

The city of Duralee had dawn but not sunrise.

Alec Walters had strolled meditatively up the ramp towards the race track, craning his neck to watch the very center of the city. The first few flashes of lighting across the kilometers looked like little more than sparks or – more familiar to a Duralee resident - distant gunshots. The coalescence of plasma at the center of the city was beginning to charge. Ignition was imminent. As Alec reached the edge of the kilometers-long race track, one final crackle of energy pulsed and the light was now steady. In a literal flash, the city went from urban nighttime to the first orange haze of the day.

At this rare moment, when the light was still just beginning to build at the very aerial heart of the endless city, Alec could look straight up and see across the great distance to the far side. Built on the inside of a giant sphere, Duralee's true form was usually masked by the haze of the day and the darkness of night, but in these fleeting moments when the two met, the truth was evident.

Alec wiped his stained hands with a rag and tried to decide if the city was beautiful, or ugly and he'd just gotten used to it. With a yawn, he turned and headed back down the ramp. He watched the dawn rarely. Like most people in the rusted city, he did most of his living at night, when the harsh rays of the artificial sun weren't slowly broiling him.

Back in the shadow of the Duralee Track, in the deep chasm between the stands and the race track itself, Alec felt instantly cooler just a step outside of the bright morning light. He headed down the long ramp, descending steeply to the five open garage doors and the five racers sleeping within them.

Waiting inside the nearest garage was a four-wheeled vehicle, a lightly-modified commuter that was still more rust than racer. Alec tapped the vehicle's running engine as he came around to the front, causing a host of diagnostic readouts to appear inside his vision. He considered the numbers and then sat down on the rolling stool and began to look around for the tool he needed.

"Walters?" called a female voice.

"In here, Ramona," he said before leaning inside the vehicle. "I'm trying to track down a leak. Trying being the operative word."

"What are you working on now, an oil leak?" the olive-skinned woman asked as she joined him by the side of the racer. Unwilling to abandon a chore, she bound her freshly-showered black hair up in a loose bun.

"Energy," he said. "Berri's burning a tenth of the racer's battery on just a once-around the track." Alec leaned on his elbow and rubbed his eyes,

indifferent to the stain he left on the bridge of his nose. He wiped grime off on his jeans and kept looking through the engine.

"Are you sure it's not his driving?" Ramona chided, even as she approached the pillar that divided the repair stalls. "Heads up, I'm going to raise it." Alec rolled back and let Ramona elevate the vehicle half a meter off the ground. He stood and resumed looking at the top of the engine while she got onto a rolling bed and slid underneath it. "So did you consider my idea?"

"Which idea?" Alec asked, searching the complicated engine. He touched points of the running motor, trying to find heat that might signify the leak. Each point of contact brought up a host of diagnostic tests and he studied the results, all to no avail.

"About going for the Iron Cup," she asked through the machine. Alec looked down at her and she up at him, the machine between them. "I know we've only got two seasons beneath our belts, but I think we can do it. And I think we've proven that we're ready to go for the Cup."

Alec deliberately looked away. "I don't disagree but..."

"But what?" She rolled out from under the car and looked up at him. Used to his evasions, she tackled them head on. "You don't want to ask Aleverton."

"No, I don't," Alec admitted freely. He stepped back from the vehicle and popped his back. "I also don't want to ask the track manager. I don't like asking John for favors."

"If we can get the Iron Cup before the end of the season, we can get some sponsors," Ramona pushed on Alec. "They can pay for energy costs." She rapped on the vehicle's erosion-colored door with her worn knuckles. "They can pay for some paint jobs."

"I've still got money in the operational budget," Alec assured her unsuccessfully. "We're not broke yet." He turned and headed towards one of the rolling bins of tools.

"Yet," Ramona cast after him. Alec didn't say anything and instead busied himself with reading the nuances of the algorithm that derived the efficiency rating of the racer. "Not that I don't love our little all-nighters but I'm going to go home and get some sleep," she told him. "I finally own an actual bed and I don't think I've spent two nights straight in it."

"Good night," Alec sent after her. His unwillingness to fight angered her and she snatched up her jacket and made her departure evident. Alec tried not to let it bother him and focused instead on the racer. He looked over the schematics – digitally overlaid in his cybernetic vision – including

modifications they'd made to it. He started to get an idea of where the leak might be found when the lights flickered.

Alec looked up, only to be startled when the garage doors began to automatically close, as did the door to the stairwell. A sudden rumble shook the entire garage and he felt himself shift downwards. Great machines hidden behind walls lowered the garage through the automated levels until it came to a stop.

