

Cochlear

The panel slid away effortlessly at his touch, revealing a door hidden in the gridworked wall. Michael ducked his head as he passed through the gap to the other side, rolling his shoulders to ease stiff muscles. His eyes took in the lush surroundings; the wall melting away as if it had never existed.

"Neat trick."

The leaves rustled, and a young man stepped into view from behind a bush, a grin on his face.

"Knew I'd find you here," Michael replied, a hint of a smile he couldn't quite suppress sliding into reality. "And there's more where that came from."

"Oh?" The other smirked, a challenge playing about the corners of his eyes.

Michael rolled his eyes - and in the next moment, the forest had warped around them until salty spray splashed across both their faces and the sound of water crashing against sheer cliff walls roared in their ears. "'Oh', Tristan," and it was Michael's turn to smirk, raising his voice to be heard above the din.

Tristan laughed, raising his hands in mock defeat. "Okay, okay, now take us somewhere quieter!"

With a cocky grin on his face and a mock salute, Michael obliged.

"Quiet enough?" he asked, strolling along the cobblestone path. Stately, antiquated buildings stood in the distance, partly obscured by the trees that lined the pathway. Wood-slatted benches were interspersed under the trees' shade, and it was on one of these that Tristan was seated, legs stretched out in front of him, hands folded across his lap, leaning back easily as if he hadn't just been standing at the edge of a continent. He grinned; the sort of grin that indicated not-very-well hidden laughter. "Quiet enough, Miguel," he said, "although I didn't know this sort of place was your style."

A look of discomfiture fluttered across Michael's features for a moment before it was replaced with a mock frown. "Must be your stupid ideas rubbing off on me," he grumbled, but there was no real heat behind the words. "Looks like I need to go home and blow up a few more zombies."

"Poor zombies," Tristan remarks with a laugh as Michael takes a seat on the bench opposite of him. "So, why were you looking for me?"

"Felt like it," Michael grunted.

In the distance, the shrill chirp of a small bird was echoed by an even more distant reply. A breeze nosily shuffling the leaves on a tree tugged briefly at the hem of Tristan's shirt before fading away altogether. Michael said nothing, and Tristan spoke silence with him.

It was a muted clanging of bells and the sudden chatter of voices that startled the great bird of silence from its roost. Tristan started, looked up with widening eyes focused on Michael's face with too many questions to be answered in a century and in half a second - no, half that time, and halved again - Michael was on his feet, reaching across the narrow yet ever widening path towards those eyes still focused on his and -

- he jerked backward, before letting his body sag down into the chair, burying his face in both hands.

He'd failed again. *Again.*

He remained slumped like that for a few minutes, unmoving, before kicking back the chair and stalking from the room. The door slammed shut behind him, and then another - but already his pace had softened.

"Asleep, Tristan?" he called through a closed door. It was more for his own benefit than anything, but that was a thought he did not dwell on for long.

Michael stepped into the sparsely furnished room - and upon seeing that Tristan was indeed stretched out on the bed, VISOR still firmly in place - allowed himself a moment as he sank down against the wall, pulling his legs up to his chest like a child, hiding from the world.

The last few moments before the forced disconnect replayed themselves in his mind - he'd look at the log later, but being honest with himself, he wasn't expecting to find anything new in the code.

Again.

When Michael finally opened his eyes - which he'd forgotten he'd closed; relaxed his clenched jaw, balled fists - he saw Tristan staring at him with wide open eyes and a questioning smile on his lips, VISOR slipped off and discarded to the side.

"Something wrong, Miguel ah?" he asked.

Michael shook his head, forced a grin to his face. "No, nothing. Go back to sleep."

"'Nothing' does not make you look like a cat in labour, Miguel," Tristan replied, and Michael wanted to scream at him to *stop calling me that, that's not my name!* but being Michael and not seven years old, he merely forced a grin and wished that he'd programmed a [insert witty reply] script into his brain for times like this when it refused to function properly.

"Your nose looks like a cat in labour," was the best he could come up with and *yes* he was aware that made no sense and no you do not have to point that out to me Tristan and "Oh, just go back to sleep."

Of course something's wrong, he wanted to scream, as he walked out the door shutting it behind him. But *that* would be entirely silly and immature and not productive in any way and something that Tristan might have when he was drunk on girly drinks and he, Michael, was not Tristan. No, *might do*, Michael corrected himself.

