

Chapter 1: Second Try

“WARNING: All scanned objects will be printed. By scanning yourself, you accept that you can and will be printed in another time, place, and situation. No outer relations, statuses, or property can be guaranteed aside from all those explicitly scanned alongside your person.”

-The Society of Preserving Humanity, Shuttle Printer foreword.

The first thing Cristo notices is his dead body on the floor. Not his own body- he’s standing up straight-, but the body on the ground is decidedly a Cristo. Scruffy wet black hair, pocked mexican skin, and of course, a jumpsuit labelled ‘San Dimas Penitentiary’, with the sleeve just short enough show the faded track marks on his arm. The only two differences between Cristo and the body on the floor are the fact that it’s on the floor, and there’s a bullet hole in the head. He takes a small step to the side, as to not get the growing pool of blood on his shoe.

It’s not long to look over where he is. Dead body aside, the janitorial staff deserves a vacation and a bonus for how clean everything is. Blue lights flood the hallway of sorts, the only other light source being a large embedded screen spanning from ceiling to marble-esque floor. Opposite the television displaying a menu of paraphernalia is a set of alcoves, stretching as far as the eye can see until the hall bends out of sight around the corner.

This only makes the other man in the room all the more conspicuous. A light-skinned gentleman, wearing something in the *shape* of an officer’s uniform, but in the *color* of the clearance rack at a clown’s fabric store. And to add to the unsettling nature of his image, he stands notably less than four feet tall, his eyes wandering around the room, settling on Cristo intermittently. Waiting.

“Expecting something?” Cristo asks.

The short man looks at the body on the floor, and to Cristo. “A reaction, to be honest.”

Cristo motions to himself. “This *is* the reaction.” Even after all the years, Cristo could list at least one drug combination that results in this kind of trip. Though, in all fairness, the garishly dressed midget is a new twist. “Got a name?”

“Kilo Sumain-Gupta,” he responds, his voice sounding oddly accentless for such a name.

“Alright, good to hear, Kilo. Followup question,” Cristo says, pointing to his dead body on the ground. “Is that me?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Let’s skip to the million-dollar question, Kilo: *why* is my dead body on the ground?”

“You behaved in a hostile manner. I reacted accordingly.” Kilo glances at the body on the floor. “You’re taking *this* very well, in comparison.”

“I’ve seen some shit,” Cristo admits. “I don’t frighten easily, no offense. It’s a little tough to get me to act ‘hostile’.”

Kilo sizes Cristo up and down, nodding. “You might be right. After I explained that your wife and son are dead, you-”

“Excuse me?” Cristo says, his brow furrowing and nose flaring. He steps forward, but

Kilo takes a step on the backfoot, hand already halfway to his chest pocket. "See? *That's* closer to the reaction I was expecting."

Cristo catches his breath and stands up straight, exhaling to keep calm. He stretches his arms down to his side. "*I'm good*. What are *you* talking about?"

Kilo motions all around him. "This is... the future," he says, a little hesitantly, as if it's weird to introduce one's current environment as thus. "Welcome. But, by virtue of *time passing*, your family does not exist anymore."

Anger bubbles up in the taller man, slowly figuring out that the other isn't joking. "I met my wife this morning."

Kilo raises a finger. "You met your wife the morning of the day in which *you were scanned*."

"Scanned?" Cristo seethes, confusion bleeding through his words. "I'm not a fucking PDF file, I was in an MRI!" As far as Cristo knew, it was an MRI, and for two thousand dollars, he wasn't going to ask questions to get booted from the medical trial.

Kilo looks up in confusion, but as the collar in his neck lights up and emits a small sample of muffled sounds, he nods in acceptance. "Well, you stepped in a very *advanced* MRI machine, that day. And today, you're stepping out of a very advanced *Printer*," he says, alluding to the alcove directly behind Cristo.

Cristo looks around himself, reexamining the alcove that goes nowhere, the flawless copy of his body on the floor, and the sickening reality that is slowly telling him that he's not just hallucinating on the fluids in the immersion tank of that scanner in which he laid down. Worry sets in. "Where am I? What time is it?"

Kilo smiles at the delight of answering simple- to him- questions. "You're aboard the Shuttle Printer Arrignee. Exact time is tricky, but we're about three hundred gigaTicks into the Second Halfling Empire."