Alec went for the door and pulled on it fruitlessly, then waited for the auto-lock to disengage. He fidgeted impatiently until the door groaned with release and he threw it open. He ran out into the metal grating that were the stairs of the lower levels and looked up through almost twenty levels of stairs. He sighed. "Dammit," he groaned before heading back into the garage to resume his work.

Facing out the window of the deli, Alec watched the line grow longer at the corporate food bank. On the corner of two streets that hadn't seen commuter traffic in ages, the windows were dusty and the nearby alleys were plastered in posters for civic events from a previous decade. Belonging to the Hometrics Corporation as a corporate charity outlet-turned-public-relations-opportunity, the foodbank was closed for the day. It had been closed since this morning. Alec wasn't sure if the people getting into line were hoping maybe a midday shipment might replenish the overworked and underfunded kitchen's supplies and allow them to start handing out food again, or if they just had nowhere else to be so they might as well get in line for tomorrow. The line was already down the block and around the opposite corner.

Alec looked down at his sandwich and felt guilty. He willed himself to keep eating. To avoid the vacant stares across the street, he looked down at the countertop of the deli and watched the ad playing in the imbedded screen. Apparently next year's fashion was going to be all about bi-chromatic eyes, so if he wanted to truly be complete as a person, he needed to get new eyes today.

A screech came from behind him. The old man who ran the deli was writing new prices on the dusty chalkboard of the menu over the counter. On a rickety ladder, his right arm occasionally hissed as steam escaped the hydraulics. He was raising the price of the very sandwich Alec had ordered.

Just before Alec took another bite, he beep registered inside his mind. A scrolling marquee across his vision reported the called was listed as 'John, Track Manager'. Alec swallowed and accepted the call. "Hey, John, what's up?" he asked as he brushed crumbs into the basket of his lunch.

"Got your message," came the squat voice from the squat man. "I don't think I got to beat around the bush, son: the answer's no."

"We're sixteen-and-three, John," Alec put up as a token defense. "And one of those losses, Ramona crossed the finish before the other team's captain. Maybe it's not a win in the books but it's a win as far as the people are concerned."

"The people's concerns aren't mine," John told him indifferently. "Sixteen-and-three isn't a flawless record. A flawless record gets you a shot at the title. Sixteen-and-three gets you the same as everybody else. You wait in line for the lottery to get into the Cup Elimination Bracket."

"That's two months off, John," Alec groaned, feeling like he was begging. He looked around the deli, the proprietor at the back sweeping dust out the side door. His metal arms creaked with each turn of his waist. Outside, some kids were cloistered across the alley, relishing the scent of bread and meat, imagining the tastes

"What can I tell you, Alec," the track manager all but goaded. "It's good to be the champ. And you ain't the champ." Alec wasn't sure how John hung up that loudly but the disconnection of the call made Alec wince.

"The whole thing is crazy," said Berri as he sat on the edge of the pool table, carefully braiding his red cornrows. "You get one loss in the season and there's no automatic qualifier. Nothing. Nothing at all. One loss and suddenly you're back in the pitch with everyone else. And we got the exact same shot at making it into the Bracket as Team Airborn that's, what, two and fourteen?"

"That's not the worst of it," Dotson agreed as he and Alec circled the pool table in the corner of the bar. Still empty in the early afternoon, the air was thick with the chemical smell of harsh cleaners used to clean up last night's frivolities. Sharing the caustic scent was the ever-present buzz of advertisements coming at the team from different surfaces and at different volumes all around the bar. "There's no set season length. It's not like we have to – anybody has to go – twenty-six races or eleven races. We race when we get the chance. Our season," he said with air quotes, "can be

half as long or twice as long as another team. Hell, we could race every day."

"We'd be so lucky," Ramona said as she and Lancer sat on the stools opposite Berri. "We'd get, what, a tenth of a percent of the stadium take?"

Alec scoffed as he decided on his shot. "Maybe on paper that's what the winner gets, but there's a whole lot that gets taken out before any of the teams get their cut." He lined up his shot and took it but his pool stick struck the ball too high and the orb went spinning wild. "Dammit." Turning the table over to Dotson for his shot, Alec paced back to the edge of the empty stage in the corner of the joint. "Technically, we're not allowed to race more than four times in a seven-day period. The neural strain is considered too much."

"Yeah, because health regulations matter in this sport," Lancer jabbed, brushing his long blonde hair. Ramona went to take a drink from her glass mug, only to find a two foot hair in it. She tossed the hair away, shoved Lancer, and drank on.

"Or in this league," Berri added before he announced his intention to take on the winner by placing a quarter down on the pool table.

"Or in this city," Alec mumbled to himself. No one but Ramona noticed.

On race day, the Duralee Track was alive.