But it was with Tristan slipping into the past tense that Michael strolled into the cafe. "The usual," he ordered with a dismissive gesture, all but falling into a chair. When the waiter didn't immediately leave to fill his order, Michael looked up to see an unfamiliar face staring at him.

"You're new," he said more than asked, uneasiness settling into the place behind his sternum.

"Impressive," the not-waiter-waiter said, taking the chair opposite of Michael. "A VN within the VR isn't something most people can do."

Michael watched the newcomer warily, his fingers tapping on the table in front of him on their own accord. "You're pretty impressive yourself, getting into my network," he commented glibly with far more confidence than he felt right now.

The boy turned large brown eyes on him and Michael was suddenly reminded of Tristan. "Don't worry, I'm not government -" and was the kid *laughing* at him?

"Good to know," he said - and who could blame him if his tone was a little dry? "I don't suppose you're going to get my coffee, are you?"

This time, the boy did chuckle. He swiped his fingers across a forearm, calling up an intsys. Michael watched as he keyed in commands - a moment later a cup of coffee sat steaming on the table, and the kid's waiter outfit had been replaced by a set of casual clothes.

"But this is *my* network," Michael grumbled, aware that he was whining. The coffee was good though, nothing out of the ordinary, maybe even an improvement, if anything.

"Milk and extra sugar," the kid cut in to his thoughts, and Michael had to suppress the urge to kick him under the table.

"How *did* you get in here?" Michael had to ask, somewhere between a third and half the cup later. "And do I know you?"

The boy just grinned and leaned back in the chair. All he needed was a cape and to lace his fingers together to make the perfect evil mastermind, Michael thought wryly. "It wasn't easy," he admitted, calling up his intsys again. "Data manipulation is impossible without this. Nice security system. It took me a while to figure out too."

"Thanks," Michael said reluctantly. "So if you're not government, then who are you and what are you doing in *my* network?" Setting up the security for his nested networks had taken Michael the better part of a month - seeing someone break it down and do as he pleased so simply grated at his nerves.

"To warn you." Any hint of mirth had disappeared from the kid's face, sending a chill down Michael's spine like a sudden cold snap in the early days of fall.

"Warn me?" he echoed; this was turning into some clichéd B film.

"You can't hold on forever, Miguel ah'," the boy continued as if Michael hadn't interrupted - but it was in another voice that Michael heard those words. His fingers tightened around the cup's handle, threatening to crush the ceramic into fine powder.

Michael stared. "You... How... Who *are* you?" *You know Tristan?* echoed in his thoughts, barely audible over his own pounding heart.

A ripple in the data, and Michael was alone in the cafe, his usual NPCs peopling the space. A slip of paper coming to rest on the table was the only proof that the past five minutes hadn't been just his imagination. Michael glanced at the string of ones and zeroes before tucking it into his pocket.

"Henry, huh?" he mused to himself.

His coffee had grown cold. He didn't bother stepping out of the cafe before terminating his own link.

The edge of the table cut uncomfortably into his arm, the VISOR feed biting into his cheek. Tristan was waiting for him when he finally pushed himself upright, letting his mind make the full transfer back into consciousness. Tristan, standing there with the same disapproving look on his face that Michael remembered from another time, another place. Huh, how long ago had it been now? One, three, five years? Ten years? No, that couldn't be it - Tristan was only twenty five, after all.

It was Tristan's equally disapproving voice that pulled him completely out of post-net haziness. "You brought me into the virtual network without my permission again, Miguel! I told you I don't like it when you do that."

I don't like it when you do that echoes in Michael's mind as he stands, rolling back stiff shoulder muscles. "Sorry," he grunts, before adding: "VN. No one calls it 'virtual network' except for you."

"You use too many strange words," Tristan says with a face. "The last time you signed me in you kept talking about int this and AI that- "

A groan, as Michael resisted the urge to perform a rendition of 'face, meet table'. "Intsys - interface system. And even you, Tristan the occasional idiot, should know what AI means."

"Artificial intelligence, but that's not the point. The point- "

"Shower." Michael cut in, not waiting for Tristan to finish. He tossed the VISOR onto the table, and left a confused Tristan silent behind him as he shut the bathroom door behind him.