Cristo mouths the word *gigaTick* with a lifted brow, only for a small light to glimmer around the inside of his neck collar, and a small robotic voice chiming 'A gigaTick is equivalent to approximately thirty Earth years'.

Cristo twitches at the translator somehow sewn into his collar. "The f-? Nevermind." Cristo takes the device at its word while the two cogs in his head capable of math grind together. "So, year 6000?"

Kilo looks up in confusion, waiting for his own translator to explain what a *year* is. "I pity your Mathematics teacher."

"What the hell is a Halfling, anyway? You?"

"Yes," Kilo replies dryly. "What did you *think* a Halfling is?"

Cristo shrugs. "Like, half-Human, half-Dragon or something. You're just like, a midget."

"Sorry to disappoint," Kilo mutters.

"So you guys run the world?"

"We run the solar system; there's always worlds beyond." His eye twitches, lip turning up, like he's mad to not be ruling the galaxy.

Cristo nods his head, trying to process everything. "We sent people outside the Milky Way?"

"We're outside the Milky Way," Kilo says defensively. "Welcome to the Kestrel Solar System."

Cristo flinches, looking around, his two brain cells at work once more. "Okay, so: I'm not on Earth. I'm not in the Milky Way at all. The my wife and my son are dead. I never got to see them grow old. And the *entire* solar system is run by the Lollipop Guild, headlined by the mascot of a tie-dye pride parade who recently *SHOT* me because I suffered a panic attack?"

Kilo nods along, waiting for the translation of the insults to scan before agreeing more concretely. There might be something to be said about how Halflings take short jokes, but Kilo appears accepting. "Correct."

"Then why the fuck am I here?" The only thing keeping Cristo from tackling the short man before him is the clear precedent laying on the ground, whose blood puddle has now reached Cristo's feet for the second time.

"Oh," Kilo says with a cheerful grin. "We're providing you Humans a society of your own to make. Apparently, the Empire's Council felt somewhat remorseful that we've had a monopoly on the populace for so long."

"What?"

"Your entire species is being leveraged for a pet project!" Kilo's eyes light up, his mouth incapable of hiding a subtle shit-eating grin. He jumps as if spurred on by a cattle prod, skipping towards the screen. "Let me provide a visual aid." He taps away at the screen, the display warping to his miniscule stature as he browses through a menu that may as well be an online store. He selects a large electric knife and a squeegee, and with a swift tap of the 'Print' button in the corner, one of the alcoves comes alight. Spiders strings spin within it, multiplying at an insane clip, until a tornado of strands weaves the two items into existence from thin air in seconds flat. "The Second Halfling Empirical Complex Council, or SHEC for short, will grant your group temporary access to *this* Shuttle Printer, the Arrignee. Now, this is just the Main *Inner* Printer," he says, grabbing both of the items, and tapping an alcove's edge to hollow out the floor within it to some unknown garbage chute. "The Arrignee itself is eight kilometers tall, two kilometers wide, and can travel about nine meters per second at base speed, capable of printing anything within its size, with molecular accuracy." With the caress and care of a man cleaning up dogshit or scraping a burnt dinner into the trash, Kilo begins slicing the corpse on the floor into chunks, sweeping each fleshy cut into the chute, cleaning up each section of the floor with the squeegee.

"Wow," Cristo says, watching prime Cristo deli cutlets dropping down a seemingly endless shaft. "Not big on funerals or anything, huh?"

"Hmm?" Kilo pauses while his translator flickers alight. He scrunches his nose upon learning. "You people celebrate *after* someone dies?"

Cristo motions to the remaining third of his yet swept corpse, incredulous. "Yeah, most people don't plan when they die."

Kilo stares up at Cristo like he's the crazy one here, then shrugs, and continues his cleaning along with his explanation. "You can print whatever society you like- within some reason- and once yours is large enough, you'll meet the other groups that were given the same opportunity on this planet."

"How many others?"

Kilo pauses mid-slice and stares into the distance. "Five. Sorry, four others. Five total." He continues carving up the last of first-Cristo's corpse, scooting the head with his foot before kneeling down to properly wipe away the last of the bloodstains. He throws the tools down the

hole and, and casually wipes his hands on his coat- *ain't like it'll get any uglier*- before letting out a breath and smile. "So, ready for the tour?"