The fans in the stands were cheering wildly and madly, pressing up against the chain-link fences that separated the masses from the track. The huge expanse of the track was a vast mixture of obstacles and features meant to challenge the very best drivers. Shooting between those obstructions were two racing teams, ten racers total, jockeying for position.

With the screech of his four tires, Alec rounded the curve, drifting laterally through the gap between the edge of the track and the captain of Team Echelon. Alec righted himself and pulled ahead, throttling for all he was worth. "I'm through the curve, Basin!" he yelled enthusiastically, unable to quell a laugh of excitement.

"Don't get cocky, boy!" Basin growled at Alec through their cybernetic link. The short, grizzled veteran appeared in a window in Alec's vision. "They're letting you get ahead. They're isolating you."

"Me?" Alec laughed at the possibility. "They don't care about me. Ramona's the team captain."

"Yeah, and you're the one in the lead. Now slow down and let Berri 'n Dotson catch up with you." Over a kilometer away, through the observation slit in the cement wall of the technician's station, Basin watched with a pair of binoculars. The room was heavily air conditioned to counter the intense heat from the computers that sat on the specialty network desk built into the otherwise featureless room that was little more than a cement dugout.

Basin glanced down at the computers that tracked the progress of the team, their vitals displayed in five sets of charts running in real-time. "And your heart rate's spiking," Basin growled. "Calm down or you're going to burst a gasket."

"Me or my racer?" Alec laughed again, getting nudged from behind by Echelon's captain. The physical aggression made Alec smirk, taking it as a sign of frustration and desperation from an inferior racer. He moved away from the yellow and blue racer that was trailing him and slipped between two narrow dividers in the track. His pursuer swerved around them rather than risk misjudging the distance.

"Both!" Basin yelled, pulling over a chair. So short and broad, the older man almost seemed taller sitting down. He began to type into the computer, bringing up various black screens. "I'm serious, kid, slow down and calm down."

"I'm going to pass the lap, Basin!" Alec yelled. There was a sudden thud from his right and Alec felt his racer lose traction, sliding across the track like he was on wet ice. He slid sideways and then lost all sense of friction with the track. He seemed to float for a moment. Alec turned the wheels but there was no response to the movement. An intense, terrifying weightlessness overtook him, as did a surreal and unnerving silence. The crowds beyond the track seemed to cease to exist. All Alec knew was the slow sense of growing descent.

His racer pitched forward, tugged down into the gap between the track and the box seats on the inside of the track. Alec looked to his left and saw the highest-cost box seats, those on level with the track. The people behind the armored glass, wealthy beyond all reasoning, were staring at him. Some had rushed to the window, their jaws hanging open, their eyes wide as though they'd never seen such a horror.

Slowly it dawned on Alec that he was falling. Crashing. He looked forward as the racer continued to tilt engine-first and Alec looked down into the gaping chasm. In slow, unalterable motion, Alec saw the deep mass of machinery that resided beneath the track spread wide like he was falling into the gaping maw of the very city. Velocity took hold and his fate zoomed at him. All sensation suddenly ended and he descended into absolute darkness.

There was a single pinpoint of light.

No greater than a bit of dust, the tiny and distant dot of light flashed a bit brighter. Not overwhelming in its brilliance, the flash none the less seemed to ripple against the darkness, like it churned its stagnation. Alec was aware of something beyond his perception and then he felt a distant voice ask:

Are you real?

Alec opened his eyes.

He'd been in enough crashes to recognize an ICU but this one was different. There were no stains on the ceiling tiles and all the bulbs in the overhead lights were working perfectly. Not a flicker. No omnipresent hum. Alec started to move, to look around, but intense pain put a stop to that real fast. "Hey, he's awake!" someone familiar shouted.

A middle-aged gentleman with refined looks and a rakish smile leaned over into Alec's ceiling-fixed view. "Hey there, buddy," said the gentleman of classic style. "That was quite a crash you took." He backed away, giving Alec some room. "Your team's outside." He chuckled at the glazed over look in Alec's eyes. "Come on, man, you remember me. It's Decker. I work for Arctechtronics." Decker searched Alec's face for some sign of recognition, as if it would confirm a positive prognosis. "You're in an Arctechtronics medical station. I had them bring you here rather than to the track ICU. Your, uh, your spine was severed. And a lot else, but that was the big thing. And I've seen the old racers. The Duralee Track ICU is gonna slap some insta-heal on it and send you home with two aspirin and a bottle of grapefruit juice."

Decker's eyes flashed in that telltale way that meant he'd gotten a message. With the smoothness of a corporate professional, he began to button his suit. "Listen, you should be out tomorrow or the day after. When you catch your breath and get a chance, come by Arctechtronics and we can have that drink you owe me. But we should definitely catch up. Until then, I'll catch you around." Decker disappeared from Alec's view. He heard Decker's expensive footfalls depart, and then the door shut. After that was absolute, still silence of a room devoid of any guests.