Tristan was still standing by the desk when Michael emerged from the shower several minutes later, roughly towelling his hair dry. The way Tristan's brows drew together, and the slight but still discernible downturn of his mouth was almost enough to make Michael feel bad about snapping at him earlier. After all, it wasn't exactly Tristan's fault. No, logically, it wasn't Tristan's fault at all - except for that one part of Michael's mind that insisted that yes, it *was* Tristan's fault, *everything* was Tristan's fault.

"Look - " he began, and groaned because he wasn't *trying* to sound mean. In the end, he settled for an awkward pat on the shoulder - Tristan started, turned, and stared - and a quiet "sorry, Tristan," before letting himself drop onto the bed like a limp doll.

"Should I make a habit of expecting you?" Michael raised an eyebrow when he saw the now not-as-unfamiliar face sitting at his usual table.

The kid grinned. "Who knows?" he replied enigmatically, pulling his intsys out again with a brief swipe of his fingers. Moments later, two cups of coffee sat steaming on the table. Michael rolled his eyes and pulled up a chair.

"Henry, right?" Although it was more of a statement than a question. "Binary's a bit old-fashioned. You could've at least used hexadecimal."

He laughed, typing a string of commands into his intsys. "There's more there than just my name," he remarked, snatching a slip of fluttering paper from the air before handing it to Michael. "This might come in handy."

Michael pocketed it with a glance - he could take a thorough look later. "And is there a reason you're here today, or do you just enjoy my company that much?"

Henry faked a hurt look, and Michael's mind suddenly jumped back to Tristan again. *Focus* he told himself. *This isn't just about Tristan - okay, so maybe it is, but -*

"That's not the point?"

"Then what is - oh for god's sake; are you *always* this infuriating?" Michael ground out, wondering if he'd really said that aloud or if Henry was secretly a mind reader.

"Not really." Henry smiled cheekily, taking a sip of coffee. "And can't it be both? You're smart, a genius programmer, kind of awkward, and you happen to be - "

"No stop, stop. Stop right there." Michael stuck his hand out to emphasize his words. He had a good idea of what Henry had about to say, and he didn't need to hear it said aloud. Not by him, at least. Henry, this stranger who he'd just met, was probably the last person Michael wanted to hear it from - after Tristan, that was. Tristan. Henry. Right...

"So tell me, do you - "

"Do I know Tristan?" Henry finished for him - and Michael didn't even have the audacity to be surprised anymore. The kid stared at him unblinking, and Michael found himself staring back at wide open eyes - which was why he almost missed it when the kid's data stream flickered, his avatar wavering with it.

That was all the opening Michael needed. He slid out his own intsys - going back to the basics turned out to be more efficient when doing data captures like these - and frantically keyed in code after code. This Henry had too strong of a security usually - he didn't know when he'd get another chance like this. There...! The crack in the data link. Not a huge security hole, but if he could just -

"If you wanted a look, you could've just asked." A hand reached over Michael's shoulder and gently encircled his wrist pulling it away, the movement disconnecting the contact between his fingers and the data manipulation he was working at. Michael jerked his hand free, his neck snapping around only to see Henry behind him, a lopsided smile on his face.

"But you're - " *over there*, he began, the protest dying in his throat as he realised that the Henry sitting opposite of him had taken on the distinct, blank-eyed demeanour of a disconnected NPC. An NPC that

soon flickered out of existence, the Henry behind him taking his former seat, looking far more tired than he had been moments earlier.

Tired, and older, Michael thought. Or maybe that was just a consequence of the 'tired'. "I saw him," Henry was saying. The cup in front of him was empty, reminding Michael of his own still untouched coffee. "A couple times. Saw you too every now and then."

It took Michael a few moments to realise that Henry was answering his earlier question. "Stalker," he grumbled - but Henry wasn't done.

"I saw you here," he continued, a jerk of his thumb indicating the cafe around them.

"Yeah?"

A frown - and Michael's heart inexplicably dropped with worry - that just as quickly disappeared. "I told you I'm not here to turn you in," Henry said with a shake of his head. "But," and he paused with another frown before continuing, "there's a reason why you're not supposed to code memories like this."

"What do you know," Michael grumbled, Henry's words biting far more than he would've liked them to.

Henry shrugged, and stood suddenly. "I have to go," he said, looking towards the door.