Chapter 2: Hunger

The Arrignee can best be described as two hotel skyscrapers with a third wider one atop it. Despite only housing the small group assigned to it, the Shuttle Printer is built to comfortably accommodate approximately 300,000 people, of any species. And as Cristo follows the short man through the halls, onto the multiple elevators, along the conveyor belt walkways, past sleeping beds, fornication beds, lounges, kitchens, cafeterias, pools, bathrooms, locker rooms, shower halls, spas, medical centers, schools, libraries, police halls, conference rooms, auditoriums, hologram stages, shooting ranges, clinics, daycares, dispensaries, android calibration stations, horn polishing salons, biometric diagnostic machines, empty warehouses, full warehouses, courts, fields, playgrounds, parlors, decks, observatories, garages, and even to the hangar hosted amid the environmental control system on the rooftop, he comes to realize that SHEC, for whatever they may be, are beyond thorough in their definition of *comfortable*.

"Jesus Cristo," Cristo says, admiring the fountain in the middle of a church, laced with marble floors, waxed mahogany pews, and an organ made of onyx and gold in the rafters. "There anything *not* in this place?"

"Green lighting," Kilo utters with a snarl. He quickly snaps back to a professional demeanor. "Any other locations you wanted to see?"

"I was done after seeing the Showers. I was just naming random shit to see if it was in here," Cristo jokes.

Kilo blows a bit of air from his nostrils and straightens up. "Everyone will be meeting tomorrow morning to discuss how to use the Printer. Your Sleeping Quarters are on Level Whale." With no fanfare, he dismisses himself, his feet echoing along the floor as he vanishes around the corner.

Cristo makes no attempt to catch up to him, but instead sits in one of the pews, staring at the fountain. A few thoughts dawn on him, but out loud, only one comes out: "What time is it?"

"It is currently 67 Percent, or approximately 1600 in the afternoon," his collar translates. "Be aware, this planet exhibits a 21.3 hour day cycle."

Great. More fractions. Cristo ponders where to go next. The Sleeping Quarters for a fresh change of clothes? The Showers? The gym? But even without a rigorous train of thought, there's no denying the obvious, and best choice.

The Cafeteria is up to SHEC standards, with multiple row of buffet tables and booths separating the dining area from the kitchen, thankfully stocked with a bevy of foods- albeit all in freeze-dry packaging and watertight canisters. Despite being produced by a tangle of strings and spat from an alcove less than half a day ago, he stares in amazement at the microwave-sized apparati that transform his colorful-colored bricks into hydrated loaves of bread, heated meats, and spicy condiments. He's halfway through rubbing a miraculously crispy leaf of lettuce as another Shuttle member walks by.

An older, older, older woman stands in bright orthopedic sneakers, with a pinstripe pantsuit stretching over a tall frame of pale white skin. Her figure is a starving minimalist's collection of veins and bones, topped with hair that reminds Cristo to check for some salt and pepper before starting his sandwich. A frame freeze upon eye contact, she continues forward, respecting his personal space. "Hello." her voice chimes younger than her wrinkles would lead, coated in a gentle posh british accent. "You wouldn't happen to have some knowledge about which of these things is a *coffee-maker*, would you?"

She cracks a friendly smile, the creases in her face creating a ripple of lines in her face as Cristo looks up from his lettuce. She seems nice enough, but Cristo can't help notice the suit being a trilby short of a mobster's, and the slight hitch her eyes make towards his prison jumpsuit every short moment.

Cristo holds his gaze on the woman, but carefully motions to a *Caffeinated Coffee*-labelled container, and gives a quick notion to the Hydrator Box next to the Heater.

The woman nods, trying her best to follow the orders printed on the side of the coffee's label- a set of symbols designed to be idiot and literate-proof-, latching the canister to the Hydrator and pressing a matching symbol. She offers thanks once more, adding "I must say, it's quite the treat: having breakfast with a celebrity... *of sorts*."

Cristo swivels his head right and left, making sure there's no movie star or president around himself. He turns to her, curiously pointing at himself with a narrowing eye. He puckers his lips to utter a *What?* but the lady stops and extends her hand to shake.

"My apologies. Georgina Pompidou," she offers. "CEO. A..." she trails off, hesitating to spit out the full title. "Right, you wouldn't know," she mutters under her breath.

Cristo returns the greeting. "Nice to meet you. *Celebrity?*"

"Of course!" Georgina spews. "Christopher Samios: The North York Terrorist." The words come off her lips like she's reading the sparkling title of a magazine. "You were a whole chapter of History class growing up. No easy feat, I must say."