But Alec knew he wasn't alone.

Alec endured the pain as best he could and tried to look around but the small medical room was definitely empty. He tried to speak but only an incomprehensible groan came out.

The door to the room burst open and in came the flood of Ramona, Dotson, Lancer, Berri, and Basin. They crowded around the bed, practically cheering to see Alec still alive.

Yet he knew for certain there was someone else in that room.

The door to Alec's apartment opened and he shambled inside. "Oh god, it itches," he said, twisting his back awkwardly as he entered his apartment. Three rooms laid out in series, through the doorways connecting the rooms, he could see all the way from one side of the apartment to the other.

Ramona followed him inside and pulled up his gray t-shirt, scratching his back vigorously. "Oh god, yes, YES!" he moaned as her nails alleviated him. He practically stamped his foot repeatedly against the floor, he was so relieved.

"You should have sprung for the medication," Ramona chastised him as she kept scratching along the red skin where his new spine had been installed.

"Not at those prices," Alec said. "Decker just comped the surgery and the stay. That medication cost more than my rent."

The mention of Decker slowed Ramona's scratching. "You don't think Decker's gonna play the 'you owe me' card, do you?" she asked carefully, finishing her scratching responsibly.

Alec pulled down his shirt and hobbled towards the next room. "Nah. Anybody else, yes, but not him." Ramona followed Alec into the kitchen area. He pulled over a rolling chair identical to what they used at the garage and sat on it. "I...I don't know," Alec gave up. He began to pick at the duct tape that held the stuffing inside the cushion. Ramona let him stew for a moment and she went to his fridge, getting out a bottle of water.

As she went for the appliance, Alec looked up like he'd heard something. Ramona turned and looked back at the front door, then at Alec. "What?" she asked. Alec shook his head. "No, what is it?"

"I think..." Alec shook his head, his noncommittal attitude rubbing Ramona the wrong way. "I swear, it feels like somebody's following me." Ramona snorted, then chuckled, then laughed. "What?" Alec asked, unable to keep himself from smiling in response.

"You've got a virus," she stated flatly. "You've got some wires crossed or something in your brain or your cybermate or in their link. Something. But, come on, man, it's technical."

Eager to accept that explanation, Alec chortled, "Great, I got to go see a cyber-doc now."

"Go see Ratt," Ramona told him. "He did my last software upgrade. He's really knows his stuff."

Alec hedged. "Is he still living in his parents' apartment?"

"Rent controlled; who would leave?" Ramona said. She took a look around the sparse apartment and yawned, asking, "You think you'll be okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine," Alec told her as he scratched over his shoulder. "Go home. Get some rest."

"We race again in four days; you going to be ready?" she assured him, already heading for the door.

"We'll find out," Alec said, groaning as he rose to see her out. He followed her to the door and let her out, then shut it behind her. The moment the door shut, however, Alec felt paranoia rush over him. He glanced over his shoulder at an apartment he knew was empty and yet he was certain someone waited within.

"Hello?" he called to the emptiness. "Is someone there?"

Somewhere, deep inside his mind, he was certain someone had answered, he just couldn't hear it.

The elevator doors parted unevenly and Alec stepped out. He checked both ways, the long hallway extending far in both directions. He walked to the right, only checking behind him once. He headed to the middle of the hall, to a large door painted several times. The most recent coat was slapdash to say the least. Alec knocked.

There was no response for a moment, so he knocked again. He thought he could hear movement behind the door and someone yelled through it, "What do you want?"

"Ratt? Buddy, open up. It's me, Alec."

Alec heard a chain unlock, then several heavy deadbolts, then several more sounds that sounded like security mechanisms but he wasn't sure. For more than a minute, he listened to the releasing mechanisms of paranoia and then the door finally opened.

'Will Work For Food Isn't An Economic Model' said the T-shirt that opened the door. Wearing the shirt was a nerdy-looking figure with a shaved head and glasses. "What's with the do?" Alec asked at Ratt's head.

"Got a new jack installed," Ratt told him. He turned his head and showed Alec the side of his neck, revealing a digital port and some irritated skin around it. That port was one of many on the base of his skull.

"Cool," Alec said, unsure what else to say. "Listen, I was wondering if you could do me a favor."

"No," Ratt told him, walking into the apartment. Alec followed him in, then was stunned by the auto-locking features of the door. He stared and watched a veritable ballet of automated locks secure the door. He turned back and realized Ratt had been speaking.

"I'm sorry," Ratt clearly repeated. "I can't keep doing pro-bono work." This was clearly a declaration that had justification Alec had missed.