"Yeah yeah, don't let me keep you," Michael replied - and didn't wait for Henry to leave before warping his location to the access point in the apartment.

"Memories," he muttered under his breath, as he accessed the shortcuts in the terminal with a quiet 'sorry, Tristan', running the code that would link the other man's consciousness into the VR and relocate his avatar onto the bed so he wouldn't freak out too much when he woke up. "Memories," he repeated with a snort, before slipping the visor onto his own head, letting his consciousness fall into the VR as well.

He blinked once, twice, as he found himself in the white room, taking the customary second or two to readjust to the avatar within the VR. "Memories, huh," he said for a third time, before dismissing the matter from his mind with a shrug, sliding open the panel and ducking through.

It was the cafe.

"Brings back memories, doesn't it, Miguel?" And there was Tristan, at the table that Michael had been sitting at only minutes earlier.

Well damn. Funny how things worked out. "Sure. Too bad I seem to have forgotten them."

Tristan made a face. "You only forget it because you spilled coffee and made a fool of yourself with that waitress - why are you staring at me like that?"

"No, it's nothing." Michael shook his head. "Really? It's a good thing you're here to jog my memory then - "

"But I can't remember the rest," Tristan interrupted, frowning. "It's strange. Like there's a hole in my memory and *why are you looking at me like that, Michael?* Do I have something on my face?"

Focus Michael, focus. Look, everything's normal and if Tristan didn't know you he would probably think you were a creep so *stop staring* - he's still looking at you, Michael, you better stop staring and say something - "Your nose," Michael said, "it's big." *Shut up yes I know that was lame*, he snarled at the voice in his head that was about to say just that.

The frown didn't leave Tristan's face, though. "Something's wrong," he said, and Michael cursed him for having his occasional astute moments.

"Let's go somewhere else," Michael suggested - warned, really, because in the next moment, they were both standing on a well worn forest path regardless of whether Tristan wanted it or not.

Considering the stormy look on Tristan's face, that had been a 'did not want'. "You have a lot to explain," he said.

Michael ignored him, and started walking instead, hands in pockets. A sigh, and reluctant footsteps indicated that Tristan was following. It was late spring or early summer - the air pleasantly warm but not yet unbearably hot under the shade of the leafy canopy. The absence of any sort of motion except for them was reassuring - his security nets were still secure.

The relative silence tugged at Michael's thoughts like the teasing of wool into yarn. Tristan had *remembered*. But why? *How*. A sudden thought like a lump in the yarn stopped him short (Tristan's muffled complaint as he walked into Michael's back) but no, it couldn't have been - except the coincidence of this timing with Henry was too much of just a coincidence... or was it?

A hand on his shoulder, and then he was spun around and staring at Tristan's face with his too big nose and upset looking eyes. "You're avoiding something, Miguel," Tristan said.

Michael stepped back, pushing Tristan's hand away. He pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut. Why was it so complicated, he wondered with a groan. *You were the one who made it this complicated, Michael*, a voice inside his head that sounded suspiciously like his own pointed out. "I didn't have a choice," he muttered - aloud, it seemed.

The upset diminished and the frown was back. "What did you do this time? The university didn't like it very much the first time you hacked into their network in the middle of exams."

"How - " Michael began to say, but a rustling of leaves interrupted his thoughts. "Hide," he muttered, shoving Tristan behind a tree, extending the intsys to its full length so he could use both hands to type. The rustling continued for another moment, before dying down completely - leaving Michael with only a hint of the access address.

A groan came from behind him. "You *are* doing something you're not supposed to be doing again, aren't you?" Tristan asked as he stepped back into the clearing. "That's why you've been acting strangely since logging in, isn't it?"

"Yeah..." Michael replied, distracted, parsing the signal pattern. The intrusion style looked familiar, like

something he'd seen recently -- "Henry...?" he mused aloud.

"You know Henry?" Tristan sounded surprised, looking over Tristan's shoulder at the screen of the intsys.

"*You* know Henry?" Michael parroted back.

Tristan shrugged, taking a step back. "Maybe? Um, let's see... he transferred in during middle school from overseas, but I lost contact with him after he graduated from high school. It might be someone else though - it's just that I bumped into him yesterday and will you stop staring at me like that? You've been doing a lot of that today and it scares me a little."