Cristo's face sets in as he realizes *infamy* and *celebrity* are a little too synonymous in her mind for his tastes. A number of responses swirl in his mind, but the one to leave his mouth is more in hopes of changing the subject than diving deeper into his own past. At least, the past she might know about. "Actually, it's just Cristo. No *h*, or *opher*."

Puzzlement grows on Georgina's face as her hand shuffles around to her backpocket. "It's not short for *Christopher?*" she says, as she draws a pamphlet from behind her to eye once more: the *Arrignee Welcome Guide* plastered on the front in bold letters. She flips to the first page, and corrects herself. "Apologies: I guess my brain just made the assumptive leap. I get stressed out when people truncate names and such. So few people out there willing to pronounce *Georgina* fully. You'd think it's a curse," she jokes. "Are you named after Monte Cristo?"

"Sure," Cristo lies with an accepting smile. "No offense, but most old white ladies have a problem when I'm ten feet away, and that's when they only know I'm Mexican," he chuckles.

"CEO," Georgina reminds Cristo. "If the company I kept *only* wanted to blow up four cities, it'd be an improvement." She eyes him up and down, stopping at the sandwich in his grip. "And nobody starts conflict when free food's around."

Cristo does his best to downplay his *achievements*. "*Blowing up four cities* is a little exaggeration. It's a lot less glamorous than the papers make it look. But I'll admit, you're dead-on

about free food,” he says, flashing a smile and raising his sandwich in a toasting gesture. He takes a bite, looking at the coffee container slowly perk up, and his eyes go back to Georgina. More specifically, her pamphlet. He motions to it, bread stuck to the roof of his mouth. “Where’d you get that?”

Her hand runs over the pamphlet. “Mister Sumain-Gupta gave it to me. The first thing I received. I don’t even have my purse yet.”

Cristo wonders why he may be lacking it, but comes to the right conclusion: Kilo gave it to the first Cristo, shot him dead, and forgot about it upon printing the second. He mulls mentioning the series of events to Georgina- a joke of sorts- but it feels too early for him to try macabre humor. *Sorry, I left mine on my other body.* “May I?” he says, gesturing.

Georgina hands it over and turns to finish her coffee. She takes a sip, and while the aroma fills the air, rich and hearty, the notion that she might need a hint of creamer and sugar jumpstarts her searching through the refrigerated cabinets for more packages.

Meanwhile, Cristo rifles through the pages, coming to the realization that he may be underestimating the situation at hand.

On the first inside page, an image of the Shuttle is shown- not what Cristo is expecting. It has no wings, or jet engines, or cockpit. The Arrignee is more akin to the symbol of Pi or the Arc de Triomphe: square edges, with two long legs propping it up, completely black from head to toe. It reminds him of a two-legged spider, in fact.

The second page is headlined by a bold title: The Pantheon Project. ‘Goal: to create a set of civilizations to incorporate into the Second Halfling Empire (S.H.E.) within the Kestrel Solar System. Activity will be completed by providing a selected group of individuals, not yet existing in the Empire, with a terraform-capable vehicle for a period of time decided by the Second Halfling Empirical Council (SHEC).’

He looks up at Georgina, who’s nose is now half-buried in a thermos like an addict huffing paint. Sure in the fact that she’s not going anywhere anytime, nor appearing to be in a question-answering state of mind, he reads on. The pamphlet details the *rules* of the society they might be creating, but he can’t help but laugh at the obvious nature of the guidelines: No altering the airspace to be uninhabitable by common life, no direct or indirect enslavement of a sapient species, no willingly torturous acts, No peeling away of the planet’s upper crust to expose the tectonic plates. The specificity of a few stunt Cristo’s laughter, a faint hint in the back of his mind echoing that someone may have tried such things before.

He flips through the pages, trying to get past the basic guidelines- *Holy fuck, how many people used thermonuclear warfare in building a society?*- and finally lands on the page listing the members of the Arrignee. Kilo excluded, by the looks of it. Each name may as well be a ghost, but he takes a small joy in seeing his name and a title: ‘Cristo Samios: Civil Engineer’. Below that, a small descriptor, a fun fact of sorts: ‘Cristo is the first sapient creature to ever be successfully added to the Printers, albeit the 326th overall entry- after a strawberry cupcake, and before a 12-pack of tennis balls.’