"Well, what are your rates?" Alec asked. The bluntness of the question took Ratt by surprise. "Look, I know how it is. I get it. I'll pay. I don't mind. And don't give me the friend discount; just don't give me the 'corporate price gauge' either." Ratt looked worried, like he'd offended his friend with the prospect of charging. "You're worth it," Alec promised him. "I'm not asking you because you'll do it cheap; I'm asking because you'll do it right."

"Do what?" Ratt asked. He gestured to a couch opposite a large computer desk with three monitors.

Alec accepted the seat on the couch and though he sat on the side, the slope of the dumpster-worthy piece of furniture shifted him to the middle. "I'm..." Alec found himself struggling to admit it. He laughed and said just that, adding, "Cyber-psychosis is a real problem amongst racers."

"Yeah, amongst guys Basin's age," Ratt said as he took a second to check on some programs he had running on his screens. He tweaked some code but then turned back to Alec. "You've been racing, what, a year and a half? And you weren't doing a lot before that, college boy."

"No," Alec told Ratt, even as he snickered with the familiarity. "We're not having that fight again."

"Could you actually see the sun? Did they actually have growing vegetation on a college campus?" Ratt teased.

"Shut up," Alec snapped with a laugh. Ratt chuckled as well, helping Alec defuse some of his fear. "I'm...I think I'm being followed."

"You are," Ratt said. "Ads follow you everywhere. Every corporation in this town keeps tabs on your movements and whereabouts using the short-term memory in your cybermate's—"

"Ratt, no," Alec stopped him. "Not your anti-establishment BS. I mean, like... walking down that hall." He gestured at the door. "In the elevator coming down here. I swear, there was someone there with me."

"All the time?" Ratt asked.

Grateful Ratt was taking this even remotely seriously, Alec shook his head. "It comes and goes. Sometimes it's intense, sometimes I barely notice. Sometimes I'm sure there's no one around. But it's there, it's right there...sometimes. Someone is...is just outside my realm of perception. And..." He stopped.

Ratt didn't let him. "And what?"

Alec took a breath. "And...and sometimes, when I ask if someone's there, I..." He closed his eyes, ready for a mocking reaction. "I swear, I can almost feel them answer."

"What do you mean answer?" Ratt asked, looking less worried and more curious.

"Like...like I can almost hear what someone's going to say," Alec said.

"The person you think is following you?"

"No... I...well, yeah, I guess. I mean..." Alec sighed and threw up his hands in frustration. "And you know I've had cybermate issues before. I've had the buzzing, I've had the 'ghost visions' and stuff. I know what that's like," he dismissed. "This is...this feels different. It seems different."

Ratt nodded thoughtfully for a moment as he listened to his friend, then decided. "Okay." He gestured to the broken-down computer desk chair in the corner, by the grungy kitchenette. "Pull it over. We'll run some diagnostics."

"Basin runs diagnostics on us before every race," Alec said, even as he rose and grabbed the chair by the back. The back came off without any trouble, which filled Alec with the opposite of confidence.

"Basin doesn't have my programs," Ratt assured Alec as he brought to life programs on his computer.

Alec rolled the chair over to the computer desk and he sat down next to Ratt. The computer guru pulled out some cords and began to plug them into the jacks on the back of Alec's neck. "Glad you've got a racing jack," Ratt said as he readied his friend's brain. "Data transfer is much quicker than with your standard personal jacks."

A few keystrokes and Alec felt his skin go cold. "I'm testing your senses," Ratt practically narrated. "You're going to feel a bunch of

temperature changes, some vertigo, some pain. Sorry. It won't last and it shouldn't be intense."

Alec watched as entire colors disappeared from his vision, concurrent with a host of sounds at all manner of registers and pitches moving through his hearing. Nausea took him over and he felt hungry, then full, then like he was drowning. He stayed calm, breathing slowly and deliberately, and simply focused on staying upright. Ratt monitored his computer screens intently and studied the reports.

Gradually, the sensory variations lessened and then were gone entirely and Alec was aware of the world like normal. He glanced at Ratt and asked, "What's the diagnosis?"

"Basin's doing a good job of keeping you guys at optimal operating parameters," Ratt said, studying the settings on Alec's systems like he was reading a classic novel in a foreign language. He gestured at the settings which Alec didn't understand. "I'm guessing a bunch of these weird deviations from factory standard are for racing optimization. I mean, I wouldn't do it like that but..." He shrugged.

"Do what?" Alec asked, looking over Ratt's shoulder.

