulse dagger. Hot blood streamed off the tip. She stuck out her tongue as if to lick the blood off. “That’s entirely possible, but I’m not the only one. You’ve been so infatuated with me, that you’ve been missing what’s been going on in this place. Not all the students who died today were killed by you. Something out in the woods killed one of them. And didn’t you heard what happened to Minister Sinister? His Daughters of Trin have been very bad little girls. This place is bound for ruin. It’s all coming down. I like to think I’m helping that in my own way.”

Trey struggled to get up on shaky legs. He had to think. He had to stall her. Strangely, he still felt intense attraction to her, even though he was afraid of what she had done, and what she was going to do next.

“I always wanted to participate in a massacre,” Serenity said, going up on her tiptoes and swishing her skirt. She giggled. “Or at least be instrumental in one. And just look how it turned out! I’m so pleased!”

“What are you going to do with me?”

Serenity frowned. “Do you really need to ask that? I’m going to let you take the blame for this. I mean, you did kill all your classmates, and...after that, you tried to kill me.” As she finished, she took the pulse dagger and ran the tip down the front of her uniform. The material split easily, burning and smoking. The uniform parted, exposing the pure white of her undergarments, the twin pale swells of her budding breasts, and the firm plane of her stomach. Trey gaped as the pulse dagger continued downward, severing the entire length of her skirt. The garment floated down around her legs. And long, creamy legs they were. “That is, you tried to kill me...after you tried to rape me.”

Trey had had enough. There was no recovering from this. Even if he managed to escape, they would never believe Trey. After all, he had killed them. Nobody would believe that he’d been Serenity’s puppet. And so it was time to end it.

“Devilgod,” Trey said.

Nothing happened.

“*Devilgod!*” Trey shouted.

Still, nothing happened.

“*DEVILGOD! DEVILGOD! DEVILGOD!*”

Nothing happened.

Except Serenity was laughing. It was a Raynbow Spryte laugh, grim and cold, filled with too much mirth, too much satisfaction. “Really Trey, this is getting redundant. I’m having to handhold you through everything. I sincerely thought you were smarter. Guess I was wrong.”

“It’s not working,” Trey said. The third password wasn’t working. There was no way to get out of the simulation. He was stuck!

“Of course it’s not working,” Serenity said, as if talking to a child. “There is no third password. For that matter, the first and second passwords don’t exist either.”

“What do you mean?” Trey asked in horror, but already knowing. You see, deep down, he *knew*. Maybe he had all along.

“The reason the passwords don’t work—the reason why they wouldn’t work even if they did exist—is because this isn’t a simulation. This is real-space.”

28. Murderer and Hell

Serenity's grin at this final, apocalyptic revelation was almost wider than her face. It wasn't really, but it was close.

"*Liar!*" Trey screamed.

"You're a murderer, Trey. Accept it now, and you'll feel whole bunches better."

"I don't believe you." But he did. Oh did he ever. He had killed them all, and it was real. They weren't coming back to life. They weren't code.

How could it have come to this? What had gone wrong?

"It was so easy to convince you, I almost couldn't stand it. You were so miserable. You were so ready to believe. After I saw you outside the school that first day, when I knew you were the one, I sat down right in front of you. I knew it wouldn't be long before you'd try to contact me. Not that you'd speak to me. No, you'd do it through cyberspace—and that's exactly what you did. I strung you along, but I knew that there was a better way to get you to do what I needed you to. Boyfriends don't kill their classmates just because their girlfriend tells them to. I had to push you away, and into the arms of somebody else."

Rainbow Spryte.

"That's right," Serenity said, as if reading his mind. "Getting you to believe it was a simulation was easy really. I used your blind infatuation for me. It made it so simple. Ester, Tris, and Irene were in on it, you know. Ester stripped in class to solidify your belief that the simulation was real and that the passwords worked. Once you were convinced of that, I had to get you used to the idea of killing. That's where Classroom Killer came in. Oh! Oops! Did I call that game by its real name? It's true. Nobody'd ever play a game called Classroom Knight! That's just stupid. I'm still amazed that worked as well as it did. But there you were, executing your classmates with-

out hesitation.

“After I convinced you that the passwords wouldn’t work as well around me, you were primed and ready. I just needed one big event to set you off.”

“Ernie,” Trey said. “You used him too.”

“First of all, his name’s not Ernie. It’s Trin. I guess I didn’t have to lie about his name; I just did. Once I started making things up, I just couldn’t stop. Guess I have control issues. Second, I used him, but he went willingly enough. Quite frankly, he was easier to use than you. But you know what the best part of it was? He was completely in the dark. He really thought he was my boyfriend. He didn’t know what I really needed him for. He was a little on the naïve side, but he was tasty enough—until you killed him. Anyway, that’s about it. Everything was planned. Everything worked. You did what I needed you to do, and they’ll talk about this for years. Trinity School won’t ever be the same. The best part of this is that I’m going to walk out of here, mission accomplished, and nobody’s going to question the poor girl who barely survived the senseless slaughter of her friends and classmates, not to mention an attempted rape. Nobody’ll know that it should be called the Serenity Massacre, but that’s fine with me. I’ll know its true name.”