Georgina’s entry is in similar fashion. ‘Georgina Pompidou: CEO of [Redacted]. Georgina knows over seven different Lemon-only recipes, including the infamous *Lemon Rock*.’ The last two words, Cristo says out loud, confused to what the dish would entail, especially considering its *lemon only* designation.

"An old specialty of mine," Georgina says between mouthfuls of drink. "Done right, the flavor of the lemon is *just* enough to overcome the reality of eating a rock." She chuckles, drying her tone. "It's a British dish- in *all* senses- prepared for very specific taste buds. May it never reach your lips." She goes about sipping her coffee while Cristo continues on.

The pamphlet mentions five people after Georgina and himself.

'Freel, man-for-hire. Freel was one of the guards hired to protect the original Shuttle Printers.' *Boy scout. Got it.*

'Detective Seventeen, detective. Seventeen received the Blue Medallion, the highest civilian honorific from the First Halfling Empire.' *So no one just has like, a regular-ass name?*

'Penelope Orlev, assistant. Penelope is a vegan who-' *Yep, I can stop reading right there.*

'Felix Lemming, freelancer. Felix has been alive for over 80% of all attempts at societies.' *So, he's failed a lot.*

'Michael LaCerr, murderer. LaCerr has charitably volunteered to look over the Shuttle's functionality and maintenance'. *Wait, did that say 'murderer'?*

Cristo double-takes at the sight, trying to think of a typo or similar word that may have occurred as he peers over the page again. The fun fact doesn't appear to help much either: *And Jason Vorhees looks over Camp Crystal Lake, too.*

He asks, but Georgina is quick to dismiss the danger. "Mister Samios, one can't relegate a man to a word. Everyone can be reasoned with, and I assure you, Mister LaCerr is no exception to the rule."

"You've seen him?"

"No, but I've yet to meet a number of faces. So far, I've only run into Mister Seventeen and Lemming. Interesting fellows, the two of them." According to Georgina, Seventeen is making his rounds as if performing a rudimentary safety check on everyone. She muses how he looks like an adorable little Gumshoe- another Halfling like Kilo-, but backs off to clarify her comments aren't meant to be pejorative. Felix struck her as a little odder; she tuts at his seeming *confusion* to the situation- it appears Mister Lemming is highly suspicious of the Arrignee's *shorter* members, but she confesses that he's likely to come around once they start working together. "What about yourself?"

Cristo flinches back at the turn in conversation. "What *about* myself?"

Georgina glows with anticipation. "Are you looking forward to it? Designing a civilization?" She looks into the distance, swaying her head. "A *society*, more specifically. My company dealt with land development, so I feel I've a bit of a *stiff leg* in the run, but like most university activities, I'm certain this is to be a *group* project."

Cristo looks at Georgina. He thinks about what he can actually bring to the table in terms of actually *creating* something. He doesn't know how the Shuttle or the Printer works yet, and even the few years he's trained as a Civil Engineer would put him at an apprentice's level at best- likely overshadowed by whatever Georgina knows about land development. There's the chance that he could pull some knowledge from old one-off jobs as a mechanic or a handyman, or a student, but the thought comes to heart that there's a bit of a common theme to his one good skillset: hotwiring a car using bare teeth and the headrest, faking your death by overdosing with a narcan IV rigged to a battery pack, stealing the identity of a dead man in a bathroom stall, how to properly jam a stiletto heel into the base metatarsal to best stab someone, and a number

of other highly valuable traits of dubious legality. But, city planning? Not in his repertoire. He tries jogging his better memories, maybe drumming up an idea while changing the subject. "I'm still prepping, I guess. I wonder what's in the Printer. Do you feel weird, leaving everything behind? Like, you were a CEO; starting from scratch has to suck a little."

Georgina shakes her head with a faint grin. "Much of the world was *trying* to leave me behind. While I'm not one to state my age, it should be obvious that I am, in fact, 'fucking old'. I'll miss my old halls,"- Georgina pauses for a sigh-"But a part of me will sleep well tonight, knowing I've somehow outlived every rat bastard hoping I'd break a hip. My own sons, included." As if the thought of outliving her children was a joyous sentiment, the grin on her face brightens. Cristo's expression is more remorseful, and she corrects herself, trying to be more accommodating. "I take it the Samios household was a bit more... cherished?" She guesses. "My apologies."