"Your vision is cued for movement over color," Ratt said, pointing at a numerical readout. "Your sense of inertia is hyped up while your sense of balance is toned back some." He turned to Alec. "I mean, none of its big. I could reset them and you wouldn't know the difference. I mean, if it bothers you, ask Basin. He's the one who did it." Ratt pointed and Alec could at least recognize the documented log of when his settings were changed. "But I don't see anything to suggest a sensory echo."

"Great," Alec said, going for the cable plugged into his neck.

"Hang on," Ratt stopped him. "We ain't done. That was the one-credit diagnostic. You can get that done at a convenience store. You're paying for the expertise."

Alec smirked and sat back down, agreeing, "Yes I am." He leaned back against the corner of Ratt's desk and remained quiet, letting Ratt work. The clack of computer keys and the occasional hum of the diagnostic programs inside his mind became very methodical and systematic. Slowly, Alec felt himself beginning to drift towards the sleep that had troubled him for days.

Are you there?

It wasn't a voice, but a presence.

Alec opened his eyes and looked around Ratt's room. With his mind growing so placid and his thoughts so calm, he was acutely aware of

the presence, of the sensation of another person. He glanced at Ratt and the computer geek seemed decisive. "That looks promising," Alec said, both hopeful and worried. He buried the sensation of the other person down deep and ignored it. Somehow, he felt bad for doing that.

"It's kind of like prosopagnosia," Ratt told Alec as he scrutinized the diagnostic results. Alec stood and looked over Ratt's shoulder. "It's where you don't process yourself properly, but since you are aware that 'someone' is in the room, your mind decides it must be another person." Ratt turned around in his computer chair and all but announced, "Basically, buddy, you're perceiving yourself and thinking it's somebody else. It's like looking in the mirror and not recognizing the person, and thus thinking they're someone else."

Alec sat down on the couch with such a thump, the cords running from the back of his neck tugged the computer, making Ratt leap to guard it from being pulled even a portion of an inch. Meanwhile, Alec considered half a dozen questions but the one that made it out was, "Are you sure?"

Ratt snickered and shrugged. "Come on, man. Ghosts aren't real." He seemed to grow thoughtfully amused by the very question. "Ghosts aren't real. Fortune-telling doesn't work. Dark Side's not the gaping maw of hell from which all evil spews." He settled his gaze at Alec. "Don't sweat it. I've got your system running a system sweep and recalibration program in the background. It'll take a day or two to finish so that it doesn't eat up too much processing power, but when it's done you won't have this problem anymore. I've already messaged Basin—"

"No, I don't want him to know!" Alec exclaimed.

"I just said I was uploading a program that was going to clean out some stuff," Ratt calmed Alec. "He knows how it is and you don't have a race for a while anyway, so he's not going to care." Alec looked less than convinced. "I mean, he's going to give you a hard time, but that's not anything new. Giving someone the crotchety old man treatment is a form of polite greeting for him." Alec chuckled in spite of himself. "Go home," Ratt assured him. "Get some sleep. Avoid any stressful thinking if you can."

Alec smirked and rose from the couch. "I'll try," he said a little more cynically than he meant it.

Alec kept looking into the corner.

The owners of the track's teams were gathered for a quarterly meeting where they did nothing but argue and accuse one another. A dozen people who pretended to be wealthy were all crammed into the Duralee Track's

office, which was little more than a kitchenette built off a small and dated lounge. They smelled like the room, which was old and uncared for.

Alec was sitting with his back to the windows so that the harsh orange light of the sun could fall behind him. The abrasive light had yellowed the room and many of the occupants within. Most of the owners were older and their skin showed the signs of exposure. Most had pocket-marked scars from cancer removal and even whole skin grafts. Their clothes, likewise, looked like it had once been their best attire. Now, sadly and despite its condition, it still was.

Alec was ignoring the debate over raising the ticket prices half a percent, knowing the track's owner would make the final call, regardless the team owners' opinions. He was instead fixated on the corner of the room nearest to him, where the kitchenette met the windows.

He could feel a person there.

As the owners of the track's teams argued noisily about the implications a price raise would have on attendance, Alec felt like he could hear the specter speaking. He could practically hear the words, but it was drowned out by the harsh realities of sound and light.

"Are you real?" he whispered, both asking the question he'd been asked back at Ratt's and as a genuine question of his own.

He was certain he was answered, but not in any way he could hear.

Ramona bobbed and weaved on the mat before Alec, less as a defensive measure and more to psyche him out, to draw his attacks. Wearing sparring gloves and pads, they were alone in the gym full of rusted training equipment, on the top floor of a bottomed-out building. They stepped over the blood stain on the mat as they circled one another, watching for an opening.

Alec apparently offered one because Ramona kicked at his side. He went to counter the kick and she socked him on the side of the head. She followed with a hard cross that bent into an elbow and knocked him to the mat. Where he usually was quick to recover, he lingered with a shake of his head.