Trey felt like throwing up again. He found that he was sobbing. He wasn’t sure if it was for him, or for the students that had died by his hand. What did it matter? They were dead, and he was responsible. There was nothing he could say. There was no forgiveness for what he had done. Only damnation. Of this he was certain.

All he had ever wanted was to be with Serenity. Had that been too much to ask for?

I’m sorry, came the answer, though Trey didn’t know where it had come from. Internally, he sighed, knowing what he had to do, hoping beyond hope that it was possible. He held out one hand in front of him, palm toward Serenity, and one hand behind him, at his waist.

“I think it’s time to end this,” Serenity said, taking a step forward. “It’ll hurt, but not for terribly long.”

Then she dove at him. Not Heaven this time, but Hell incarnate.

29. Wound and Wait

Serenity slammed into Trey, pushing him backwards, the pulse dagger plunging into his chest, missing his heart, but puncturing a lung. Trey felt things churning inside, boiling. Melting. As if given strength by some higher power, he was able to contain a primal scream of agony, even though he knew the wound was probably fatal. He found that taking his next breath was next to impossible. Something gurgled in his chest as he forced air into his lungs. Serenity's hair was all over him, getting in his nose and mouth. Her face was mere centimeters from his. Up close she was as intoxicating as ever. Even though she had just stabbed him, perhaps killing him, he felt like she was hypnotizing him. It wasn't anything conscious on her part—it was just who she was. It was how she affected him. There was nothing either of them could do about it.

The deed done, Serenity pushed back, her legs straddling Trey's waist. "Just wait for it," she said. "It won't be long now."

His chest burned. It was more painful than anything he had ever experienced. Even a kill-flik in cyberspace couldn't produce this much pain. Surely-sure, he was dying. He took a deep breath that wasn't very deep at all, amazed that he was still conscious when an activated pulse dagger was liquefying his chest right in front of his eyes. "I...know," he gasped. Then, summoning every last ounce of strength and anger, he brought his right fist up and hit Serenity in the side of the head as hard as he could.

30. PaSSion and Redemption

The second (and last) flay grenade Trey had taken from the clip at the base of his spine hit Serenity in the cheek, twisting her head to the side and throwing her sideways, off his body. She grunted, her head hitting the side of Teacher Stein's desk. As Trey sat up, the world spinning and dangerously close to fading out altogether, Serenity grunted, then groaned, her hand coming to her head in wonder at what had just happened to her.

Trey grabbed a fistful of her hair, wrapped his wrist once, and yanked her down to the floor beside him. She was dazed, unable to fully control her limbs. As she spasmed and moaned, Trey rolled onto all fours. Even though it shouldn't have, this made it feel like the pulse dagger was actually sinking deeper in. He pushed back onto his knees and steeled himself. Grabbing the handle of the pulse dagger, he blew out a breath, and with it, he yanked. The pulse dagger came out easily enough, but it was replaced by an immeasurable pain that had him gasping for oxygen. He couldn't take a breath. He tried to force it, but there was nothing.

Serenity was trying to get up. Trey pushed her head back down and crawled on top of her. He noticed that his hand was still curled around the flay grenade, which had Serenity's blood on it.

Her cheek was a mess. Her perfection was marred. And as if she were a witch whose glamour spell had just been broken, Trey saw her for who she really was.

Just another one of his bleeding classmates.

"...kill you," Serenity mumbled, her eyes unfocused.

You already have, Trey thought.

"Get...offff!"

Trey shook his head, mouthing, *I loved you, but I was wrong. I'm sorry for both of us.*

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Serenity's eyes went wide.

There's no redemption for you. For me, I can only hope.

"No...!" she said, writhing up against him.

Trey put one hand out to steady his body. The other hand (the one curled into a fist) he put on her stomach. The flesh was warm and smooth there, and he briefly wondered what the rest of her would have felt like, had things turned out differently. All he had wanted was her.

He straightened his legs, laying his body fully on top of her, dismayed a little at the stream of blood and melted flesh that poured from his chest wound. Okay, that wasn't good, and it wasn't pretty. Gonna be hard to patch up old Trey. Difficult to put that stuff back in. Truly-true.

His weight was too much for Serenity in her dazed state, so she could only look up into his eyes and hate him. And he saw it in her eyes—how much she hated him.

He kissed her then. She tried to bite him—did bite him, but he kept on kissing her. When he stuck his tongue in her mouth, she almost bit it off. Her mouth filled with blood, but Trey kept on kissing her. She spit blood into his face, but he kissed her anyway. When she turned her face sideways, back and forth, he kissed her cheeks. He tasted her blood, his blood. He licked her tears, his tears.

It was a sick, perverted passion, and Trey exulted in it. Near the end of it all, Trey thought that maybe she kissed him back. Probably not, but maybe.

Held in his fist between them, the hum and the vibration of the flay grenade grew.

Eventually, in its own way, it brought redemption.

THE END