Cristo shakes his head. "Thanks. I was a little more separate from mine than I'd like," he says, motioning to his jumpsuit. "But I *just* saw my wife this morning. Visitation. It still feels like a dream. But," he wobbles the half-eaten sandwich in his hand, "this tastes pretty fucking real." His face scrunches as he eyes a scrap of tomato fall to the floor. "If I had known all this would happen, I'd have at least took a photo with me, or something."

Georgina nods. "Well, if you ever need to talk or a shoulder to cry on, I'm sure I... can find Mister Sumain a stepstool for you."

A burst of laughter erupts from Cristo, for a brief moment almost forgetting his situation. His wife, his son, his end-of-life '87 Mobius, his two-story house with the chipped threshold and peeling paint that he'll never see again. A planet he'll never live on, and a myriad of questions that his life wasn't notable enough to have answered in the history books. For just a second, he can laugh at a cold businesswoman brushing off any sympathetic duty to the man who shot him in the face.

Chapter 3: Walls

Georgina goes about looking through all of the flavors of coffee and tea for later benefit, while Cristo dismisses himself to find a bathroom.

Five invigorating minutes after Cristo discovers the meaning of all of those wet and windy symbols next to the toilet's control panel, he emerges refreshingly clean and ready to tackle whatever comes next. Then, turning to look down the hall and seeing what's approaching, he rethinks the statement.

There were a number of thoughts that Cristo has never had. Questions like 'Are Halfling women just as big as the men?': Yes. 'Is there such thing as Halfling gym rats?': Abso-fucking-lutely. 'Has protein powder been banned?' Heavens, no.

Wearing a shirt too small for her one-percent body fat, slathered in cyrillic lettering, a dark-haired Halfling lets out an excited squeal that honestly, isn't as deep or horse-steroided as Cristo is expecting. A thick Russian accent blankets broken English, even with the translator in Cristo's collar glittering. "Another member for to helping!" She shifts onto her backfoot, turning away for Cristo to follow. "Helpings with other members, da!?"

Cristo's brain freezes at the sight. *Where would you be taking me? Can I resist? Would I be successful? Do Halflings find this attractive?* But the only words to escape his mouth are luckily cordial: "Wha- who are you?"

The woman giggles as she starts jogging off, "Penelope!"

Cristo follows out of a mixture of curiosity and fear, unsure of which is more motivating. His face twists in confusion. "The *Vegan!*?"

Penelope jumps in her step. "You knowings!"

"Yeah... it was... the very first thing I learned about you," Cristo hesitantly utters as he steps into the elevator with Penelope. "The *only* thing I knew about you before..." he silently sizes her up and down. "Yeah."

Penelope giggles, flexing. "Impressive, yes?" she reaches up, patting Cristo's arm. "You not beings so thin, also."

"Thanks," Cristo chuckles, quickly flinching and running his hand over his arm to check for any injuries. *All clear.* He clears his throat. "So, uh, what kind of help were you looking for?"

Penelope claps in glee, grabbing her pamphlet from her back pocket, opening it to the roster of Shuttle Printer members, pointing to the last name, Michael LaCerr. "See? Is missing man."

"What?"

Penelope wrinkles her nose, trying to find the right words. An idea pops into her head, leading her to shout at the ceiling: "Arrignee! Where beings Georgina?"

The speaker system of the Shuttle itself responds, in a smooth robotic voice akin to the translators. "Georgina is currently near the entrance of the Bathroom on Level Swelter."

"Where beings Seventeen?"

"Seventeen is currently in the West Compendium Lounge."

"Now, where beings Michael?"

The system falls silent for a chill moment, returning with a slightly more robotic tone. "LaCerr's location is UNAVAILABLE."

Penelope points to the speaker, physically hinting. "Is hidings. I wantings meetings him."

Cristo squints in confusion. "The *murderer*? You want to *meet* the murderer? The murderer who might not want to be disturbed?"

Penelope brushes off Cristo's concerns with a *pssh* and a wrist-flick. "Is fine. I havings wonderful plan."

Cristo crosses his arms. "Okay, let's hear it."

Penelope lifts the pamphlet, showing it to Cristo again. "See!? Michael overseeing *maintenance*. So, we breakings things, he come for to runnings."