"Yeah, yeah... I was just surprised," Michael said dismissively.

"Were you friends?" he asked curiously. "I never heard you talk about him."

Tristan grinned. "Oh, that's because he was two years my senior, so by the time I met you when you spilled coffee over my notes, I'd almost forgotten about him."

"Will you stop bringing that up," Michael groaned, although his heart was doing excited leapfrogs that Tristan *remembered*. A flood of relief at Tristan's words. "Probably a different Henry, since there's no way he's two years older than you."

"Funny you bring that up," Tristan said, suddenly thoughtful. "It was like he hadn't aged at all since I last saw him..."

Just a coincidence, Michael reminded himself firmly - but the thing was, he didn't believe in coincidences like this. Besides, hadn't Henry only mentioned that he'd 'seen' Tristan around? Although talking to him did involve seeing him, Michael supposed. "Huh." A noncommittal grunt when he realised that Tristan was expecting a response. "Maybe it's the same person, then." Although why Henry was trying to get in was beyond him.

Another rustle of leaves - and Michael couldn't help himself from glancing around him even though he had a feeling stopping Henry wasn't worth the effort. He'd focused so much on the security of the first layer, he hadn't bothered doing anything extra on this one. If Henry had gotten through the first one, Michael doubted he'd be able to stop him from cracking the last layer of security either.

"So, uh, why did you suddenly say Henry's name?" Tristan said - or Michael *thought* he said, the last two words being eclipsed by an explosion.

"The hell!?" A yell of surprise, as he promptly shoved Tristan into the undergrowth. That sure as hell wasn't Henry, because this style of penetration could only mean one thing. That, and the fact that there was a fucking huge fireball bursting into a firey cage around them and fuck fuck *fuck* what the *hell!*?

How the *fuck* had government gotten in?

"Do not move" - and oh god they even had the booming voice down, they really had their dramatics planned out - "or we may be forced to take drastic measures."

Michael straightened, eyeing his surroundings. If it had been anyone else, their intimidation tactics might have worked. *Might*. "Yeah? Like what?"

Damn it, how the hell had this happened? Michael cursed silently, his mind already working on altering the coding. He swore under his breath. The cage wasn't all for show - data manipulation was getting harder by the moment.

"This will be much less painful for you if you do not struggle," the voice was saying.

"That's what she said," he quipped. Tristan stirred behind him - Michael did his best to telepathically tell him *not to move* because this was difficult enough as it was. He worried at his lip as he did another quick visual check.

He could see the shadow of a figure now. Barely. And... they didn't look pleased. Huh. Really. Which meant he should keep on talking, right? Right. "I heard you guys were a bunch of sadistic jerks though." What the hell was he even saying and *stay down Tristan* I'm almost done...! "I didn't think you'd let up a chance-- *fuck!*"

A bolt of pain shot through the base of his neck, travelling down his spine. He heard a definite whimper from Tristan this time - and the shadow went from being a shadow to an actual person. Generic government avatar, he guessed.

"You're right, we don't let go of chances like this," the guy was saying, a glint of interest appearing as he noticed Tristan in the background and this was all so cheesy that it would've been funny if it didn't hurt so much to *think* let alone perform data manipulation without the use of an intsys.

Although, there wasn't that much more they could do even if he did use it, was there? Shooting a cocky grin at the government guy, Michael slid out the intsys, and accessed the shortcuts programmed that would finish the job and get Tristan out through both layers of the VR.

With a crackle, he felt Tristan's presence disappear behind him - and not a moment too soon as a second fireball landed where Tristan had been seconds earlier, the explosion throwing him off his feet. "Are you *trying* to kill me?" he muttered, scrambling upright.

"Killing you would defeat the point" - and by this point, the whole almighty booming voice thing was getting a bit annoying - "but we did warn you."

Warn me about what, Michael had been about to say, when the most excruciating pain exploded what felt like inside his brain. His fingers dug into his skull as he dimly registered falling to his knees. So this was what they meant by data capture. He'd always been curious. In a "I want to know but I'd rather it never happen" sort of curious. Ah... as long as he'd gotten Tristan out, he could handle whatever they threw at him... Probably.