"Ding-ding-ding," Ramona teased, standing over the prone Alec. She held her hand at Alec and he took it slowly. "You're not yourself today," she observed, only slightly out of breath.

"Must be something with today; where IS everybody?" Alec said as he walked stiffly over to the bench under the window adjoining the wall to the ceiling. He sat down with a wet flop and dug his water bottle out from his bag under the bench.

"Not here, quite changing the subject," Ramona said, stepping one foot onto the bench. She bent forward a little and looked Alec in the eyes. "What's up?"

"I nearly died, like, two weeks ago!" Alec protested defensively with a laugh.

"Pssh," Ramona dismissed. She sat down next to Alec. "We've all nearly died. It comes with the territory of being a racer." She looked at Alec. "What's bugging you?"

"Nothing," Alec insisted, trying to smile harmlessly.

"You seem distracted," she pressed. Alec gave up and didn't say much else. He just focused on his water. Ramona watched him worriedly for a moment, then got her own bottle. She wiped the condensation off the plastic body and rubbed her face thoroughly. "Basin said Ratt tinkered with your settings," she said. Alec continued to stare off but he did a poor job of hiding his concern. "What'd you have him do?"

Alec looked at his bottle and heaved a sigh. "I'm not sure why I'm bothering to hide it, from you," he told her. She put her hand on his shoulder supportively. "Ratt thinks I have some kind of sensory echo, or that my brain is processing myself as a different person or something." He glanced at her and she looked worried but not disturbed. "I, uh, I sometimes feel like somebody's with me. Like..." He gestured amorphously with his hands. "Like...in the room."

Ramona nodded solemnly. She looked around the gym, stuffy and heated by the sun coming in from the windows. "Is there someone here now?"

Alec shook his head. "It comes and goes. A-and I know no one's there, but..." He kept himself from saying more. "Ratt ran diagnostics, I've done my own checking. It's just...it keeps happening," Alec confided to Ramona. He was whispering, not to be overheard by strangers but so he wouldn't hear himself, so he wouldn't have to accept how it sounded. "I keep getting this feeling like...like there's someone in the room with me. Like there's someone..." He shook his head and looked away. "I dunno." Ramona watched her friend struggle with this. "I really think I'm going, going mad, you know?"

At a loss, Ramona turned and looked into her sports bottle. She swished the water for a moment before asking, "Maybe you're doing this all

wrong," she proposed out of the blue. Alec looked at her and she at him. "Maybe you should stop fighting it."

"Stop fighting it?" he asked, not understanding.

"You resist everything," she told him. "Everything's gotta change. Maybe this is something you should...accept." Alec shook his head, growing strangely angry at the very idea. "Okay," Ramona redirected. She looked into the empty fighting gym, tiny motes floating in the golden light coming down through the windows over them. "So, you feel someone's in here with us."

Alec looked into the empty gym. He listened and he felt. "Not right now," he said with some thought.

"Are they just in the room with you, or are they moving or..." Ramona wasn't sure what to suggest, what questions to even ask.

"No, it's..." Alec was struggling too. And embarrassed. "It's like when you're sure somebody is going to speak, but then doesn't. It's like...it's like anticipation. It's not dread exactly, it's..." He shook his head. "I don't know how to describe it."

After a moment, Ramona posited, "Okay, how 'bout you try this: Write it down. Next time you're alone and you feel like somebody's with you, get out a journal or something – actually write by hand; use a tablet or even use actual paper and pen – and write it down. Write what it feels like. Try to be as specific as possible."

Alec sifted through the idea with a scoff but found it lingered with validity. "That's actually a good idea," he realized.

"What do you mean?" Ramona said before smacking him in the stomach. "All my ideas are good." She rose to resume exercising, clearly expecting him to follow.

A metro ride across the city gave Alec time to ponder Ramona's suggestion. He stared absently between the graffiti on the window to look out at the city. Moving this fast, there was a great sense and awareness of the curve of the giant sphere, of which the city occupied the interior. Looking out over the dense urban expanse, every building that wasn't brown and tan had yellowed away under the sun until it all melded together like so much dried mud.

Alec got off a few stops early and walked up the broken escalator to the small shopping district. A cloister of shops existed like huddled

vagrants around a fire, as though fearful of what lie in the abandoned streets beyond. Alec walked through the hum of neon signs and approached a tiny corner shop that was little more than a door in the corner of the shopping center.

Through the door was an extremely narrow passageway that opened into a cramped stationary shop. An older woman with a skeletal left hand made of brass smoked from a pipe as she very carefully turned the pages of a book. The shop smelled of old paper and stale dust.

The woman looked up from the book almost as old as she. "Yes?"