Cristo makes a number of hand gestures before breathing solemnly into his own closed fist, pondering where that plan ranks in the history of terrible plans he's had. That time he shot himself in the kneecap to wake him up from a nightmare that was in fact just a bad drug trip. The time he decided to smuggle a call-girl out of the Russian mafia with approximately thirteen dollars, a stolen backpack, and plastic spork to his name. The time he brought fists to a knife fight with a maniacal terrorist on a set of active train tracks. And of course, when he skipped out on a date with an obsessive girlfriend whom he knew always kept jumper cables in her purse at all times. Admittedly, Penelope's plan isn't the Top Five worst in his life, but *Dios fucking Mio*, is it

up there. "So, your plan is to wreck the Arrignee so that the murderer who's volunteering to keep it in order will have to show up?"

Penelope nods vigorously, a bright white smile peeking behind pink lips.

Cristo looks up. "Arrignee, can you send messages?"

"Absolutely."

"Excellent. Tell Michael the Murderer that I have nothing to do with this idea."

"Recorded and sent," the speaker responds as the elevator comes to a halt.

More curious about Penelope's plan than willing to participate, Cristo follows along as Penelope runs into... a Gym. *Work with what you know, I guess*. Inside is the typical arrangement of weight machines, treadmills, weight racks, resistance band stations and mirrored walls- fancy, clean, and state-of-the-art, but nothing wholly new to the goal of working out- but another man sits on the bench. It might be a man. It's a bit hard to tell.

It isn't so much a person as it is an array of military gear, boots, scarves, and gloves, all sitting underneath a reflective silver mask. No holes are in their mask for the eyes, the nose, or the mouth- it simply wraps around the face, disappearing into the scarf. The figure turns to Cristo, tilting its mask with a cold stiffness. The voice emanates from the mask, a mildly perturbed Jersey male coming through loud and clear. "She asked you to help with this, too?" He chuckles, resetting to introduce himself. "Freel. Cristo, right?" He doesn't offer a hand to shake, keeping his arms rested on his knees.

"Yeah."

"Does her plan sound stupid to you, too?"

"Yeah." Cristo's eyes trace Freel's wardrobe a few times over. "Any reason you're dressed for war?"

Freel looks down at his own garb. "Scanned like this," then points to his mask. "The mask is a constant."

Cristo nods as he watches Penelope prance about the Gym, running her hand along a few of the machines. "So how exactly are you gonna draw Michael out from here? I'd've figured the *Shooting Range* would've been a better starting point."

"Shooting Range is BYOG," Freel says, in a tone implying he's already been there.

Cristo looks to Freel. "Yeah, but I mean, the *Gym*? There's gotta be better."

An eruption interrupts Cristo's words, and any other sound for the foreseeable distance, drawing Cristo and Freel's attention to the source: Penelope wielding a leg press machine like a baseball bat, bashing away at a support column in the middle of the gym. Not a weight, or the frame, but the entire machine. The impact chips away at the column and machine in equal parts, the metal warping in her grip. Low grunts and yelps precede each swing, with the dust debris quickly becoming rocks then large chunks with every subsequent crash, the impact forcing a wince from the sound and ripples it sends through the level.

Cristo runs forward to approach, but on a swing at halfway through the column, Penelope shatters the machine in her stubby muscular fists, weight plates flying through the room at a clip capable of beheading, warranting a swift duck in time with the plucking snap of the machine's wiring. A hard *clang* rings out over Cristo's head. He turns back to see Freel sporting a very high-tech shield, one of the weights having bounced off of it without making a mark. He offers his hand to stand Cristo up. He barely has time to accept as

Penelope runs towards the two, apologizing. "Sorry! So sorry!" She's clenching her teeth, cringing at her own actions. She's quick to pick Cristo up from the floor, her grip both rigid and soft as the seat of a roller-coaster. He finds himself stood upright amid Russian-tinted apologies before his mind can even recognize the swift change in his posture.

He brushes himself off, understandably perturbed. "Don't be sorry. Be... *careful*." He takes a second glance at the support column- A four square meter column of cinderblocks fortified with cement, rebar pipe, and a few new compounds of various quality- nearly broken clean through, with the stronger inner pieces fraying and bending like snaggleteeth in an open mouth. A pause and an exasperated breath precede Cristo's question. "What were you even *expecting* us to do?"

Penelope looks at both of the men, wide-eyed. "You two strong. Thinkings you could helps."