A slight release of pressure, and Michael pulled himself back up, leaning against a tree. "That... wasn't so bad," which would have sounded a lot more bad-ass if he hadn't been breathing so heavily. He was ready for the next wave - he'd programmed a shortcut for temporary local security just in case of scenarios like this - but not for the next, or the next.

"Are you fucking kidding me," he murmured. Already, his surroundings were dimming, as he fought to

keep his consciousness in his own plane. He stumbled to his feet, fumbling for his intsys, even though he was feeling the futility of it already. *How* still echoed in his mind, even if it probably didn't matter by this point - an obvious answer jiggling at his consciousness - or what was left of it, at any rate.

And, speak of the devil - "Henry," he breathed, his voice horribly jagged. Somewhere in the distance, but close enough to still be seen - and Michael took a deep breath as he saw the kid pull something out of his pocket and point it at him.

He didn't hear the bang. He didn't feel it when it hit. All he felt was the sticky warmth flowing over his fingers a few moments later, and the black curtain that fell through his mind.

A voice - no, two voices:

I warned you, didn't I?

You can't hold on forever, Miguel
Michael

"I... don't have a choice."

Michael stirred from the darkness what felt like an eternity later.

Tristan was sitting there, when he blearily opened his eyes.

"Why?" Michael thought he heard him say, before it all faded out again.

"Ah, well, it's my fault," Tristan was saying when Michael faded back in, but this wasn't what Tristan should sound like - words sparse and breaths laboured.

Michael shook his head, and gripped Tristan's hand. "Don't say that," he snapped. "It's not your fault unless I say so - "

Tristan slipped him a note across the table when the professor had his back turned. "Lunch, usual place?" the slip asked.

Michael rolled his eyes, jotted down 'old fashioned', and slid it back.

The 'usual place' was a cafe tucked into a back alley that Michael had discovered in his 2nd year of high school. It was also where, one unfortunate spring day, he'd happened to knock a cup of coffee across a perfect stranger's notes. "Don't worry about it," the stranger had said, and then -

"Fancy seeing you here," says the stranger whose name is Tristan. Bells that signal the change of hour rang across the campus, startling the birds from the trees that lined the main path.

"You go to my school?"

"Yes?" And this - wide eyed and laughing - is how Tristan should be.

And one day, as they're sitting on the benches on either side of the cobblestone path, Michael wonders if he should point out: "You do realise that my name isn't actually Miguel, don't you?"

Tristan frowns, thinks, before he says: "What are you talking about? Isn't it - " and then he stops as his mouth forms a perfect "oh!" and Michael almost wants to laugh but Tristan gets there first and says "I like 'Miguel', so I'll keep calling you that."

(And this is where Michael realises that this cannot be real, cannot be happening, because this is where Tristan is supposed to glitch because of the bug in the memory function and brings the entire VR down -)

"But I had to," Michael protests weakly.

There is a faint wail of sirens somewhere nearby, panicked screams still lingering in the streets between the accident and the hospital. Henry tilts his head at Michael. "Really?" he asks, all of five years old.

If Michael finds this strange, he doesn't say anything. No, but what he does say is -

"You shot me," a certain sense of horror mixed in with wonderment tracing through his words.

Mini-Henry just smiles - and there is a bang.

There is a bang.

He jerks awake; he must have dozed off. Lines of code stare at him unchangingly and unforgivingly incomplete. He sees how much he still has to do - groans, and face faults.

Tristan yelps - there is another bang as the door swings open too far yet again - and returns a few seconds later with someone else fretting all the time about how it's been *days* since Michael's come out of his room and Michael whines right back as the someone drags Michael out by the back of his shirt - which is when they trip over a stray pair of pants and go down in a tangle of long limbs and Tristan's eyes widen as -

Tristan's eyes widen - his hands tighten around the steering wheel and he swerves and Michael can only watch as he

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Tristan asks - and he is whole and perfect (except for the part where his nose is still too big.)

What did he want to talk about? Michael stared and held back the words he wanted to say, the stories that threatened to spill out - until they did spill out, tumbled through his mouth until he was talking like a teenage girl about the assignments Tristan missed, about the flowers by the building (but he doesn't mention that they weren't for him), about the time when the waitress at the curry store down the street flirted with him and above all he talks about how *you're not gone, you can't be gone you're here and*

"I'm sorry."

"If you're sorry, then why don't you do something about it?"