"I, uh, I'd like a notebook," Alec asked hesitantly.

The woman seemed inclined to believe this was a ploy or a prank. She took the pipe from her mouth and asked, "What kind of notebook?" Alec just shrugged.

The woman's intelligent eyes softened and she waved him over with the bit of her pipe. "Forgive me, son, I mostly sell narcotics." Her brazenness stunned Alec, but also amused him. "There's not a lot of money in stationery these days." That statement of regret and even resentment was one Alec had heard time and again.

The proprietor produced from under her desk a spiral-bound collection of paper pages. She opened the plastic covering and pages with light blue lines running horizontally. "How's this?"

Alec accepted the notebook and flipped through the empty pages. "This is perfect," he said, smiling slowly. He looked at her and asked, "Do I need a special pen?"

The woman closed her eyes and shook her head, as if proud to be able to answer, "No. Any pen that writes with ink will do. A pencil if you've got one."

Alec chortled at the impossibility of that. He flipped the notebook over and balked. "I'd forgotten how expensive paper is." The woman didn't argue, she just shrugged at the way of things. With a smile, he decided, "I think I'll take it."

In the early morning, just after dawn, Alec sat alone on the floor of his apartment, his back against his bed. He was staring through the doorway down the length of his place, through the doorway into the main room. The strange sense was back, stronger than ever. He kept glancing this way and that, certain someone or something was going to appear.

"H-hello?" he spoke to the apartment. He was afraid but not of someone else. He wasn't paranoid but worried. He wasn't scared of an intruder; he was used to crime. He wasn't scared of a ghost either. He was scared he was going mad. He was scared he had finally succumb to insanity.

Certain the fleeting feeling wouldn't evaporate on him as it had in the past, he took the notepad and sat it on his knee. With a pen, he began to write in dark blue letters, scribbling down words to vaguely but desperately describe what he was feeling. Worried. Someone else is here. Another presence. Grateful. Someone's just outside my vision. I can feel them.

Alec stopped.

"Grateful?" he whispered, staring at the outlier. He didn't recall writing it. It was his handwriting but whereas he mostly wrote in block letters, grateful was written almost cursive. His hand had written it but he had not. It was like he'd been in such a flurry to write the other words, he hadn't been paying attention and he'd written what someone else was saying.

Alec looked up and around at the room, as if he expected someone to admit to having written the word instead. Only the heat of the morning and the silence of his solitude was to be found.

Alec licked his nervous lips and put the pen to the paper. "Who's there?" he asked himself, trying to get a feel for the presence he hoped was just beyond his perception. He closed his eyes and tried to let his subconscious write. He kept his eyes shut until he felt he'd finished writing, then he looked down. Two words were written on the page.

I am

Alec took a long, slow breath, afraid he was confronting madness. He began to tear up, afraid of what this meant. "What are you?" he whispered. He released his hand, letting the pen draw the letters and words, as if on its own. He didn't move the writing implement, he let it be moved. And move it did.

Nothing, really

Reading those words, Alec's heart broke. So fixated on the unknown, he'd assumed malevolence. He'd trust to the likely evil of something beyond his own experiences. Now he felt a callous fool. He realized it had never occurred to him it could be the complete opposite.

"Why are you here?" Alec asked, ready again to let the pen do the writing.

I'm alone. I tried to find someone and I found you.

Alec smiled at the words, strangely flattered. "Me?" he asked with a self-conscious laugh. "Why me?"

I don't know. In all of creation, I found you

He felt, he genuinely felt, like the presence and voice that was driving his writing, was smiling. Alec felt hot and realized he was blushing. "I don't know what to say."

Anything

The strange presence seemed to beg, seemed almost desperate now.

*I'm so alone. I see nothing. I hear nothing. Please...say anything.
Anything at all.*

Alec was at a loss. "I don't know what to say." He tried to think of something but he had no idea what she would care to hear. He stammered in an attempt. He realized he thought the voice a she but he really had no idea. He didn't know what he was doing, he didn't know...

"I've got a race today," he told her, at a loss for anything else. He felt selfish, having nothing else to say except to talk about himself. He looked towards his window and the ugly world outside. "I'm hoping that if we win, maybe we can use it to get into a better position for the bracket elimination."

Racing...

Alec didn't know if the words were meant curiously or fondly. "Yeah, I own a racing team. We're professional. Or, you know, we're technically professional," he admitted. "I guess we're semi-pro." He laughed at his nervousness, aware it was getting worse the more he spoke to her.

It struck him as funny. "Her," he said, aware of his assumption. He looked into the light of the day, feeling strangely optimistic. "What's your name?" he asked with a smile like he was asking the sky.

My name is Samifel