Cristo pinches the bridge of his nose. "Penelope, I bench 250, max. Pounds. On a good day." He eyes the remnants of the machine Penelope was swinging, the few plates still entwined in the frame reading beyond a metric tonne. "You don't spend much time with Humans, do you?"

Penelope picks up a singular, twenty-five kilogram plate and hands it to Cristo with an appreciative smile. "Every little bit helpings." She twists her neck towards Freel. "How much you liftings?"

Freel folds his arms. He's not capable of emoting much, but his shift in tone seems... unenthused. "I'm not helping. These are support beams."

Penelope once again brushes off the caution around destroying the pillars holding up the very structure they're all inside. "Not worrying. Old boss, she tellings me about 'redundancy'. We can breakings at *least* two more, no problems." She says, flicking the fabric of her shirt to show it off.

"No clue what that says." Freel says.

"It's Russian," Cristo says. "*The gym's my bitch*. Or something like that." He eyes Freel, whose mask is turned towards him. The judging is implied. Cristo tries to change the subject. "Anyway, based on how big this place is and how many beams there are, she's not wrong."

Freel pauses. "Who's talking: the Civil Engineer or the Terrorist?"

You get involved in ONE...FOUR fucking plots, and everyone starts judging. Cristo returns a stern look. "It's *all* civil engineering, now."

"...Okay," Freel accepts, turning his attention back to Penelope, who's now lifting and setting down machines further away, looking for the heaviest one. From a sand pit studded with various random items galore- *good to know that Crossfit never died out*- Penelope draws up what looks like a thick pole, but as the whole shape wriggles the sand from its contours, the absolute size of the aircraft carrier anchor stuns the two onlookers. "Who the fuck even works out with that?"

Cristo gestures in Penelope's direction. "Well..."

Even she struggles to lift the object, spanning her arms as wide as possible to hold the device. She waddles up to the next support column, twisting her torso to wind up the swing.

"Should we stop her?" Cristo says.

Freel pauses. "How?"

"I dunno." Cristo thinks about methods that would actually stop someone capable of benchpressing his car. Penelope takes her first swing at the second support column, and to put it

lightly, the anchor is far more effective than the leg press machine. A lone swing puts her three-quarters through, blocks and shards of the column littering the floor, some managing to fly to the walls, spiderwebbing a few mirror panes. Even from a field away, Cristo flinches in worry. "You got a taser on you?"

"Not trying that again," Freel says without elaboration.

Cristo eyes the singular weight in his hand and goes to approach Penelope. From a safe distance, of course. "Hey, Penelope."

The comrade lowers her anchor, gently setting it down. The floor beneath her feet sinks deep, the anchor's resting spot mimicking. *Maybe she'll respond better to Russian.* But before Cristo can utter a snor, Penelope's jaw drops as she stares beyond Cristo's shoulder. Awe opens her eyes, silently convincing Cristo to take a peek.

The gym is clean. The support column is restored to its original glory, and the press machine is back in its spot. Not a spec a of dust litters the ground, the only imperfection being Freel still sitting on the bench at the far end.

"Did *you* see anything!?" Cristo shouts.

"Any what?" Freel says, looking around. After a cursory swivel of the head, he flinches, his mask twitching in all directions as if the site corrected itself before his eyes. "What the?"

Cristo shares in bewilderment, turning around once more to see the expected: the second pillar is fixed as well, with all machines back in order; even the anchor has made its way back to the sand pit. "What's that?" Cristo says, pointing to the one small difference amongst the not-so-wrecked space.

Atop one of the benches sits a small greeting card, akin to a note of discretion a hotel leaves on a pillow. The card has a black background, and a small yellow stripe, similar to Penelope's hair.

Coming down from a mixture of gaslit frustration and confusion, she picks up the card and begins reading. "Thank you for your interest in finding me. I do not wish to acquaint myself with anyone at this time. Respect my wishes, and do your best to keep all amenities in good working order. Consider this a warning for all listening parties. Dos vidanya. LaCerr."

Cristo takes one more look around the Gym, wrapping his head around someone somehow correcting every little stain in seconds. "Good enough for me," he chirps, turning towards the exit. *The murderer wants to be left alone. End of fucking discussion.* He throws a goodbye wave Freel's way before passing by, his pace quickening. Freel returns the gesture, his mask orienting towards the strongwoman Halfling in the distance. *Where the fuck are regular people?*