Michael groans and face faults - and finds the *deja vue* horribly jarring. "Why are you in my head I never said you could be in my head," he complains, but Henry doesn't move from where he is.

"I like it here," he says with a cheeky grin, before his expression sobers. "We all make mistakes - "

"Tristan is *not* a mistake!"

"But what matters is that you fix them," Henry continues, as if he hadn't been interrupted. He floats a little, and pulls something out from overhead. "Did you have a chance to look at what I gave you?" Michael's hand goes to his pocket - except it's obviously empty. "Never mind, look at it later. Here, catch."

Michael obliges, snatching the ball tossed his way out of the air. "Did you just give me something from my own mind?" he asks.

"Maybe," Henry laughs.

"Henry?" a third voice suddenly appears - and Michael sits up and takes notice because:

"Ah, Tristan! Just in time, haha. Well, I'll leave you two to it - Oh, and Michael? When you cut me off earlier? I was going to say that you 'happen to be the *second* person who's successfully created an integrated data AI'."

"Somehow, he seems a little strange," Tristan says, strolling over with his hands tucked into his pockets. "Who cares if you're the first or second, as long as you succeeded, right?"

"I didn't succeed," Michael replies so quietly that Tristan frowns and struggles to hear. "Besides - "

There is a bang, and the car swerves. The mother scoops up the child who had run into the street but there is a scream nonetheless - and it takes a moment for the focus of horrified onlookers to shift to the car. No, not to the car, but to the screams. To the brightly painted walls and to the shattered sunflower on the door. To the small broken bodies tossed aside like rag dolls.

Not to the car.

Only he brings his focus to the car - because it has never left the car because the colour is familiar, the scratch on the right door is familiar, the shape is familiar even crumpled as it is and more importantly the man hunched over the wheel is more than just familiar -

- the timing is horrible. A train derailed? Why now, Michael wanted to yell. I don't care, just, don't just walk away - !

"We're busy, he might not make it anyway," a passing man in a white coat says and Michael is struck by the unfamiliar urge to hit him - but what sticks is he might not make it anyway and he hurries back and -

"Just a bit longer," he pleads to no one in particular, as he hides the two of them in an empty corridor. His mind made up, accepting that 'he might not make it anyway', Michael finds his thoughts surprisingly clear. He slips his portable VISOR over the bandages on Tristan's head - and is almost surprised when it works. He pulls out his enterm, fingers tapping restlessly against the keys as it boots up, hooking it so the VISOR had direct access. "Don't you dare disappear on me," he growls under his breath, and wonders how much time he has before Tristan's laboured breathing stops altogether. A bud of panic begins to bloom in some chest cavity before he forcibly nips it away.

His fingers fly over the keys, mind racing, everything coming together perfectly. Strange - he'd written most of this as a side project one day while he'd been bored in class as a 'what if' and 'just for the hell of it' - he'd never thought it would actually come in handy. Never thought it could come in handy, third law of the 'net and all that. Not to mention, no one had done it before. A personality matrix, the memory array, encoding the states. A groan from Tristan - "Don't you dare," Michael repeats.

It's almost done, he's sure it's almost done - "he's" almost done.

Tristan stirs. His eyes open. Michael stops, stares. His fingers, however, do not stop their frantic activity, his mind continuing to parse line after line of coding.

"What are you doing?" he asks - and Michael pauses for a split second.

"Just shut up," he replies instinctively - and realises that's probably the wrong thing to say.

A terse silence follows, and Michael can feel Tristan's eyes on him. His fingers falter for a moment, as he meets Tristan's gaze.

Tristan smiles. "It's alright," he says, and then -

You can't hold on forever, Miguel...

1.

"Oi, he's finally awake! Michael you asshole, do you realise how worried we were!?"

He was in his room. His actual room. The only one he couldn't just sign out off. He groaned - but when he tried to sit up, he found that his limbs didn't seem to be wired up to his nerves correctly.

"Do you even realise how long you've been out?" Michael answered with another groan. "A week! It's been a week!"

A week...

"...!" Michael jerked upright - hitting his head against the wall when still nothing worked and he slumped back down. "Tristan... I have to - "

There were people in his room. There shouldn't have been people in his room. There were people in his room who were suddenly avoiding Michael's eyes and looking awkwardly at each other.

"Michael," one of them began awkwardly - Dominic, Michael recalled after a moment.

"Tristan's not... here."

Michael shook his head. "That's not - I need to go back." He pushed the blankets off and slid off the bed, wondering when he'd ended up in it in the first place. "He's waiting."

Dominic cleared his throat uncomfortably. "It's been almost ten years, Michael - "

"That's not it," Michael interrupted. They didn't know. He wasn't gone. Tristan was still... here.

Someone grabbed his shoulders and turned him around. The blurriness of memories were slowly returning, faces finally matching up with names now. "Tristan was our friend as well, but you have to let go. I'm sure he's moved on, so..."

Michael shook his head, pushed them away. "I don't want to hear it - "

"You can't hold on forever, Michael."

The edge of the table cut uncomfortably into his arm, the VISOR feed biting into his cheek. Tristan was waiting for him when he finally pushed himself upright, letting his mind transfer into consciousness. Tristan, standing there with the same disapproving look on his face that Michael remembered from another time, another place.

"You brought me into the virtual network without my permission again, Miguel!" Tristan protested, but this time, Michael cut him off.

"Let's go for a walk," he suggested - and he could see the confusion struggling in Tristan's features. "A virtual walk," he amended. "It's more interesting."

Tristan stared at him like he had grown an extra head, before he finally nodded.

They entered the network through the forest that had bordered the school campus. A faint look of fear flitted across Tristan's face, and Michael couldn't help but suppress a shudder as well - the incident hadn't been long enough gone for him to have forgotten. Tristan shot him a worried look and an unspoken question. Michael shrugged. "I think we're safe. I found a gift." His hand went to his pocket, fingering the slip of paper that was there.

They didn't stay there long, the unease far outweighing the usual calm the place brought. It had been one of the few good things of having chosen a university out in the middle of nowhere. They visited the city next - its windows strung with holiday lights, the storefronts crammed with sale items. A sign proclaiming a special on tech parts caught Michael's eye, but Tristan tugged him along, pointing excitedly at bright red letters reading "LIMITED TIME OFFER" and something about shirts and vests and Michael's mind blanked. He rolled his eyes, but followed anyway. A zoo - the hippopotamus yawns at them and the giraffes ignore them altogether, enjoying its midday snack. The beach is empty, and Michael takes the opportunity to push Tristan into the lake, prompting an all out water fight. They retire inside as the sun sets, a fire crackling in the fireplace.

"That was fun," Tristan laughed, fingers wrapped about a mug of tea. He looked at Michael thoughtfully for a moment before asking: "Could we go to one more place?"

"Yeah, sure," Michael replied. "Where?"

Salty spray splashed against his face, the waves crashing against the cliffs below loud in his ears. He shot Tristan a curious look, wondering why he wanted to come here of all places.

"No reason," Tristan said simply. "I thought it would be nice."

"Nice?"

Tristan hummed in response. "Mm. As a memory."

The word hit Michael in the gut like the grille of a truck, and he had to struggle to maintain his composure. Tristan, however, wasn't done.

"You disappeared," he was saying. "Henry visited, by the way. He said you probably wouldn't be around for a while."

"He did?" There wasn't much more for him to say.

Tristan nodded, and the sounds of falling water retook the conversation once more.

Michael's fingers brushed against the paper again, as he swallowed his heart back down until it rested somewhere behind his stomach, even as its pulse rose. "Let's go back," he suggested - except as usual, it was less of a suggestion and more of a warning. Tristan was not waiting there when he pushed himself upright, mind transferring into consciousness. He wasn't surprised. He found Tristan in the bedroom, sitting cross-legged on the bed.

"I..." Michael started to say, but the words stuck in his throat.

"This is good-bye, isn't it?" Tristan didn't seem worried at all, a smile on his face.

Michael nodded - and terminated the link.

"So you're going to do it?" Henry idly tosses the ball in one hand, not paying Michael much mind.

"Seven-two, one-oh-one, seven-eight, one-one-four, eight-nine," Michael recites. "72. This isn't a physical address, is it?"

Henry laughs, and tucks the ball into his pocket. "You got me," he admits. "Although it took you longer than I thought. But you're right - I don't exist."

Michael eyes the dust around him, and nods. "I couldn't hold on forever," he says, answering Henry's question.

"We all make mistakes," Henry laughs. "It's only human, after all."